

The Harvest Guest - Novel Adaptation

Chapter 1: The Folded Chair

At 04:12, the dying man's breathing lost its pattern.

Elin counted anyway. Twenty-eight seconds, then eleven, then a shallow draw that shifted the blanket without lifting his sternum. The syringe driver continued its measured push. No occlusion warning, no leak around the cannula, no change in the dose prescribed for pain. His face had released around the medicine. Whatever else was happening, he was not struggling.

His daughter slept in the vinyl visitor chair with her chin on her chest and one hand closed around his wrist. She had been holding the place where his pulse ran, though it was too thin now for an untrained hand to follow. Her thumb moved over the same inch of skin each time she stirred.

Elin set a steel dish and a paper cup of crushed ice on the bedside cabinet. The room was overheated. Rain clicked against the sealed window, and a wet coat hung from the bathroom hook, giving off the mineral smell of pavement. Beyond the door, the corridor radio moved between static, gull cries and the flat recital of coastal weather.

She checked the chart at the foot of the bed. The pen was missing again. She wrote the time across the back of her glove, then pressed down the edge of the clear dressing where it had begun to lift.

The man opened his eyes.

They passed over his daughter and Elin. He looked toward the empty corner between the wardrobe and the door.

"Hello, love," he whispered.

Elin followed his gaze. A handwashing notice, a coat hook and a length of cream wall stood there. The linoleum beneath them was dry.

"You're early," he said.

His daughter woke with a start. "Dad?"

He did not turn toward her.

Elin touched the daughter's shoulder. "You can use the family room for twenty minutes. Wash your face. I'll settle him."

"I was only resting my eyes."

"You've been in that chair since midnight."

"I can stay."

"You can." Elin took the daughter's hand from his wrist and laid it on the blanket, where the warmth would be easier to feel. "He's comfortable. There's fresh tea down the corridor."

Both statements were true. Neither required the daughter to leave.

The woman looked from Elin to her father. Her cardigan had slipped from one shoulder, and a red seam marked her cheek where it had rested against the chair. "Come and get me if he changes."

"I will."

Elin held the door while she went. The daughter glanced back once before turning toward the family room, walking with the unsteady care of someone who had forgotten the arrangement of her own limbs.

The man's eyes remained fixed on the corner.

"Any pain now?" Elin asked.

"No."

"Nausea?"

He made a small movement with his head.

She checked his oxygen tubing where it crossed the bed rail. The plastic had caught under his forearm, so she freed it and settled his hand on the sheet. His skin was warm and papery. Capillary refill was delayed, but there was no useful intervention hidden in that fact.

"She's wet through," he said.

"Who is?"

His mouth softened, almost amused by the question. "You know."

Elin dipped a sponge swab in water and touched it to his lips. End-of-life perceptions were common enough: people long dead appearing at the bed, animals crossing rooms, children waiting in corridors no one else could see. Hypoxia, medication, memory, the brain making different use of what remained. Families sometimes found comfort in them. Sometimes they were frightened by the composure with which the dying accepted impossible company.

"Are you frightened?" she asked.

"No." His gaze shifted a fraction, following something at the edge of the wardrobe. "She'll spoil the floor."

The floor was dry. Elin put the swab aside and watched his breathing until the next exhalation came. No grimace or bracing through the abdomen. The dose was appropriate. Increasing it would have treated Elin's unease rather than his symptoms.

In the corridor, the weather report cleared through the static.

"Ferry warning in the Minch from first light. Gusts building around St. Brannan, with harbor disruption expected after Thursday—"

Elin's thumb stopped on the edge of the blanket.

The island name occupied less than a second of air. Static covered what followed. She smoothed the blanket over the man's knee, although it was already lying flat.

"You hear that?" he asked.

"I hear you breathing more easily."

"Said she'd wait by the door."

Elin raised the bedhead by five degrees. It made no discernible difference. She aligned the mouth-care packet with the steel dish, moved the unused cup away from the chart and checked the catheter bag. The tubing ran clear. Output was low and concentrated, expected at this stage.

The room required nothing further from her.

The open chair remained beside the bed, angled toward him. One of its black feet had caught on a crescent of dried disinfectant. Elin gripped the cold aluminum frame and pressed the release.

The hinge snapped shut.

Clearing the chair created no clinical benefit. There was adequate space to reach both sides of the bed. No emergency trolley needed access. His daughter would return soon and open it again.

Elin set it flat against the wall nevertheless.

The man watched the space it had occupied. His fingers drifted from the sheet, lifting toward the empty corner before the effort failed.

"Don't shut her out," he said.

A phone began to buzz against the medication cart in the corridor.

"There's nobody at the door." Elin put his hand back on the blanket, palm down.
"Save your mouth."

She removed her gloves and dropped them in the waste bin. At the threshold she looked back. He faced the wardrobe with his lips parted, waiting as calmly as he had waited through the intervals between breaths.

Elin stepped into the corridor and closed the door.

The phone vibrated against the cart's steel top. The screen read **ISLAND CLINIC**. By the time she reached for it, the call had stopped.

A voicemail appeared, then another missed-call notice beneath it.

Through the closed door came the faint rush of oxygen. Farther down the corridor, the man's daughter was returning with two paper cups, her cardigan buttoned wrong.

Elin asked the nurse at the station to sit in Room Twelve until the daughter was settled. Then she called the night administrator.

* * *

The locker-room radiator had collected three pairs of damp cuffs and a towel that smelled faintly of mildew. Elin shouldered through the door with the phone against her ear and opened her locker.

Inside were a spare scrub top, dry crackers, peppermint lozenges, a weatherproof shell and a waterproof sleeve of blank transfer forms. She took out the forms first and checked for the signature page.

"You there?" the administrator asked.

"Yes."

"St. Brannan clinic called twice. It's your father. He dropped overnight. More confused, apparently. They want family on the island."

Elin spread the forms on the bench. "What are his saturations?"

"I don't have that."

"Respiratory rate?"

"The note says active decline."

"That isn't an observation. Conscious level? Intake? Pain?"

Paper rustled at the other end. "Marcy took the first call. She wrote that he was awake on and off, drinking a little, weaker since yesterday. The clinic asked us to reach you before the weather closes."

"Who assessed him?"

"It doesn't say."

Elin pressed a thumb along the transfer form's fold. Eamon had become a list of omissions delivered by someone reading another person's handwriting.

"Put in emergency family leave," she said. "Starting now."

"For how long?"

"I'll confirm when I know whether he can travel."

The administrator paused. "They said you should come prepared to stay."

"I'm bringing him back."

Elin ended the call before the distinction could be discussed.

She removed her hospital ID and wallet from the locker shelf. When she pulled the badge free, a folded piece of blue card slipped from behind its plastic sleeve and fell onto the bench.

The ferry tag had once been stiff enough to hold a crease. Water had softened it into layers. Its corners were furred white, the printed date blurred, and the string had darkened where wet dye and pocket dirt had worked into the fibers. Enough of her name remained to identify the passenger.

For one second the locker room dropped away from her hand.

A coat pocket lay cold and heavy against her thigh. Rainwater had run down the sleeve whenever she lowered her arm, and the ferry's diesel vibration had traveled through the bench into her teeth. She had kept her fist around the tag for the whole crossing while the wake opened behind the boat.

Twenty years had not restored the card's shape.

Her phone rang again. **ST. BRANNAN CLINIC.**

Elin picked up the tag and pushed it behind her hospital ID. The plastic bowed before accepting it.

"This is Elin Mora."

A woman answered, her voice careful and local. "Miss Mora. Moira Senn, at the clinic. Your father had a rough night."

"What happened?"

"He went down when he tried to stand. We got him back to bed."

"Did he lose consciousness?"

"Not fully. He knew where he was. Knew who was lifting him, too, and objected to most of us."

"Did he hit his head?"

"No mark that we can find."

"Temperature?"

"Thirty-seven point two this morning."

"Pulse and oxygen saturation?"

"The oximeter stopped charging. His pulse is quick."

"How quick?"

A pause followed. Elin heard wind press across the mouthpiece, then a door shutting.

"One hundred and ten when June counted," Moira said. "It settles when he's lying quiet."

"Respiratory rate?"

"He won't let anyone stand over him with a watch."

"He can refuse an examination. You can still tell me whether he's breathless at rest."

"Some of the time. Worse after moving. He's drinking water, little bits. No food since yesterday afternoon."

"Pain?"

"He says no."

"Confusion?"

"He asked for his boots and then accused us of hiding them, though they were under the chair. Otherwise he knows the day and what the weather's doing."

Wednesday. Elin looked at the clock above the radiator. The last night shift had not yet given way to ordinary morning.

"What medication has he had?"

"His regular dose. Nothing extra."

"Keep it that way unless he has a symptom requiring treatment. If he's fighting for air, treat the breathlessness. Don't add sedative because he's trying to get up."

"We'll do what's kind till you reach us," Moira said.

The phrasing resisted measurement. Elin heard in it a rebuke, or an assurance meant to sound like one.

"Can he sit upright for a crossing?" she asked.

"Possibly. Today."

"I need better than possibly."

"It's what I have. The harbor office says Wednesday's boat is the last forecast passage before the weather closes. Nothing reliable after Thursday, perhaps nothing until Sunday."

Elin checked the time again. "Send his medication list, allergies, onset notes, urine output and details of the fall. Every page you have."

"You'll come today?"

"I'll be on the ferry."

"He says he'll leave if you come for him."

The sentence landed too cleanly among the fragments.

"Then have him ready to travel," Elin said.

She ended the call and opened the communal equipment cupboard.

Preparation had an order. She chose a clinical bag with intact seams and emptied it onto the bench before repacking. Oximeter, thermometer, manual blood-pressure cuff. Cannulation supplies, saline flushes, sterile dressings, tape. Emesis bags, gloves, thermal blanket, spare oxygen key. She tested the oximeter against her own finger and rejected a charging cable split near the plug. The replacement held a steady light.

The transfer forms went into their waterproof sleeve. She added a black pen, then a second. A blank identification bracelet lay in the forms packet; she left it there.

A nurse in compression socks came in, nose reddened by a cold, and searched the bottom of her tote.

"Seen my blue pen? Clicky one."

"No."

The nurse checked her scrub neckline and found it clipped there. "Right. Great."

She left without noticing the spread of equipment.

Elin counted the dressings again. She checked the thermometer battery, the expiration dates on the flushes and the seal of the thermal blanket. The softened ferry tag remained behind her badge, pressed against the flat plastic carrying her

photograph and current name. Its damp had dried decades ago, yet her fingers still held the remembered chill.

She put on the lanyard.

The ferry website rejected her old password. She reset it, entered her identification and found a single passenger space on the morning sailing. Vehicle allocation was closed. She booked passage on foot with an open return, then called transport coordination and began a mainland bed search without claiming a diagnosis she did not have. The transfer would require assessment, consent, a safe crossing and a receiving team. Each condition could be written down and pursued.

At 06:03, the booking confirmation arrived.

WEDNESDAY — ST. BRANNAN — FINAL FORECAST SAILING

She printed it and slid it behind the transfer papers. Outside, rain rattled the high locker-room window. Somewhere along the coast, the harbor was already making decisions without her.

Elin zipped the bag until its teeth met, signed it out and lifted the strap onto her shoulder. Its weight settled against her hip: equipment, paperwork, a route back to the mainland. Behind her hospital ID, the old ferry tag disappeared from view.

She left the hospice carrying everything she believed would be needed to bring her father away.

Chapter 2: Last Mainland

The ferry purser weighed Elin's clinical bag twice.

On the first pass it exceeded the foot-passenger allowance. On the second, after she showed her hospital identification and the transfer forms, he wrote MEDICAL in blue pencil on a card tag and tied it beside the hospice label already fixed to the handle.

"Keep it with you," he said. "Cargo deck'll be wet."

"I need access to the oxygen key."

"Aye. Keep it with you."

His glance had already moved past her to the pallet behind: four green oxygen cylinders in a steel rack, each neck capped and numbered. They were bound for the island clinic. Beside them stood boxes of long-life milk, veterinary dressings, paraffin, insulin in a cold chest, and a narrow wooden crate marked FUNERAL SUPPLY—HANDLE FLAT.

The old ferry tag behind Elin's identification rubbed her sternum as she bent to lift her bag. The plastic of the current card had a sharp lower edge. She turned the lanyard outward, but the wind caught it at once and slapped her photograph against her coat.

Wednesday's crossing boarded by labor rather than queue. Two deckhands rolled the oxygen rack down the ramp while passengers carried what could not be trusted to wheels. A woman with a baby strapped under her waterproof handed Elin one end of a crate of groceries without asking. Elin took it because the ramp was steep and the woman's free hand was gripping a sack of potatoes.

"Inside the blue rail," the woman said. "Else the spray gets the flour."

They put the crate down among fuel cans and feed sacks. A boy of about fourteen came after them with three pharmacy cartons stacked to his chin. Someone called for the coffin box to stay level. Someone else had lost a parcel of spark plugs and found it beneath a folded wheelchair.

Elin moved her bag away from the chair's wheels.

When the ramp lifted, the ferry shuddered underfoot. The harbor wall slid sideways beyond the streaked passenger windows, then the mainland town opened behind it: slate roofs, supermarket sign, ambulance station on the hill. All the things available there remained visible for seven minutes.

Elin took the corner of a table beside a power socket. She spread the waterproof sleeve over the tacky surface and called the first hospice on her list before the ferry

cleared the outer marker.

"No beds today," the coordinator said. "Possibly Friday, but I can't hold anything without a referral and current assessment."

"I'll assess him this afternoon. I can send documentation as soon as I have signal."

"We'd need a medical summary."

"The island clinic has records."

"Recent records?"

Elin looked through the window at the oxygen cylinders chained below. "I'll confirm."

The second hospice had a bed but no admitting doctor after six. The third asked whether Eamon could tolerate transport. Elin said that was what she was going to determine. The fourth call was transferred twice, placed on hold, and lost when the ferry dipped behind a headland.

She called back from the open stern deck.

Wind drove cold through the seam of her hood. Diesel vibration traveled from the rail into her wrist while a recorded voice assured her that her call mattered. Behind her, the island passengers had begun sorting cargo allocation from memory. Mrs. Flett's insulin went in the cabin refrigerator. The clinic oxygen stayed chained. Fuel for the generator belonged under the forward tarp. The coffin fittings were wanted at the joiner's shed, not the chapel, because the chapel roof had begun leaking again.

A deckhand wedged the phone between his cheek and shoulder while tightening a strap. "Thursday's looking poor," he told someone. "No, I didn't say canceled. I said poor."

Elin ended the call before the recorded voice returned.

She opened the ferry timetable on her phone. Her return booking showed OPEN beneath a barcode, as if openness were a property of the route rather than permission to ask for it. Thursday offered two scheduled sailings. Friday showed one. The marine forecast beneath them had changed since morning: easterly gale, visibility falling, sea state rough to very rough.

She took a screenshot and saved it to the transfer folder.

A man in orange bib trousers came out carrying two mugs. He put one on the rail beside her.

"Tea."

"I didn't order it."

"Galley made too much."

He went back inside before she could refuse. The tea skated a few centimeters with each roll but did not spill. Elin left it there.

The coastline narrowed. She could still identify the mainland headland by its white communication mast, then only by a dark rise under cloud. She returned to the passenger cabin and tried ambulance coordination.

A woman across the aisle was counting inhalers against a handwritten list. Two blue, one brown, a spacer wrapped in a tea towel. At the next table, the boy with the pharmacy cartons held a jar between his knees while his grandfather retied the paper over its lid. No one lowered their voice for Elin's call, and no one appeared to listen. Privacy on the ferry meant allowing another person to behave as though they had it.

"I need a provisional collection from St. Brannan harbor," Elin said. "Thursday dawn if a receiving bed is secured."

"We don't dispatch onto the island."

"Collection from the mainland pier."

"That depends on the ferry."

"There may be a medical launch."

"Is that confirmed?"

"Not yet."

"Call when it is."

The coordinator's tone remained helpful, which made the absence of anything to arrange more exact.

Elin wrote beside the number: REQUIRES BOAT CONFIRMATION. Under that she added BED, ASSESSMENT, RECORDS, CONSENT. Four conditions. None of them impossible.

She checked the ferry map. St. Brannan lay beyond the gray channel on the screen, a shape compact enough to cover with her thumb. The old tag pressed again behind her identification. When she pulled the lanyard away from her neck, she saw a red line where the edge had rubbed.

The softened blue card was hidden behind her hospital photograph. Its salt-bleached corner had begun to delaminate. She could have removed it and put it in the clinical bag, but doing so in the crowded cabin would expose the old passenger name.

Elin Mora, aged twenty-one. One foot-passenger fare. No return marked.

She let the identification fall back against her chest.

The ferry entered fog shortly after noon. The final mainland headland did not vanish dramatically. Its mast went first, then the pale rock beneath it, then the difference between land and low cloud. A deckhand moved through the cabin checking loose bags and told everyone to remain inside until the approach.

"Thursday sailing?" Elin asked him.

He braced one hand on a seat as the deck rolled. "Master'll decide with the morning forecast."

"I need better than that."

"He needs better weather than this."

"What about the medical launch?"

"Cormorant? Harbor office keeps her."

"Crewed overnight?"

"If Tomas says."

"And if he doesn't?"

The deckhand looked at her identification, then at her face. Recognition arrived without warmth or hostility. "You'll be Eamon's girl."

"I'm his next of kin and transfer clinician."

"Aye." He tightened the strap around a crate of preserves. "Ask at the office."

When he moved away, the woman with the baby leaned across the aisle.

"June's been good with him."

Elin capped her pen. "Are you involved in his care?"

"No. She came for nappies last week. Adult ones." The woman shifted the sleeping child higher against her chest. "I had some left from my mam."

"Was he breathless then?"

"I didn't see him."

"Did June say whether he was eating?"

"She said he liked the pear yogurt."

It was the sort of answer relatives dismissed and good nursing notes retained. Elin wrote it beneath INTAKE.

The woman watched the pen move. "He knows you're coming."

“So I was told.”

“He’s held on for it.”

Elin closed the folder before the sentence could require a response.

The fog thinned within the island’s lee. St. Brannan emerged by degrees: black cliff, a band of dun grass, houses pressed around the harbor as if shelter had been assigned by rank. The chapel stood above the quay. Farther inland, whitewashed cottages climbed the lane toward a dark rise where the signal mast should have been visible. Elin found it at last, a thin line against the cloud.

Passengers were on their feet before the docking rope went over. The grocery crates were opened and divided. A woman collected the insulin chest. Two men took the generator fuel between them, adjusting their grip in the same movement. The narrow funeral crate passed hand to hand without comment.

Elin kept her clinical bag.

The ramp struck stone on Wednesday afternoon. Wind shoved spray across the chipped bollards, and every loose rope along the quay began knocking.

She waited while the oxygen rack came off. A deckhand lost traction on the wet ramp; three passengers caught the steel frame before it tipped. No one issued instructions. They lowered it together and rolled it toward a van whose rear doors were secured with baling wire.

Control of this harbor was control of medicine, heat, food, burial. The thought came to Elin as an assessment, stripped of politics. One delayed pallet could alter a household’s week. One canceled crossing could alter a death.

She stepped onto the quay with her bag and transfer folder.

Too many faces turned.

Some belonged to people she half recognized after twenty years: features retained while names had gone. Others knew her without any corresponding burden. A girl dragging a crate of preserves stared openly. A man carrying oat sheaves stopped beside the harbor wall. The woman with the baby gave Elin a brief nod and went to help unload the refrigerated box.

Moira Kett stood clear of the work in a dark wool coat. Her gray hair had been pinned against the wind with exact care. Labeled keys hung at her hip from an old nurse’s clip, and a child’s tin whistle rested on a black cord at her throat.

She held a lidded paper cup in one hand and a faded red ribbon in the other.

“Long crossing,” Moira said. “Tea’s hot.”

"Where's my father?"

"Home. June's with him. He slept a little this morning."

Elin looked past her toward the harbor road. "Can he stand?"

"With help. He shouldn't have tried alone."

"Food?"

"Two spoons of yogurt. Water enough to wet his mouth."

"Urine?"

"Some at dawn." Moira offered the cup. "You'll assess him better warm."

The answers were useful. Elin disliked the relief they caused.

She did not take the tea.

Moira lowered it and raised the ribbon instead. It had once been scarlet. Weather or washing had thinned it to the color of old brick, and one edge was ridged white where salt had dried into the weave.

"This was your mother's. We found it in the guest chest when we aired things out."

The harbor contracted to the strip of cloth between them.

Maire had worn red in photographs because Eamon claimed it made her easy to find. A scarf at the winter pier. A wool skirt outside the clinic. A ribbon tied around the handle of her district nursing satchel so no one took it by mistake. Elin could not place this one. Its salt-stiff edge touched the base of Moira's thumb.

"Keep it," Elin said.

"You should have the thing itself."

Moira placed the ribbon across Elin's palm and folded her fingers over it with the gentle pressure used to test whether a confused patient would grip.

Elin pulled free. The ribbon remained trapped in her fist.

"My father."

"This way."

Moira turned with her toward the harbor road. A luggage trolley squealed behind them, one wheel locking at every rotation. An older man left the oat sheaves against a wall and lifted Elin's smaller case before she could stop him.

"I have it."

"You've the medical one." He nodded at her clinical bag. "I'm going uphill."

His help appeared genuine. Elin let him carry the case because refusing would delay her. When she looked back, the girl with the preserves had lowered her eyes. The harbor clerk watched from his office window and stepped away as soon as Elin saw him.

Moira matched Elin's pace without hurry.

"Before you go up, there's one matter. First bell is Saturday at sunset."

"I'm here for a transfer."

"Of course. We'll help where help can be given."

"I require his complete records and a boat at dawn."

"We'll see what the weather permits."

"Book the Cormorant."

Moira's keys clicked softly at her hip. "You know how this week lands here."

"No."

"Then we'll keep it plain."

They had reached the open stretch between the office and the harbor road. Cargo work continued around them, but voices had fallen away. The oxygen van remained with its rear doors open. One of the men beside it tightened the wire latch, eyes fixed on his hands.

Moira spoke in the same tone she had used to report Eamon's intake.

"No Mora may leave until one freely takes the guest place by Saturday's first bell."

Elin stopped.

The older man carrying her case went two steps farther before realizing. He set it carefully beside the road and did not look at either woman.

"No," Elin said.

"We don't ask it rough."

"You don't ask it at all."

"The festival cannot begin until the place is taken. People have prepared. They've kept the terms."

"You're describing unlawful detention in front of witnesses."

A gust flapped the coat of the man at the oxygen van. He glanced up then, apology plain in his face, and looked away. The woman with the baby did not. She stood by the refrigerated chest, one hand on its lid, watching Moira with an expression Elin could not classify as agreement.

Moira reached toward Elin's turned collar.

Elin stepped back before the touch landed.

"Travel's taken it out of you," Moira said. "See Eamon. Warm up. We'll sort what can be sorted without a fuss."

"I have an open return ticket."

"Then you've lost nothing on paper."

"If anyone obstructs his transfer, interferes with my equipment, or touches those forms, I contact mainland police."

"Best get signal while we still have some."

"Boat. Dawn."

"We'll do what's manageable for him."

"You'll book it."

Moira's gaze passed briefly to the clinical bag, the waterproof papers, the hospital identification turned outward on Elin's chest. "And for everyone waiting on the bell," she said.

The man who had carried Elin's case cleared his throat. "Eamon's lane is slick by the bend. I can take that to the door."

Moira smiled at him as if he had restored ordinary conversation. "Thank you, Calum."

A second man retrieved the oat sheaves and moved off without speaking. The girl with the preserves continued to stare, expectation bright and unguarded in her face. At the office window, the blind came down one slat at a time.

Elin tucked Maire's ribbon into her coat pocket. It went beside her phone, salt edge scraping the screen.

She lifted her clinical bag and started up the road. Her timetable, forms, mainland contacts, and open return remained intact. Behind her, Moira picked up the untouched tea and followed at a courteous distance.

Elin left the quay with her mother's ribbon in her pocket and the village's condition attached to her family.

Chapter 3: Doors Matter

The oxygen cylinder beside Eamon's bed had enough pressure for hours, not days.

Elin read the gauge before she looked fully at him. The key was taped to the cylinder neck with adhesive gone gray at the edges. Tubing ran beneath the bedstead, looped once around a chair leg and rose to the cannula on his face. A kink waited where the mattress pressed the line against the wall.

She freed it with two fingers.

Eamon watched her do it.

He lay propped against four unmatched pillows in a loose fisherman's sweater. Illness had sharpened the bridge of his nose and emptied the skin beneath his cheekbones, but his gaze remained steady. One hand rested on the blanket. The other worked a short length of net twine across his knuckles.

The bedroom held several years of care assembled without room for it. Medicine bottles crowded a saucer on the windowsill. A chipped jug had been marked at half-cup intervals in permanent ink. Absorbent pads occupied a fruit crate under the dresser. Old rubber deck boots stood unlaced beneath the bed, toes polished by use. Damp had lifted the wallpaper seam behind the oxygen cylinder, and somebody had taped a square of plastic over the worst patch.

An old raincoat hung from the back of the bedside chair. Beneath it, half hidden, slumped a worn leather satchel.

Elin set down the clinical bag.

"You came quick," Eamon said.

His voice was rough but intelligible. He had breath enough for the sentence without pausing, though the effort raised the tendons in his neck.

"How long have you been on this cylinder?"

He rolled the twine over one finger.

A young woman at the dresser turned from the blister packs she had been sorting. She was in her twenties, broad-shouldered under a cardigan with the sleeves pushed up, her dark hair escaping a loose knot. A notebook lay open beside her, medication times mixed with tide heights and household reminders.

"Changed at half ten," she said. "He was on the concentrator before, but it started making a hot smell."

"You unplugged it?"

"And put it in the washroom where he couldn't decide to try it again."

"Good." Elin checked the cylinder connection. "June?"

"Aye."

"Elin."

"I gathered." June nodded at Eamon. "He stood this morning for the commode. Near dropped after. I got him down to the chair before he hit anything."

"Loss of consciousness?"

"No."

"Chest pain?"

"He said no."

Elin looked at Eamon. "Did you have chest pain?"

"No."

"Dizziness?"

"A room can shift without asking permission."

"Did you feel the room moving, or did you feel faint?"

"Faint."

"When did you last eat?"

"Your ferry fed you?"

"Answer me."

"Pear yogurt," June said. "Two spoons this morning. Broth last night, maybe six mouthfuls. He's had water. Not enough."

Eamon looked at her. "Informer."

"I wrote down the treason." June tapped the notebook.

Elin took out the oximeter and warmed his hand between her palms before fitting it to his forefinger. His skin was dry and cool, the nails thickened by years of deck work. The device searched longer than she liked, then settled on a low reading with an irregular pulse.

"Your hands are cold," she said.

"House is cold."

She checked the other hand and obtained a similar result. Respiratory rate elevated. Pulse fast. He could speak. His lips were pale rather than blue. She watched the depth of each breath and the small delay before he released it.

"Any pain now?"

"Only company."

June looked down to hide a smile.

Elin wrapped the blood-pressure cuff around his upper arm. The sweater bunched beneath it.

"I need this off."

"Do you."

She met his gaze. "Yes."

June came to the bed. "Eamon, can we take your arm out of the sleeve?"

He lifted the elbow a little. June eased the fabric down without pulling the oxygen tubing.

Elin took the pressure twice, listened to his chest, then asked him to lean forward. He did so with June's hand held near his shoulder but not touching. Air entered both lungs, reduced at the bases, with secretions shifting low when he coughed. The cough exhausted him. He closed his eyes until his breathing steadied.

Elin checked his ankles, the shallow indentation left by her thumb, the temperature of his calves. No obvious injury from the morning fall. A healing skin tear lay beneath a dressing on his left forearm, dated in June's handwriting.

"Who prescribed the morphine?"

"Clinic doctor last month," June said. "Dose is on the bottle. I wrote every time."

"Any extra?"

"No."

"Sedatives?"

Eamon opened his eyes. "They've not managed to improve me."

June's expression changed before she could conceal it. "Nothing extra."

Elin read the medication record. It was incomplete by institutional standards and better than many family charts she had seen: time, amount, symptom, response. A

damp cereal packet had been torn flat and added when the notebook went missing for half a day. The handwriting changed between June, Moira, and Eamon himself.

She put the record in order beside the bed.

"Dad, tell me where you are."

"In my bed."

"Which house?"

He looked around the room. "You've been gone long enough to forget it?"

"I'm checking your orientation."

"Eamon Mora's cottage, St. Brannan. Wednesday." His fingers resumed moving the twine. "Late afternoon, unless the ferry turned you backward."

"What brought me here?"

"I fell. Moira rang you because she can't leave a thing alone."

"And what am I proposing?"

"To put me on a boat."

"For what purpose?"

"Mainland hospice."

"What would that mean?"

"A crossing in bad weather if you get your way. Ambulance at the other end. Strange bed. Better oxygen, likely. People writing down when I piss."

June turned to the dresser and busied herself with the blister packs.

"What are the risks of staying here?" Elin asked.

"Lungs worsen. Tank runs out. You say I should've gone."

"And the benefits?"

"I'm home."

His answer came without hesitation. Elin waited, giving him time in case more followed.

Eamon studied her face. "You checking if I've enough mind left to disagree?"

"I'm checking whether you understand the decision."

"I understand it."

"Can you retain what I've told you?"

"You've told me the mainland has beds you haven't secured and a boat you haven't booked. You've told me tomorrow latest as if weather reads your notes."

Elin had not yet told him tomorrow latest. Moira must have repeated her demand from the harbor, or Eamon had inferred it from the open transfer packet.

She continued. "Can you weigh those risks?"

"I just did."

"And communicate a choice?"

"Aye."

"What is it?"

Eamon's thumb stopped on the knot in the twine. "I said I'd leave if you came for me."

"That isn't an answer to whether you consent now."

"No."

June glanced back.

Elin held still. "No, you don't consent?"

"No, it isn't an answer." His breathing had roughened, but his attention did not drift. "You've been here ten minutes. Ask when you know what you're moving."

"The window for safe transport is closing."

"Then it should've stayed open longer."

She could document capacity. He understood the nature and purpose of transfer, retained the relevant facts, weighed benefits and risks, and communicated a view. Capacity did not make his answer convenient. It made his inconvenience binding.

Elin opened the transfer packet.

A blank identification bracelet lay inside, white plastic with a clear shield over the writing strip. She printed EAMON MORA and his date of birth in block capitals.

Eamon watched the pen.

"What's that for?"

"Safe transfer."

"I've not agreed."

"It identifies you if we move."

"If."

She reached for his wrist. He drew it beneath the blanket.

"Elin."

"I'm not restraining you."

"Then take your hand away."

The request landed with the clarity she had just tested and confirmed.

Her fingers remained on the blanket above his wrist. She could leave the bracelet loose in the packet. It could be fitted at dawn if he consented. That was the ordinary sequence.

The ferry weather had worsened. The island clinic lacked functioning equipment. Oxygen was finite. Every hour created a smaller margin in which his wishes could be carried out at all.

She slid her hand beneath the blanket, caught his wrist and fastened the bracelet before he could pull free. The plastic ratchet clicked twice.

Eamon stared at it.

June set one blister pack down with unnecessary care.

"It comes off with scissors," Elin said.

"Everything does, if you've the right scissors."

She checked that two fingers fitted beneath the band. His pulse moved against her fingertips.

"Did you come because of me?" he asked.

The question altered the room more thoroughly than any clinical observation.

Elin released his wrist. "I came to get you into appropriate care."

"Because of me," he repeated, "or because of the week?"

She bent to return the cuff to her bag. The old raincoat brushed her shoulder as she straightened. Its waxed fabric gave off damp wool, paraffin and a faint medicinal smell that had survived two decades in a closed room.

Maire's coat had hung beside the kitchen door during district rounds. As a child, Elin had searched its pockets for boiled sweets and found tongue depressors, safety pins, damp gloves, once a blood-stained square of gauze folded inward on itself. The satchel under the chair had gone with it, bumping against Maire's hip from house to house.

Elin zipped the cuff into its compartment.

"You're not fit to stay without proper support," she said.

Eamon's hand returned to the twine. "Same answer, then."

June moved the oxygen bottle farther from the radiator. She did not look at Elin.

"I need every record the clinic has," Elin said. "Prescriptions, visits, allergies, previous admissions. I need a spare cylinder, transport chair, blankets, and confirmation from the harbor office."

"I can get most of that," June said.

"Most isn't adequate."

"Most is what exists."

A knock sounded against the outer door, followed immediately by its opening.

Moira entered carrying a wooden tray.

She had brought the harbor tea after all, along with two more cups, sugar, a small jug of milk and a plate of seedcake covered by a linen cloth. Rain stippled the shoulders of her coat. The keys at her belt had been rearranged since the quay, several labels turned inward.

"I brought enough for the room," she said.

"No one asked you in."

"Door was open."

June took the tray because Moira continued holding it toward her. The transaction left June backed against the dresser with both hands occupied.

Moira went to Eamon and touched two fingers to the blanket near his knee. "How's the breathing?"

"He can answer," Elin said.

Eamon looked at Moira. "Crowded."

"We won't stay." She adjusted the oxygen tubing where it crossed the blanket, a competent movement that did not disturb the cannula. "June, take tea while it's hot."

June set the tray on the bedside chair, first lifting Maire's raincoat and the satchel together. The satchel's strap had been threaded through the coat sleeve, physically joining them. When June moved one, the other came with it.

Elin saw the arrangement and remembered Maire coming home in rain, stripping off the coat while the satchel still hung from her shoulder. For years after she disappeared, Eamon had left both on the same hook.

Moira poured tea.

"He goes at first light," Elin said.

"If dawn is open, we'll all be grateful."

"I need the harbor office to confirm the Cormorant tonight."

"We can ask Tomas."

"I'm not asking for a favor."

"No." Moira handed June a cup. "You rarely did."

Eamon's mouth tightened. Elin could not tell whether the remark amused or hurt him.

"I also need his clinic file," Elin said.

"You'll have what helps him travel well."

"All of it."

Moira folded back the linen over the seedcake. "Before we drown in paper, one date matters more than the rest. Saturday. First bell."

Eamon turned his face toward the window.

"He won't be here," Elin said.

"The family matter remains whether the sea opens or not."

"There is no family matter."

Moira measured milk into Eamon's tea without asking. "The village has kept its part. Stores laid in. Doors marked. Watch arranged. By Saturday's first bell, one Mora takes the guest place freely."

Eamon looked back at her. "No one from this house is volunteering."

His voice was low. The words cost breath, and he spent it anyway.

Moira put down the milk jug. "We use the old words because they're the ones that hold."

"Hold what?" Elin asked.

"You don't believe the answer."

"That doesn't exempt you from giving one."

"Some questions are better taken in order."

Elin heard procedure in the phrase: defer, soothe, retain authority. "Then start at the beginning."

"Not while he's tired." Moira's gaze moved to the bracelet around Eamon's wrist. "You've made him ready."

"I've identified a patient for transfer."

"Aye. And if he's too worn to take the guest place, the line passes as it passes."

The bracelet seemed to tighten around Elin's own wrist.

"Say what you mean," she said.

Moira smoothed the linen cloth beside the cake. "It will be Eamon or you."

June's cup struck its saucer. Tea leapt over the rim and spread beneath her thumb.

"Gran."

"We would rather keep it plain than let fear make it ugly."

"You made it ugly at the harbor," Elin said. "You announced unlawful confinement to half the village."

"We announced what everyone already has to live around."

"No one has to live around it. You call a ferry. You permit movement. You stop threatening a dying man."

Moira's expression did not change. "We'll do what's manageable for him."

"There's that word again."

"Because bodies impose it, however much paper objects."

Elin picked up the old raincoat from where June had placed it on the chest. The satchel came with it, strap still caught through the sleeve. She pulled them apart.

Dust marked her palms. The raincoat's lining had gone cold and slick with damp. She shoved the satchel into the wardrobe, then the coat on top of it, and closed the door.

The action cleared the room of their smell. It also left the bedside chair available for Moira's tray.

Eamon watched the wardrobe doors meet.

"You leave those," he said.

"They're harboring damp."

“They’ve done it quietly for years.”

“They don’t belong beside oxygen equipment.”

Moirá poured a third cup of tea. “Maire carried that satchel to every house on the north lane.”

“I know what it is.”

“Do you?”

Elin took the cup from Moirá’s hand and returned it to the tray hard enough to spill milk into the saucer.

“You don’t touch my paperwork. You don’t alter his medication. You don’t prepare him for any ceremony. At dawn he leaves.”

Eamon lifted his banded wrist. “You’ve skipped a person in that sentence.”

Elin looked at him.

His arm trembled with the effort of holding it up, but he did not lower it until she had seen the white plastic.

Moirá’s attention moved between them. “Rest first. Decisions after.”

“Not yours,” Eamon said.

“No,” Moirá replied. “Freely means freely.”

Elin heard the lie in the room around the word: the public ultimatum, the controlled harbor, the deadline. Consent named inside confinement did not become consent.

“Leave,” she said.

Moirá covered the seedcake again. She gathered nothing else. Cups, milk, sugar and tray remained beside Eamon as another piece of household equipment no one had requested.

“June, don’t be late home,” she said.

“I know the road.”

“Road isn’t what concerns me.”

Moirá straightened the edge of Eamon’s blanket, careful not to touch his body. Then she left the bedroom and closed neither the bedroom door nor the outer one.

Rain entered the cottage as a cold draft.

June went to shut the front door. Elin heard her pause in the passage, then the latch settled.

Eamon lowered his arm. The bracelet remained around his wrist.

"Cut it off," he said.

"I need it in place if we move quickly."

"If."

"We'll discuss consent after you've rested."

"You discussed it already. You just didn't like the bit where I was awake."

Elin checked the cylinder gauge again. The needle had barely shifted.

"I'm going to find signal and confirm the boat," she said.

"Of course you are."

June returned to the room. "I can sit with him."

"Record intake. Watch the tubing at the wall. If his breathing changes, send someone immediately."

"I know."

"Do not give additional medication without checking the prescribed interval."

"I know that too."

Elin lifted her phone, transfer folder and coat. Maire's ribbon had lodged beneath the phone in her pocket. She felt its hardened edge but did not take it out.

At the bedroom door she looked back. Eamon had turned the transfer bracelet inward so the written name lay against his pulse.

* * *

The signal mast stood uphill beyond the clinic, but every lane that appeared to lead toward it bent around a wall or ended at a yard.

Elin walked with her phone raised, watching the display shift between one empty bar and SOS only. Dusk gathered early under the weather. Across the village, people carried paper packets from house to house. White lines had begun appearing beneath front doors and garden gates.

She passed a woman kneeling at a sill with a spoon. The woman nodded to her and continued laying salt into the joint between stone and wood. Farther up, a boy carried a kitchen chair backward through a doorway while his sister held a lamp clear of his feet. No one wore festival clothes. The work had the untidy repetition of bins brought in before a storm.

The high lane narrowed beside stacked hive boxes and a corrugated shed. Bees muttered within the boxes despite the damp, a low agitation under the wind. A rowan cross hung above the shed door on rusted wire.

Elin's phone found one bar.

She stopped at once and opened the harbor number. The bar disappeared. She moved two paces toward the shed and raised the phone higher.

Her boot came down on a white line across the threshold.

A hand caught her elbow before she ground the salt into the mud.

"Leave that."

Elin pulled free and turned.

Ruaridh Sorn stood beside her, narrow in a waxed coat several years past waterproof. One eye was cloudy. In his left hand he held a hive knife with a smooth horn handle; in the right, a paper twist opened over his palm.

"I need signal," Elin said.

"You need your foot elsewhere first."

She stepped back. The sole of her boot had smeared a gap three inches wide through the salt.

Ruaridh crouched with care and repaired it. He did not simply shake a new line over the damage. He scraped away the muddy grains with the blunt side of the hive knife, dried the stone with a rag from his pocket, then pinched clean salt into the joint. The wood above it bore old nail holes, chalk scars, and a dark groove where repeated wetting had lifted the grain.

"This isn't for show," Elin said.

"Show's cheaper."

Behind him, the shed door had been patched twice near the lower hinge. Salt filled a shallow channel cut into the threshold stone. The channel was worn at the center where boots crossed.

"I need the high road to the clinic."

"Road's there whether you ask me or not."

"Then say where."

Ruaridh pointed uphill with the hive knife. "Past the well, left at the wall with no gate. Mast's dead if that's what you're after."

"It showed a bar."

"Phone being hopeful."

"I need to confirm a medical launch."

"Cormorant's below."

"I know where the boat is. I need the harbor office."

"Below too."

Elin put the phone in her pocket. "Does everyone here answer a different question from the one asked?"

"Only when the asked one's no use."

The bees rose louder inside the nearest box. Ruaridh laid the hive knife across its lid and pressed his palm to the wood. His manner with the hive resembled palpation: contact first, judgment made through vibration.

"They shouldn't be active in this weather," Elin said.

"They're not active. They're complaining."

"You keep bees through winter out here?"

"Bees stay where their food is."

His glance dropped to the gap she had nearly made, checking the repair. Elin followed it.

"Salt doesn't prevent respiratory failure," she said.

"No."

"It doesn't sterilize a threshold."

"No."

"It draws damp and damages the wood."

"Aye. That's why the channel needs recutting."

He spoke without any need to defeat her objection. The shed showed the cost of his practice openly: swollen boards planed back, hinge screws replaced, salt whitening the stone. Whatever he believed, he maintained it like equipment.

Ruaridh folded the top of the paper twist and offered it to her.

Elin did not take it. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Keep it dry."

"I'm not salting my father like a haddock."

"Wouldn't preserve him if you did."

The answer was so plain that she looked at him again.

Ruaridh nodded toward the village. "Doors matter more than walls here."

"How?"

"A wall closes. Door makes an offer."

"To whom?"

"Whoever's asking."

"That means nothing."

"Aye, likely." He pointed with the folded salt twist toward her father's lane. "Useful version, then. After dusk, don't answer a familiar voice through wood unless you can see the mouth making it. Keep salt where people cross. If you find an inner door lined, leave it lined."

"An inner door."

"Aye."

"Inside a house."

"That's what inner means."

"Who is lining internal doors?"

"People tired of digging."

Elin looked past him. The hive boxes stood in ordered rows beneath weighted covers. Each entrance had been narrowed with a strip of wood. A tin lid containing damp salt rested on the shed windowsill. None of it answered whether he was delusional, superstitious or preserving rules whose original purpose had gone missing.

"Are you telling me there is an intruder?" she asked.

"I'm telling you not to answer what you can't see."

"Has anyone been harmed?"

Ruaridh rubbed a thumb over the names worn nearly smooth in the hive knife handle.

"Aye."

"By whom?"

"Question gets less useful each time."

A bell knocked once somewhere below. Another answered farther along the lane. The sounds were small and domestic, metal struck by hand rather than a chapel bell carrying over distance.

A woman across from the shed opened her front door, shook salt from a folded paper packet and swept it into an even line with two fingers. She tested the latch before going in. The motions were unhurried.

Elin held out her hand.

Ruaridh put the paper twist of salt into it.

"I'm taking this because your threshold is badly sited," she said. "Someone else will step on it."

"Someone else might look down."

She tucked the twist into the inner pocket of her coat, away from Maire's ribbon and her damp phone.

"Clinic road," she said.

Ruaridh pointed again. "Past the well. Left where there's no gate."

Elin turned uphill.

"A vigil," he said behind her, "is just staying when every useful part of you wants the door."

She stopped.

The sentence irritated her more than his rules. "That's not medicine."

"No."

"Staying while somebody drowns in his own lungs isn't care."

Ruaridh opened his palm to the wind, testing the rain against his skin. "Didn't say stand there empty-handed."

Helplessness made doctrines for people who could not tolerate admitting they were helpless. Elin had seen it in families who prayed over untreated pain, in staff who called neglect natural dying, in people who confused presence with a reason to stop assessing. She would not let Eamon become proof of anyone's philosophy.

Her phone remained on SOS only. The road to the clinic climbed into low cloud.

From somewhere below, a woman called her name.

"Elin?"

The voice was familiar enough that she turned before identifying it.

Ruaridh caught her sleeve.

"See first," he said.

A moment later June came around the stone wall carrying a loaf wrapped in a tea towel. She stopped when she saw them.

"Moira sent bread," June said. "Apparently bread settles arguments now. You coming back down or what?"

Ruaridh released Elin's sleeve.

She looked from June's visible face to the closed shed door and the repaired white line beneath it. The rule required no belief to follow. It required only a delay before answering, the kind of precaution that cost less than its failure if Ruaridh happened to be right about any part of it.

"Did you reach Tomas?" Elin asked.

"He's at the harbor. Clerk says to come before full dark if you want the Cormorant put down as medical priority."

"Then go back to Eamon. I'll confirm it."

"He asked where you'd gone."

"What did you tell him?"

"That you were trying to make the island obey a folder."

Ruaridh made a sound that might have been a cough.

"Record his fluids," Elin said. "Keep him on the cylinder. I'll be back before dark."

June shifted the loaf under her arm. "He still hasn't said yes."

"He understands the risks."

"That isn't the same."

"I know what it is."

June studied her for a moment, then went downhill.

Elin took the clinic road. At the turn she reached into her coat and checked that the paper twist had remained dry. Dawn transfer, she told herself, fixing the time ahead as if it had already entered a chart.

She returned toward the cottage with Ruaridh's salt in her pocket and Eamon's departure still asserted as fact.

Chapter 4: House by House

The oxygen changed pitch while Elin was flattening the transfer forms on the kitchen table.

A steady hiss had accompanied her since she returned to the cottage. Now it stuttered once, stopped, and resumed beneath a wet scrape from the bedroom.

She was through the doorway before Eamon managed to call.

He had folded forward over the blanket. One hand gripped the sheet, the other the loose cannula at his cheek. Each attempt to breathe lifted his shoulders and drew the hollows above his collarbones deeper. His face had lost what little color it held at dusk.

“Dad. Sit back enough to let me work.”

He shook his head without raising it.

June came from the washroom carrying a basin. Water slopped over her wrist when she saw him.

“Pillows,” Elin said. “Two. Support his arms as well.”

June dropped the basin and pulled pillows from the chair. Together they raised Eamon without forcing him flat. He tolerated the movement until his chest met the first pillow, then braced his forearms over it and remained leaning forward.

Elin reseated the cannula. She traced the tubing with her fingers: beneath the blanket, past the bed frame, free at the wall where she had corrected it earlier. The cylinder valve was open. The gauge had fallen faster than expected but was nowhere near empty.

“Can you feel air at your nose?”

Eamon tried to answer. A cough interrupted him, too weak at first to clear anything.

Elin held the tubing beneath her own upper lip. Flow. She checked the connection at the regulator and watched the small indicator settle after its stutter.

“June, open the window a crack. Then bring the medication record and the bottle.”

Cold entered above the sill. The room already smelled of damp wool, old wallpaper and the faint sweet residue of medicine. Eamon coughed again. This time a rope of sputum reached his mouth and stayed there.

Elin folded a clean cloth around her fingers and cleared it without reaching far enough to provoke him. “Spit if you can.”

He did. The effort left him trembling against the pillows.

"Any pain in your chest?"

He shook his head.

"Pressure?"

"Sea," he managed.

"What about it?"

"In my chest."

His words came on separate breaths.

June returned with the prescribed morphine, the notebook and the torn cereal packet used when the notebook had gone missing. "Last given at four. Small amount. He settled after."

Elin read the entry, then the pharmacy label. She checked the concentration against the prescription twice. This was symptom relief already authorized for episodes of pain or breathlessness, not a means of quieting resistance. Eamon remained frightened, lucid and visibly distressed.

She crouched where he could see her without turning.

"You have a prescribed dose available for this. It may ease the feeling of air hunger. Do you want it?"

His gaze moved from her to the bottle in June's hand.

"Will it put me out?"

"It shouldn't at this dose. I'll watch your breathing and response."

"Then give it."

Elin measured the prescribed amount and administered it by the route written on the label. She recorded the time immediately.

June shifted the second pillow beneath Eamon's forearms. "Better there?"

He moved his right elbow an inch. She followed the movement and left it where he chose.

Outside, a handbell sounded in the lane. Two measured knocks, followed after a pause by another bell farther downhill.

June glanced toward the window.

"Keep watching him," Elin said.

"I am."

Elin placed two fingers at Eamon's wrist. His pulse was fast and uneven enough to count twice. The oximeter found a signal, lost it when his hand shook, then held a low reading. She warmed his fingers and tried again rather than trusting the first number.

His respiratory pattern had changed since the afternoon assessment. Faster, shallower, with a catch before exhalation. Secretions shifted when he coughed. She listened to his chest while he remained forward, working around the oxygen tubing and the pillow. Air entry was reduced; coarse sounds moved after another cough. No single finding explained the speed of the deterioration.

"Can you bring anything else up?"

"Trying."

"I know."

She supported the cloth beneath his mouth. June held a bowl without touching him. He coughed three times, the last producing thick sputum streaked with old brown. Air moved more freely afterward. His shoulders lowered a fraction.

"There," June said. "Take your time."

Eamon closed his eyes.

Elin watched for reduced consciousness, worsening color or a further drop in effort. The morphine did not erase him. It softened the frantic edge of each inhalation while leaving him able to answer and reposition himself.

"Too sleepy?" she asked.

"No."

"Breathlessness the same, worse, or a little easier?"

He considered. "Less sea."

June exhaled and sat back on her heels.

"Don't stop supporting the pillow," Elin said.

"I wasn't."

A second bell answered from uphill. Through the window came the drag of a broom over stone.

Elin ignored it and checked the cylinder again. The regulator held steady now. The cannula remained in place. She moistened Eamon's mouth, waited, then offered a sip. He took only enough to wet his tongue.

“Another?”

He shook his head.

She did not insist.

For several minutes the three of them worked within the scale of his breathing. June replaced the damp cloth. Elin reassessed his pulse and respiratory effort. Eamon coughed when he could, rested when he could not, and kept one hand on the pillow as though holding his place against a current.

The acute panic receded before the underlying illness did. His color improved slightly. The tendons in his neck eased. When he opened his eyes again, he recognized both women and looked annoyed by their proximity.

“That’s more like you,” June said.

“Crowded,” he whispered.

Elin removed the bowl and soiled cloths from his immediate reach. “You’ve stabilized for the minute.”

“Greedy thing,” he said.

“What is?”

“A minute.”

She understood him only after June’s mouth twitched.

Elin raised the bed table within reach and placed the call bell substitute on it: an old brass handbell with cloth wrapped around the handle. “Use this if your breathing worsens.”

Eamon touched the bell once without ringing it. “House is full of them.”

“Then this one has a clinical purpose.”

“Poor bell.”

June drew the blanket back over his legs. “Do you want us both here?”

He looked at Elin. “She’ll only go looking for a telephone.”

“Yes,” Elin said. “I will.”

She waited until his respiratory rate had settled into a pattern he could sustain, then left June beside him and carried the medication record to the kitchen.

The wall telephone gave no dial tone.

Elin depressed the cradle, released it, and listened again. Silence. She checked the cord at the wall and followed it to the narrow junction box above the skirting. Both connections were seated. The handset remained dead.

Her mobile showed SOS only.

She went to the front window and held it near the glass. Nothing. The small radio on the refrigerator received weather static but no voice.

June appeared in the bedroom doorway. "He's resting. Still answering."

"Your phone."

June passed it over. Its cracked screen showed no service.

"The mast?" Elin asked.

"Went down in the last blow. Sometimes it comes back when the wind shifts."

"When did it fail?"

"About the time you were up at Ruaridh's."

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"You were holding a phone in the air. Seemed like you'd found out."

Elin set both mobiles on the sill and lifted the landline again. "Where is the nearest working radio?"

"Harbor office. Moira has a set in her kitchen for the care rounds."

"Can either reach the mainland?"

"If the repeater's up."

"And if it isn't?"

June leaned against the doorframe, fatigue visible now that the crisis had eased. "Then they can talk to boats close enough to hear."

Elin looked through the front window.

Wednesday night had closed around the lane. Opposite the cottage, a man knelt beneath his front step with a torch between his teeth. He poured salt from a paper packet, then used two fingers to push it into a shallow groove worn across the stone. At the neighboring house, a woman drew a chalk mark beside the latch while a child held a lamp.

No one hurried. Their calm made the work harder to dismiss as panic.

A bell sounded from the house nearest the harbor. Another took it up beyond the bend. The sequence traveled uphill, household to household, without any answer from the chapel.

"Do they do this every Wednesday?" Elin asked.

"This Wednesday."

"You know what I mean."

June looked toward Eamon's room. "This week, before the first bell. People close early."

"With salt."

"With what they've got."

"Ruaridh gave me rules."

"He would."

"Do you believe him?"

June rubbed a damp mark from her sleeve. "I believe there are doors I leave alone."

"That isn't an answer."

"It's the one I use."

Eamon coughed in the bedroom. Both women turned. The cough cleared without becoming another crisis.

Elin tried the landline once more, this time dialing the clinic, harbor office and mainland hospice from memory even though the silence never changed. One sequence was enough to establish the failure. Repetition would not repair a broken line.

She returned the handset to its cradle.

"What oxygen is on the island?" she asked.

"Four cylinders came off your ferry. One for Eamon, one to the clinic, two meant for houses on the north side."

"I saw the rack. Who allocates them?"

"Clinic, usually. Moira knows who needs what."

"Tomas controls the harbor store."

June nodded.

"And the concentrator here is faulty."

"It smelled hot."

"Likely motor or wiring. We don't use it again until it's checked." Elin wrote the available cylinder pressure beside the medication times. "I need a spare before dawn."

"Dawn's still happening, then?"

"The Cormorant can sail even if the ferry cannot. Harbor clerk said I could put Eamon down as medical priority before full dark."

"It's past full dark."

"Then I'll go now."

June glanced at the window where rain had begun ticking against the glass. "Leave him after that?"

"You're here."

"For now."

Elin heard the rebuke and refused its framing. Eamon needed a route, not two people watching the same cylinder diminish.

She gathered the dry copies of the transfer papers. The waterproof sleeve had held. She placed the medication chart inside and added her assessment in compact notes: lucid, oriented, capacity intact, acute episode relieved with positioning, oxygen, prescribed medication and secretion clearance. She did not write *fit to travel*. That remained undecided.

"Keep him forward if that's easier," she told June. "Don't force him flat. Ask before changing his position. If he wants another dose, check the interval and the label, then come for me if you're uncertain. If his level of consciousness falls or the effort worsens, send someone to the harbor."

"I know how to look after him."

"Yes." Elin closed the folder. "Now you know what I observed."

June accepted that with a small inclination of her head.

At the bedroom door, Elin found Eamon awake. His breathing remained labored, though the terror had gone from it. The transfer bracelet showed white against the blanket.

"I'm going to the harbor," she said.

He looked toward the black window. "Wednesday night."

"I know what day it is."

"Boats know too."

"The medical launch is designed for bad conditions."

"Everything's designed until weather uses it."

"I'll confirm the crew and stretcher. We leave at dawn if you remain stable enough."

He rubbed the plastic bracelet with his thumb. "There's that if again."

Elin checked the cannula behind his ears, then stopped herself before adjusting tubing that did not require it. "Do you want the door open or closed?"

Eamon's eyes shifted to her. "Open."

She left it open.

In the passage, the front threshold had a salt line she had not seen June lay. It ran from jamb to jamb, uneven where the stone dipped in the middle. Elin stepped over it without touching it.

Outside, Wednesday's bells continued from house to house while every line to the mainland remained dead.

She pulled the cottage door shut, kept the salt intact, and ordered Eamon's departure for dawn.

Chapter 5: The Cormorant

Before dawn on Thursday, the harbor office was lit and locked.

Elin saw the strip of yellow beneath its door as she came down the last turn of the road. Rain had worked through one shoulder of her coat. The waterproof folder stayed dry beneath it, pressed against her ribs by the clinical bag strap.

She knocked once. No answer.

Voices carried from the passage between the office and the outer harbor shed. Moira's was lower than it had been in Eamon's bedroom, stripped of the warmth she used in occupied rooms.

"Keep the spare straps in the office."

Tomas answered too quietly for Elin to catch the first words.

Moira said, "Where they're wanted, Tomas. We need no confusion at dawn."

"The crew'll ask."

"They can ask me."

A key scraped in a lock around the corner.

Elin moved to the end of the office wall.

Tomas emerged first. He wore oilskins darkened to the waist. A coil of rope hung over one shoulder, and an iron key lay across his palm. He gave it to Moira, who returned it to the labeled clip at her belt.

"Outer shed?" Elin asked.

Tomas's attention snapped to her. He was a heavy man rather than a large one, built through the shoulders by work that required leverage. Water ran from his cropped hair into the collar of his oilskins.

"Harbor's closed," he said.

"I need the medical launch confirmed."

"Office opens at five."

The clock above the door showed four forty-eight.

Moira regarded Elin's wet coat. "You should be with Eamon."

"He's stable. June is with him."

"For now."

"I need the Cormorant crew, stretcher, oxygen brackets and departure time."

"You'll have an answer when the clerk opens." Moira turned to Tomas. "Get dry before you go back out."

He shifted the rope on his shoulder. Wet grain clung beneath the turned cuff of his right sleeve. Two swollen kernels fell to the paving between his boots.

Elin looked from them to the harbor sheds. Grain moved through the quay every day; she had seen oat sheaves carried above the ferry cargo. Yet Tomas's oilskins were wet to the elbows, as if he had reached into something soaked rather than handled sacks under cover.

"What were you doing?" she asked.

"Storm precautions."

"With barley?"

He looked down. One kernel adhered to the black rubber of his cuff.

Moira bent and picked the fallen grains from the paving. "Half the harbor has barley in its seams this week."

"What was in the outer shed?" Elin asked.

"Equipment," Tomas said.

"What equipment?"

"Harbor equipment."

She stepped toward the passage. Tomas moved once and occupied it.

No threat accompanied the movement. He simply made the width impassable.

"I have a dying patient waiting for transport," Elin said.

"You have twelve minutes till the office opens."

"Then unlock it."

"Not my office."

"The key to what is yours just went onto her belt."

Moira's hand settled over the clip, stilling the labels. "You're tired, Elin. We have weather work and you have care work. Neither improves because we stand in rain accusing the other."

"I asked what was in the shed."

"Spare stretcher straps," Moira said. "Lantern frames. Fuel measures. A damaged bilge pump Tomas has been swearing at since autumn. Ordinary things remain ordinary, even this week."

The answer included enough checkable detail to resist challenge and no reason for wet barley beneath Tomas's cuffs.

He turned away. As the rope slid from his shoulder, Elin saw a brass tag fixed to one end: CORMORANT.

"Why do you have her line?"

"Moved it."

"Why?"

"Swell's changing."

"Is she afloat?"

Tomas looked at Moira before answering. The glance was brief and sufficient.

"She was," he said.

Elin started around him. His forearm came across the passage, stopping short of contact.

"Office," he said. "Five."

From inside the locked building, a drawer closed. Someone had been there throughout the exchange.

Elin hammered the door with the flat of her hand. "Open it."

The strip of light remained beneath the threshold.

Moira drew her coat closer at the neck. "Don't frighten the clerk. He's had the roof over his mother's house patched twice from harbor stores, and his boy works the ferry when it runs. Everyone here has more than one thing to lose."

The remark sounded like sympathy until Elin understood it as an inventory.

The lock turned.

The harbor clerk opened the door a hand's breadth and looked first at Moira. He was the man who had lowered the blind when the ultimatum was spoken on Wednesday. Gray-faced in the electric light, he had slept in his shirt and put his jumper on inside out.

"Five near enough," he said.

Elin entered before anyone could stop her.

* * *

A strip heater clicked beneath the harbor-office window without warming the damp walls. Flares, spare batteries and cable ties occupied labeled shelves. Tide tables had been pinned over an old patch of mold. On the desk, a mug stood beside the open movement ledger.

Elin laid out her forms.

"Eamon Mora," she said. "Palliative transfer to the mainland. He requires a stretcher-capable launch, room for oxygen, a crew able to assist with loading, and an ambulance at the receiving pier."

The clerk sat and turned the tide table toward himself. His fingers were red around the nails.

"How is he?"

"Unwell enough that delay is unsafe. Stable enough that transport may remain possible if we leave at dawn."

"That's a narrow answer."

"It's a narrow window."

He checked the marine forecast printed from a receiver sometime after three. Pencil marks tracked the wind shift.

"Ferry's off," he said.

"Who canceled it?"

"Master."

"Under whose instruction?"

"His own. Easterly came in harder than forecast. Outer channel's breaking." He tapped the pressure line. "No passenger vessel makes that run today."

Elin studied the figures. The forecast had worsened in a coherent progression since the crossing. Through the office window, flags stood rigid above the harbor wall. White water broke beyond the entrance.

The cancellation was real.

"The Cormorant," she said.

The clerk rubbed his mouth. "One medical slot. Out and back if they clear the headland before seven."

"Crew?"

"Mair and Lennox."

"Stretcher?"

"On board."

"Fuel?"

"Enough for the run."

"Oxygen bracket?"

"Port side."

"Reserve?"

He glanced at Tomas, who stood inside the door with rain dripping from his oilskins onto the mat.

"Fuel's controlled," Tomas said.

"By whom?"

"Harbor authority."

"You."

"Aye."

Elin turned back to the clerk. "Put the transfer in the ledger. Departure at first safe light."

The clerk's pen hovered.

Moirá had remained outside. Her outline moved past the frosted pane, then stopped.

"If the boat's fit," the clerk said.

"You have just told me it is."

"I said there's a slot."

"You confirmed crew, stretcher and fuel."

He looked at the ledger as though another answer might already be written there.

Elin pushed her assessment across the desk. "Eamon had a respiratory crisis on Wednesday night. The island lines are dead. His home oxygen supply is limited. If you

withhold available medical transport, document who authorized it and on what grounds.”

The clerk read the first page. His eyes paused at *capacity intact* and moved on.

“No one’s withholding,” he said.

“Then enter him.”

He wrote EAMON MORA beneath CORMORANT, added MEDICAL PRIORITY and signed his initials. Elin signed beside them. The pressure of her pen marked the sheet below.

The clerk tore off the duplicate and handed it over.

Relief arrived as a loosening in her hands. She folded the copy into the waterproof sleeve.

“What time do you want him at the berth?” she asked.

“Six ten.”

“Loading route?”

“Upper quay. We bring her round.”

“Confirm she’s afloat now.”

The clerk’s gaze went toward the frosted window.

Tomas opened the office door. Wind drove rain across the threshold.

“See for yourself,” he said.

Elin was already moving.

* * *

The Cormorant’s orange stretcher reached her before the boat did.

It floated between two pilings at the end berth, turned by the tide until one salted strap tapped the wood. The launch lay beyond it with the stern submerged and the bow line drawn hard. Black water filled the rear deck. Diesel had spread around the hull in a thin rainbow.

Elin stopped at the top of the ladder.

The duplicate transfer form crackled inside her coat.

“No,” she said.

She descended. The lowest rung was underwater. Cold entered her boot when she stepped onto the tilted deck, and the launch rolled beneath her weight.

"Get off her," Tomas called from the quay.

Elin grabbed the rail and hauled herself toward the engine housing. Its cover was unlatched. Water washed around the base with each movement of the hull.

She lifted it.

Wet barley filled the compartment.

The grain had swollen into a pale mash packed beneath hoses and around the intake, driven deep enough that loose cargo could not have spilled there by accident. Diesel darkened the kernels at the edges. A torn scrap of sackcloth protruded beneath the cover hinge.

Elin plunged both hands in and pulled. The first mass came away reluctantly, molded to the machinery. More lay beneath it.

Human hands had opened the housing, packed the grain and left the cover loose. Sinking the stern required further damage or a valve opened elsewhere, but the barley alone made the intention unmistakable.

"No," she said again, though there was nothing to refuse.

The harbor clerk reached the berth above. "Christ."

"Get a pump," Elin called. "And tools. We clear the engine before the water rises farther."

He did not move.

"Tomas, close whatever's taking water."

"Boat's done."

"You haven't assessed it."

"I can see it."

"Then see this." She raised a fistful of grain. Oily water ran down her sleeve. "This was packed in."

Tomas's expression remained fixed. Beneath one cuff, a single swollen kernel still clung to the oilskin.

The significance of the shed key, the moved Cormorant line and the wet grain arranged itself without requiring confession.

"You touched this boat," Elin said.

"I move every boat in the harbor."

"Did you open the engine?"

"Get off the deck."

"Did you sink it?"

The launch rolled. Elin caught the rail before her knee struck the housing.

Tomas came down two rungs and held out his hand. "Now."

She ignored it and dug into the barley again. The grain reached deeper than her fingers. Even with a pump and clean engine, the launch would not be ready for a medical run before the weather closed the headland.

The stretcher knocked against the piling. Its straps had been moved from the launch before it sank or had floated free after. Either way, the equipment Tomas and Moira had discussed was exactly where it could be seen: close enough to preserve the appearance of preparation, useless in the water.

Elin climbed back to the ladder. Tomas took her elbow as her wet boot slipped.

She tore free as soon as she reached the quay.

"Who else has a boat?" she asked the clerk.

He stared down at the Cormorant. "Fishing fleet's hauled up or tied for the blow."

"Private launches."

"No stretcher room."

"I can improvise support."

"The channel's shut."

"You just authorized this one."

"This one has the hull and crew for it." He looked ill. "Had."

"Call the crew."

"Lines are down."

"Send someone."

Tomas climbed onto the quay. "Mair won't take another hull beyond the wall in this."

"You don't answer for her."

"I answer for the harbor."

"And the fuel."

"Aye."

"And the shed key."

His eyes shifted once toward Moira.

She approached along the quay carrying a lidded flask and a folded blanket over one arm. Rain had darkened the shoulders of her coat. She walked without surprise, as though a sunk medical launch were another weather task awaiting allocation.

"You should have gloves on," she told Elin.

Elin opened her hands. Barley pulp filled her palms and lodged beneath her nails.

"You sank it."

Moira looked past her to the tilted bow. "It's taken water."

"Wet grain was packed into the engine."

"That needs seeing to."

"It was put there by hand."

"Then somebody was afraid."

"Who?"

"If I knew, we'd have a different morning."

Elin stepped toward her. Tomas moved between them before she had covered the distance. His body blocked Moira and the path to the office.

"Out of the way," Elin said.

"No."

She held up the barley so close to his chest that oily water spotted the front of his oilskins. "You still have it under your cuff."

Tomas looked down. The remaining kernel had gone, whether fallen or brushed away.

"You returned her line," Elin continued. "You had the outer-shed key. Your sleeves were wet to the elbows before the clerk opened. Tell him what you did."

The clerk stood several paces behind, his arms held close against the rain.

Tomas said, "Get back to your father."

"That isn't a denial."

"It's an order off the quay."

"My patient's transport was sabotaged. Preserve the boat as evidence."

"Evidence for who?" Moira asked gently.

"Police. Coast authority. Ferry master. Anyone outside the system you control."

"When the lines return, you may call whom you please."

Elin took out her phone. Rainwater smeared the screen. No service. She photographed the boat, the open housing and the grain in her hand. The first image saved. On the second, the screen flickered and went black.

She pushed the device into her pocket.

"The ferry cancellation is weather," Moira said. "You saw the channel."

"I did."

"The launch has had a bad night as well."

"Weather does not open an engine cover and pack it with barley."

Moira shifted the blanket to keep its inner fold dry. "No. Weather frightens people. Frightened people do what they believe will keep a worse thing from happening."

"You gave the order."

"You heard me arrange straps and stores."

"I heard you tell him to put things where they were wanted."

"That is most of my day."

Tomas remained between them, a practical wall of wet oilskin and controlled force.

Elin turned to the clerk. "You entered Eamon in the movement ledger. Show me the prior inspection."

The clerk looked toward the office. "Launch was checked yesterday."

"By whom?"

"Tomas signs the berth sheet."

"Then either he failed to secure a medical vessel or he sabotaged it. Which are you recording?"

The clerk's face tightened. Behind him, the office roof gutter overflowed in a steady sheet. Moira's remark about repairs, his mother's house and his son's ferry work had not been casual. His silence had material supports.

"I didn't see anyone touch the engine," he said.

"You saw the condition of it now."

"Aye."

"Write that."

Tomas said his name once. "Peder."

The clerk looked at him.

Elin saw the warning pass without needing to know its exact terms. Fuel allocations. Harbor shifts. Roof materials. A son's work. Authority did not have to threaten what dependence already listed.

"Write what you saw," Elin repeated.

The clerk went into the office. He did not invite her to follow.

Moira held out the flask. "Tea."

For an instant Elin could only look at it. The lidded cup at the harbor, the tray left in Eamon's bedroom, the bread carried by June, and now tea beside the disabled launch. Each offering occupied the place where an answer should have been.

She struck the flask from Moira's hand.

It hit the boards, rolled beneath a bench and leaked black liquid through the slats.

Nobody moved to retrieve it.

Moira watched the tea drain. Her face showed neither outrage nor triumph, only the attention she might give a dropped instrument before deciding whether it remained clean.

"You need to stay upright," she said.

"Stop calling this care."

"Eamon needs warmth. Food if he'll take it. Breath eased when it troubles him. You know that better than anyone here."

"He needs an available route not destroyed to force a choice."

"The route is gone."

"Because you made it gone."

Moira tucked the folded blanket more securely under her arm. "Accusation won't float it."

Elin wanted to put the barley against Moira's immaculate coat, to leave the engine's oil and intention where everyone could see them. Instead she closed her hands around the grain until it forced itself between her fingers.

"What other fuel is stored here?" she asked Tomas.

"Controlled."

"What other vessels can carry a supine passenger?"

"None leaving today."

"Who has keys to the upper sheds?"

"I do."

"Give them to me."

"No."

"Then provide a full inventory."

"No."

The word carried no ceremony. Tomas had the fuel, the keys, the berth access and enough physical authority to enforce each refusal. Elin had a signed duplicate for a boat sitting half underwater.

Behind them, the clerk reopened the office door. "I recorded the condition found at five eighteen. Engine housing open. Grain present. Stern taking water."

"Cause?" Elin asked.

"Unknown."

"You know it wasn't weather."

"I know what I saw."

"Then preserve the page."

He nodded, shame and relief crossing his face too quickly to separate.

A harder gust struck the harbor. Beyond the wall, a wave broke high enough to throw spray over the upper path. The ferry cancellation remained true. That truth gave cover to the smaller manufactured disaster at their feet.

Elin went to the office board. Thursday's passenger sailings had been crossed out in red grease pencil. Beneath them, CORMORANT—MEDICAL had been written in the clerk's narrow hand. She drew one line through it and wrote SABOTAGED beside the name.

Tomas watched without stopping her.

"My father may die because you removed the last credible route," she said.

Moira answered from behind him. "Your father may die because he is dying."

The accuracy of the statement did not lessen its use as concealment.

Elin wiped her hands on the outer layer of her coat. Barley and engine oil left a dark smear from palm to cuff. She would need to return to Eamon in those clothes or spend time changing while his cylinder emptied.

"Bring a spare oxygen cylinder to the cottage," she told Tomas.

"Clinic allocates."

"Then have the clinic allocate it."

Moira said, "I'll see he has what can be spared."

"All indicated medication and oxygen remain available. You do not use this sabotage to ration him."

"We won't punish Eamon for weather."

"This was not weather."

Moira bent, picked up the flask and tested its lid. Tea continued to leak over her glove.

"No," she said. "It wasn't."

The admission was quiet enough to deny later and precise enough that Elin heard it.

Tomas glanced toward her. Moira did not look at him.

No one offered a name, a key or another boat.

Elin placed the signed transfer copy back inside its waterproof sleeve. The paperwork had proved that a route existed for less than twenty minutes. It could establish sequence, authorization and loss. It could not lift the Cormorant's stern.

She turned from the berth toward the road to Eamon's cottage.

Behind her, the orange stretcher knocked against the piling while Tomas retained the harbor keys and fuel.

Chapter 6: Unsalted

The spare oxygen cylinder arrived with the wrong fitting.

Elin discovered it at Eamon's bedside on Thursday afternoon, after seating the regulator twice and finding the threads would not take. The cylinder itself was full. Its seal was intact. A strip of clinic tape around the neck bore Moira's handwriting: MORA COTTAGE—PRIORITY.

Priority had delivered several hours of oxygen that could not reach him.

Eamon watched from behind his cannula while Elin compared the incompatible connections. His breathing had remained steadier since Wednesday night, though the effort of it never disappeared. The transfer bracelet sat loose enough to turn around his wrist. He had rotated his name against his skin again.

"Try swearing at it," he said.

"I have the correct fitting in my bag." Elin searched the regulator compartment a third time. "For mainland cylinders."

"Cylinder's on the island."

"I'm aware."

June stood at the foot of the bed with a laundry basket on one hip. "Drennans have the old connector. They ran clinic oxygen for Mr. Drennan when the power went down last winter."

"Why isn't it stored with the cylinders?"

"Because then no one would know where it was."

Elin set the incompatible regulator on the bedside crate. "We need it here now."

"We need linen too. Lamp oil. And Mrs. Bell has Eamon's old medication cards because she used them to argue about her own prescription."

"Why does another patient have his records?"

"Because this is St. Brannan."

That explanation had begun to cover everything from shared groceries to sabotage. Elin refused to let it cover clinical disorder.

Moira sat in the kitchen beyond the open bedroom door. She had arrived with the cylinder and remained after Elin found the fitting wrong, sorting household medicines into labeled paper bags at the table. Her competence was visible in the clean

prescription list she had brought, she checked quantities and the note identifying which two island households still required oxygen support. She had not apologized for the Cormorant.

"I can stay with Eamon while you collect what's needed," she called.

Eamon's eyes moved toward the doorway.

Elin said, "Do you want her here?"

His attention returned to her. The question appeared to surprise him as much as it did June.

"Door open," he said.

"That wasn't what I asked."

"Then ask without helping me answer."

Elin waited.

Eamon considered the kitchen, the full unusable cylinder and June's laundry basket. "She can stay. Door open."

Moirá tied off another medicine bag. "I'm honored by the terms."

"Do not change his oxygen flow or give any medication without his agreement," Elin said. "His prescribed morphine remains available for symptoms. Record the time and response if he requests it."

"I know how to care for him."

"Yes," Elin said. "Those are still the conditions."

June lowered the basket before her grip slipped. "If we move, we can make the round in forty minutes."

Elin put on her coat. Engine oil still marked one cuff despite repeated washing, and a grain of barley had dried inside the seam. She worked it loose with her nail and dropped it into the stove ash.

The harbor had left her with no route. For the first time since boarding the ferry, every useful item had to be obtained through people Moirá could name without consulting a list.

* * *

The Drennans' generator occupied a stone lean-to larger than Eamon's washroom.

Its exhaust shook the rain from a bent pipe while cables ran through holes drilled in the kitchen wall. Inside, a refrigerator hummed beside two chest freezers and a locked medicine cabinet. Mrs. Drennan opened the cabinet to check insulin temperatures before she acknowledged Elin.

"Three point eight," she said, showing her the thermometer. "It climbed to six when the fuel ran thin in February."

"Within range now."

"Because Tomas brought diesel."

She was the woman Elin had seen checking inhalers on the ferry, though without her waterproof and wool cap she seemed smaller. Her husband lay asleep in an adjoining room with oxygen tubing visible across the doorway. A concentrator vibrated beneath his bedside table.

June went straight to a shelf over the sink. "Connector used to be in the red tin."

"Moira moved it after Christmas," Mrs. Drennan said.

"Where?"

"Tool bench. I told her that was foolish."

The lean-to smelled of fuel and hot metal. Elin found the connector in a biscuit tin among spark plugs, washers and two valve keys. Its seal was worn but unbroken.

"I need to take this to Eamon's," she said.

Mrs. Drennan closed the kitchen door before replying. "When does it come back?"

"When he no longer requires it, or when you do."

"My husband requires it now."

"His concentrator is running."

"Until the generator stops." Mrs. Drennan looked toward the wall where the engine's vibration trembled through the crockery. "Moira gets the fuel allocation signed. Tomas delivers it. If we're judged wasteful, we lose hours."

"This fitting is not fuel."

"It's what keeps the cylinder useful when fuel goes."

Elin examined the oxygen line leading into the other room. "Do you have a compatible regulator already attached to his reserve cylinder?"

Mrs. Drennan nodded.

"Then this is a second fitting."

"It's a second chance."

June leaned against the sink, saying nothing. She had brought Elin here to see the objection rather than defeat it for her.

Eamon's full cylinder was useless without the connector. Mr. Drennan's reserve remained usable without it unless his current regulator failed. The allocation was straightforward clinically. The fear around it was not.

"I'll sign for the fitting," Elin said. "I'll include its condition and return it as soon as another is sourced. If your husband's equipment fails, send for me and I'll bring this back."

"You'll be at Eamon's."

"Yes."

"Moirá said you were trying to leave."

"There is no boat now."

Mrs. Drennan looked at the dark smear on Elin's cuff. Her mouth compressed.

"I heard about the launch," she said.

"Did you hear who sank it?"

"No."

"Do you know?"

Mrs. Drennan checked the refrigerator thermometer again though the display had not changed. "I know my husband breathes because that generator runs."

She took the connector from Elin, wrapped it in a clean dishcloth and handed it back.

"Bring it dry," she said.

The transaction was neither allegiance nor absolution. It was a loan made under pressure by someone with another sick person in the next room.

Elin wrote a receipt on the reverse of a transfer-form copy. Mrs. Drennan folded it into the locked medicine cabinet.

Outside, June placed the wrapped connector in the laundry basket.

"She salts her doors before anyone else," June said as they crossed the yard. "Says it's nonsense every time."

"Fear and disbelief coexist easily."

“So do fuel and principles.”

Elin looked back at the exhaust pipe shaking over the lean-to. “Moira knows exactly what withholding diesel would cost.”

“Aye.”

“And Mrs. Drennan knows Moira knows.”

June pulled up her hood. “That’s how help works here when it goes bad.”

The next house stood lower on the lane where runoff collected against the front step. Its salt line had dissolved at one end. June stopped to repair the gap from a packet in her pocket before knocking.

Elin watched her press the salt into the wet joint. “You carry it all day?”

“This week.”

“Ruaridh says maintain it where people cross.”

“Ruaridh says many things while other people are holding the heavy end.”

The door opened before June could answer. A woman with cropped white hair admitted them into a single room warmed by a paraffin heater. Damp clothes hung from a ceiling rack. On the table stood six washed medicine bottles filled with buttons, nails and pins.

“Brought the nurse,” June said.

The woman looked Elin over. “Which one?”

“Mainland one.”

“Then wipe your boots.”

Her name was Nessa Crowe. She had clean sheets tied in a flour sack and a half bottle of lamp oil beneath the sink. Both had been promised to June before Elin arrived.

“Moira comes Tuesdays,” Nessa said as she untied the linen. “Does my legs and fills the boxes. She’ll have my hide if she knows these went out before she counted them.”

“Your legs?” Elin asked.

Nessa lifted her skirt enough to show compression wraps from ankle to knee. The outer layer was clean and evenly applied.

“Ulcers,” she said. “Years of them. June’s too soft with the pressure.”

“I’m not trained for the proper wraps,” June said.

“Moira is.” Nessa retied the flour sack. “Also a tyrant about soap.”

The room contained no generator. A cold hotplate sat beside a jar holding two coins. Paraffin provided heat, cooking light and the lamp on the windowsill. Giving away any oil shortened Nessa's own evening.

"We can source lamp oil elsewhere," Elin said.

"Can you?" Nessa asked.

Elin did not answer.

Nessa pushed the linen sack toward June, then bent beneath the sink. She poured oil into a small brown bottle and corked it.

"That's enough for one lamp," she said. "Keep it behind the sheets. Tomas sees it, he'll say stores are being shifted without count."

"You need this," Elin said.

"I need Moira on Tuesday more." Nessa slipped the bottle into the center of the folded linen. "That's why you'll say the oil came from somewhere else."

"I won't falsify an inventory."

"Then don't inventory it."

June lifted the sack before the argument could become a refusal. "Thank you."

Nessa caught Elin's sleeve as she turned. Her fingers were knotted with arthritis but strong.

"Don't mistake needing a woman for agreeing with every wicked thing she does."

"I don't."

"You did when you came in."

Elin looked at the compression wraps, the clean medicine boxes and the heater consuming Nessa's remaining fuel. "I'm revising the assessment."

Nessa released her. "Mainland talk."

"Accurate talk."

"Bring my sheets back clean, then."

June carried the flour sack against her hip as they left. The concealed oil knocked softly between the folds.

At the bend above the chapel, Tomas waited beside a harbor utility cart.

He had changed out of his oilskins. His dark uniform coat was dry, and the ring of keys at his belt included the outer-shed key Elin had seen returned to Moira before dawn. A

fuel can stood upright in the cart behind him.

"What are you moving?" he asked.

"Linen," June said.

"Open it."

"No."

Tomas held out his hand.

Elin put herself between him and the sack. "On what authority are you searching medical supplies?"

"Stores are counted."

"These are private household goods."

"Then there's no trouble showing me."

June shifted the sack farther behind her.

The lamp-oil bottle was small enough to conceal and scarce enough to matter. Tomas's control operated at that scale: a corked bottle, a generator hour, the difference between a cylinder and useful oxygen.

Elin said, "Eamon requires clean linen after a respiratory crisis. If you delay it, put your name beside the refusal in my notes."

Tomas's gaze settled on the waterproof folder beneath her arm. "You write plenty."

"Yes."

For several seconds rain ticked on the cart's metal bed.

"Road closes at dusk," he said. "Finish the round and go home."

"We have one more stop."

"Then make it short."

He stepped aside without inspecting the sack.

As they passed, Elin saw pale scratches around the cart's fuel-can cap where it had been opened repeatedly with the wrong tool. Practical authority left marks too.

Mrs. Bell lived opposite the old school in a house whose front window had been replaced by plywood. A salt channel had been cut across her threshold deep enough to hold a finger's width. She was sweeping it clean with a toothbrush when Elin and June arrived.

"Don't stand on it," she said.

They stepped over.

The room beyond smelled of peat smoke and furniture polish. A framed photograph of a middle-aged man stood on the mantel beside a stopped watch. Black-bordered funeral cards had been arranged beneath it, their dates spanning decades.

Mrs. Bell took Eamon's old medication cards from a drawer. "Moirá left them here after changing my tablets. Said she'd collect them."

"Why did you keep them?" Elin asked.

"To show her she'd written the same dose two different ways."

She had been right. One card used a brand name, another the generic. The instructions matched, but the apparent discrepancy would alarm anyone unfamiliar with both.

Elin copied the dates and prescriptions into her notebook. The oldest card documented a previous respiratory episode and a short clinic admission. Eamon's current symptoms were worse, but the broad pattern was familiar: gradual breathlessness, secretion burden, exhaustion after standing. Nothing in those records resembled the abrupt terror of a panic event.

Mrs. Bell watched her write. "My Donal kept that week once."

Elin looked at the photograph on the mantel.

"The guest place?"

"The watch around it." Mrs. Bell scrubbed the toothbrush dry on a rag. "He wasn't a Mora. Couldn't be the one they named."

"Why must it be a Mora?"

"Because it was last time."

"That is not a reason."

"No." Mrs. Bell knelt to pour fresh salt into the threshold channel. "It's an inheritance with no property attached. Convenient for everyone who doesn't inherit it."

June set down the laundry basket. "You still keep the line."

"I lock my door against thieves without believing every neighbor's one."

"Do you believe there is something to keep out?" Elin asked.

Mrs. Bell smoothed the salt with the edge of an old membership card. "I believe Donal came home from that watch with wet boots after three dry days. I believe he never

told me where he'd stood. And I believe Moira has made certainty out of things she only half knows."

"When did he die?"

"Eleven years later. Heart." Mrs. Bell rose with difficulty. "Don't make him into evidence for your argument. He'd hate being useful this late."

Elin closed her notebook.

Outside, Tomas sounded the utility cart's horn once from the lane. The noise was brief and peremptory.

Mrs. Bell handed June a sealed packet of dressings. "He'll come in if you make him wait."

"Let him," June said.

"No. My fuel order's due."

There it was again: dissent bounded by material need.

Elin placed the medication cards in the waterproof folder. "Thank you."

Mrs. Bell touched the photograph on the mantel with one knuckle. "Ask who benefits from a burden staying in one family."

Tomas sounded the horn again.

The round ended because he had the road, the fuel cart and the patience to remain outside every door.

* * *

The oxygen connector fitted.

Back at the cottage, Elin tested the seal, attached the regulator and confirmed flow before moving Eamon's cannula to the fresh cylinder. The reserve gauge held steady. Clean linen went into the washroom. The lamp oil remained hidden in its folds.

Moira had left Eamon comfortable, with every medication time recorded and half a cup of broth taken by choice. Her usefulness made no argument against the launch. It only made the system harder to separate into care and harm.

By Thursday evening the rain had thinned, though the easterly wind still broke water over the harbor wall. Elin had begun drying Eamon's medication cards when someone tapped at the kitchen window.

A fisherman stood outside in oilskins. She recognized him from the ferry cargo deck, where he had helped lower the oxygen rack.

"Skiff at the lower quay," he said when she opened the door. "Small cabin. Weather's easing inside the channel."

"Can it reach the mainland?"

"If we leave before the tide turns. No promises past the headland."

"Can he lie flat?"

"Bench takes a board."

"Stretcher?"

"No."

"How long until departure?"

"Half an hour. Tomas sees me waiting, it'll be less."

Elin looked toward Eamon's room.

The Cormorant was gone. The ferry was canceled. A small skiff in bad water was not a medically sound route. It was also the only moving hull offered to her.

She assessed what could be changed. Oxygen cylinder secured to the wheelchair. Blankets. Medication. The fisherman could turn back if Eamon deteriorated before the headland. Mainland ambulance remained unconfirmed because the lines were dead, but a harbor arrival could summon help.

She went to the bedroom.

Eamon listened without interrupting. His face had grayed with the day's fatigue.

"No," he said.

"It may be the last private route before Saturday."

"No."

"You said you would leave if I came."

"I said ask when you knew what you were moving."

"I know your condition."

"Then know the answer."

Elin set the wheelchair beside the bed. "If we miss this tide, there may be no other attempt."

“Good.”

June stood in the doorway, the flour sack of linen at her feet. “He’s answered.”

“He is at serious risk here.”

“And on a skiff?”

“Yes. There are risks both ways.”

Eamon turned the bracelet around his wrist. “You’ve weighed mine for me.”

Outside, the fisherman tapped the window again.

The deadline entered Elin’s thoughts with Moira’s voice: Saturday, first bell. Every hour on the island gave other people more access to Eamon, more opportunity to narrow his choices until one could be called free. Waiting was not neutral.

“We’re going to look at the boat,” she said. “You can refuse at the quay after you see it.”

Eamon closed his eyes.

June did not help her move him. Elin brought the wheelchair close, set the brakes and positioned his oxygen. She explained each step as if explanation repaired the decision already made.

When she reached for his arm, Eamon pulled away.

“Don’t.”

“Then stand with the frame.”

He remained in bed.

The fisherman’s ten minutes dwindled outside. Elin could feel them as a physical pressure, the return of all the things she knew how to do quickly.

Eamon opened his eyes. “If I fall, it’s yours.”

“Yes.”

He pushed himself upright.

The transfer to the chair cost him more than Elin had predicted. His knees buckled once. June caught the wheelchair before it shifted, then steadied the oxygen cylinder rather than touching Eamon. By the time he was seated, sweat had dampened his hairline.

“Home if I say,” he said.

Elin tucked the blanket around him. “If the boat is unsafe, we return.”

"That's not what I said."

She took the chair handles.

"Home if he says," June repeated.

Elin did not answer. She pushed him into Thursday evening.

The fisherman had gone ahead to prepare the skiff. Its engine coughed at the lower quay, a thin mechanical sound beneath the wind. They could see its mast beyond the chapel wall.

The direct harbor road was chained. Tomas stood beside the barrier with a torch and one gloved hand resting on the links.

"Road shuts at dusk," he said.

"He has transport booked."

"No crossings after closure."

"This is a medical transfer."

"Same road."

The fisherman raised one hand from the quay. "Ten minutes, maybe."

Elin angled the wheelchair toward the verge. Tomas stepped with her.

"Move," she said.

"No."

"I will document physical obstruction of a patient transfer."

"Document it uphill."

She pulled the chair back and turned toward the chapel side path. Its gate stood open. The path passed through a narrow covered porch and emerged below the chain.

June saw the threshold first.

"Elin, wait."

The front wheels had already crossed.

The chapel sill was bare stone. Rain had washed grit into its central groove, but no salt remained there.

Eamon's body reacted before the rear wheels cleared it.

He jerked upright and dragged at the cannula. His inhalation stopped high in his chest, followed by a rapid series of shallow attempts that moved no useful air. His

boots struck the footplates. One hand clawed at the blanket while the other tried to push himself out of the chair.

"Back," he said. "Back."

"Sit down. Keep the oxygen in." Elin reached for his wrist.

He struck her hand away.

The episode had none of Wednesday night's progression. No preceding cough. No gathering secretion. The onset matched the instant his chair crossed the unsalted stone.

June crouched in front of him without touching.

"Eamon, look at me. Which way do you want to move—through to the road or back home?"

"Back."

"Back through the door?"

"Yes."

Elin released the brake and hauled the wheelchair toward the threshold. A rear wheel caught in the groove. Eamon folded over the blanket, fighting for air while the oxygen tubing pulled taut against the cylinder.

June lifted the front frame enough to free the wheel. Together they dragged the chair onto the uphill side.

The moment both rear wheels crossed the bare sill, Eamon's next breath went deeper.

Not normal. Not easy. Deeper.

Elin stopped the chair and watched him. The oxygen remained connected. His pulse raced beneath her fingers when he allowed her to check it. He coughed once, dryly. There were no secretions to clear. His color began returning sooner than it had during Wednesday's crisis.

At the quay, the skiff engine rose in pitch.

"Give me one minute," Elin said.

"Home," Eamon managed.

"We need to establish whether this is panic or—"

"Home."

June looked up at Elin. "He chose."

The skiff moved away from the lower quay. The fisherman did not call again. He steered toward the harbor mouth without looking back.

Tomas swung the chapel door shut and secured the road chain with a padlock.

"Done," he said.

Elin looked from the unsalted sill to Eamon. His recovery had begun only after the retreat. Timing did not establish mechanism. It did establish sequence.

She took out her notebook and wrote Thursday, evening; immediate onset after threshold crossing; oxygen flow uninterrupted; rapid partial improvement after return.

"You're writing on him again," June said.

"I'm recording an anomalous event."

"He asked to go home."

Elin closed the notebook and took the wheelchair handles.

No second boat waited beyond the chapel. She turned Eamon uphill.

* * *

Eamon refused the bed until his wet clothes were off.

He sat in the washroom on a wooden chair, oxygen cylinder beside his boot, while June filled a basin. Steam clouded the lower half of the cracked mirror. The clean linen from Nessa's house warmed over the rail, smelling faintly of paraffin and starch.

Elin knelt to remove Eamon's boots.

He drew one foot back.

June set down the basin. "Eamon, do you want the boots off here or by the bed?"

"Here. Socks too."

June waited for him to extend his foot. When he did, she eased off the first boot and supported his heel while Elin removed the wet sock.

"I was doing that," Elin said.

"Aye."

"He needs dry clothing."

"Aye."

June's agreement left the method exposed without prolonging the dispute.

Eamon's skin was cool and mottled at the feet. Elin checked for injury from the footplates and found a reddened patch over one ankle. She pressed lightly around it.

"Pain?"

"No."

"Can I check the other side?"

Eamon looked down at her. The question had come awkwardly, with the cadence of a consent form.

"You can."

She examined the ankle, then let go.

June wrung out a flannel. "Face first?"

Eamon nodded.

She washed around the oxygen tubing in slow strokes. When she reached his neck, she held the cloth where he could see it.

"Collar next?"

"Aye."

Elin began unfastening his damp shirt. Eamon's shoulders stiffened.

She stopped. "Do you want help taking this off?"

"I want it off."

"That is not quite the same answer."

A trace of humor reached his face. "You're learning nuisance."

"Do you want me to help?"

"Yes."

He lifted his arms as far as he could. Elin guided the shirt over them without catching the cannula. June kept one hand near his back, waiting until he leaned before supporting him.

His body showed the cost of the past two days. Prominent ribs. Bruising at one hip from the fall. A dressing over the skin tear on his arm. Redness at the base of his spine where pressure and damp had begun damaging skin despite June's care.

Elin assessed the area while explaining what she was checking. "The dressing needs changing. I want to apply barrier cream and keep pressure off this side. Is that all right?"

“Will you do it if I say no?”

The question stopped her.

“If you refuse, I’ll explain the risks and offer another way. I won’t pretend your refusal is agreement.”

Eamon studied her long enough that June looked away.

“Do it,” he said. “Warm hands.”

Elin warmed the cream between her palms.

They worked without imposing a six-minute target. June asked before washing each area and gave Eamon time to shift his weight. Elin replaced the dressing, checked his skin and adapted when he said the basin water was too hot. Necessary care continued. Asking did not prevent any of it.

By the time they moved him to bed, June’s fatigue showed in the care she took with her own back. She sat briefly on the mattress edge before preparing the drawsheet.

“Do you want to turn first or move higher?” she asked.

“Turn.”

“Toward me?”

“Aye.”

June offered her forearm. Eamon gripped it. Elin placed her hands on the drawsheet, ready to pull.

“Tell me when,” she said.

Eamon gave the word. They moved together. He settled more quickly than he had after the wheelchair transfer, breathing hard but without anger.

“Pillow between your knees?” Elin asked.

“Thin one.”

June handed her the correct pillow without checking. She knew which he meant.

The bedside chair remained blocked by Maire’s raincoat and satchel, which had been taken out of the wardrobe to make room for clean linen. The satchel strap still ran through one sleeve of the coat. When June lifted them together, a split in the outer pocket opened.

A cassette showed inside, its clear plastic clouded with age. Handwriting crossed the label, but Elin could make out only the first stroke of a name before June folded the pocket shut.

"What tape is that?" Elin asked.

"Old one."

"Of what?"

June laid the linked coat and satchel over the chest. "Don't know. Eamon never plays it."

Eamon's eyes had closed. "Leave it."

Elin did.

June stripped the damp pillowcase and replaced it. As she bent, a key tied to red wool slipped from her apron pocket and struck the floorboards.

Elin picked it up.

The key was small, old and dark at the teeth. The wool had been knotted twice through its bow.

"Pantry?" Elin asked.

June held out her hand. "Among other sins."

Elin did not return it immediately.

"You said Mrs. Bell had medication cards. What else is being kept out of the clinic?"

"Old ledgers. Visit books. Festival lists shoved in the back press because Gran doesn't trust anyone else to remember them correctly."

"Can you access them?"

"That key opens the clinic back door. Another cupboard key hangs inside."

"Why offer it to me?"

June glanced at Eamon before answering. "Because the boat had barley in it, the chapel threshold had nothing on it, and Gran will explain both until you forget they happened."

"I won't."

"No. You'll write them down and use the writing to batter the next locked door." June opened her palm wider. "Midnight. Clinic back entrance. Wear boots that don't announce you."

Elin placed the key in June's hand. "Bring it yourself."

"You trust me with it?"

"I trust you to know which records she does not want me to see."

"That'll do." June returned the key to her pocket.

Eamon opened his eyes. "Are you two finished arranging crimes over my head?"

"Nearly," June said. "What do you want now?"

"Quiet."

"Lamp on or off?"

"On."

"Door?"

"Open."

June gathered the basin, damp clothes and used dressings. At the doorway she looked back at Elin.

"You ask one."

Elin stood beside the bed. Eamon's breathing had settled into an exhausted rhythm. The transfer bracelet showed at his wrist, white and institutional against Nessa's clean sheet.

"Do you want another assessment before you sleep?" she asked.

"No."

She almost told him she needed one. His color, respiratory effort and alertness were already visible. The question had been hers, not his.

"All right."

June waited.

Elin tried again. "Do you want me to stay here, or wait in the kitchen?"

Eamon looked toward the bedside chair. It was open now, cleared of the raincoat, satchel and Moira's trays.

"Here," he said.

June nodded once and left with the basin.

Elin drew the chair beside the bed. She sat without opening her folder, while Eamon closed his hand around the edge of the blanket and left it there.

Chapter 7: What Paper Keeps

The clinic cupboard had swollen shut around its records.

Elin wedged her fingers beneath the lip and pulled until the wood gave with a damp crack. A steel dish rattled inside. June caught the cupboard door before it struck the counter, while behind them the back lock settled into place with a small, final click.

“Quick,” June whispered.

The storeroom smelled of wet plaster, old adhesive and the sweet chemical residue of medicines long removed from their boxes. Paper had lifted from the walls in pale curls. An oxygen cylinder stood strapped beside the sink, its key taped to the valve with lint-grey surgical tape. Elin checked the regulator by habit as she passed. Empty.

“Oldest ledgers first,” she said.

“You’ll have to tell me what old looks like in here.”

June kept one hand on the frosted pane in the back door. Her outline showed there whenever she leaned close: cap, nose, one shoulder raised against the draught. Thursday had run past midnight, though the village still seemed to be working. Light moved beyond the glass. Barrels knocked together somewhere downhill. Festival preparation, Tomas’s patrols, or both.

Elin set her penlight between her teeth and emptied the cupboard shelf by shelf. Patient bands furred with rust. Invoice books. Festival lists bound with string. A box of glass ampoules whose labels had browned into illegibility. At the rear lay four ledgers with clinic dates written on their spines.

She carried them to the counter and opened the newest.

The entries began as she expected: names, temperatures, injuries, medicines dispensed. A fishhook through a thumb. A child watched overnight after a fall. Chest pain recorded without an ECG because the ferry had already gone. Different hands had contributed, but each writer had preserved the same narrow columns.

Near the middle of harvest week, the categories changed.

GUEST PLACE SET.

GUEST PLACE CLEARED.

GUEST PLACE RESET.

Elin bent closer. The ink was darker than the surrounding entries, added after the clinical notes. No patient name accompanied it. There was no diagnosis, dose or

outcome.

"Every year?" she asked.

June glanced over. "There's always one place wrong at the harvest meals."

"Wrong how?"

"Too many plates. Or too few people, depending who's counting."

Elin turned back through the book. The phrase recurred on the same part of the calendar. Sometimes one person had written all three lines. In other years, the first entry appeared in the clinic hand and the last in somebody's cramped pencil. One page had been rubbed so hard at the clearing line that the paper had gone translucent.

She took out her phone and photographed the pages.

The next ledger carried the pattern backward. So did the one beneath it. The handwriting altered by generation: broad steel-nib strokes narrowing into biro, careful capitals giving way to hurried loops. The words remained almost fixed. *Set. Cleared. Reset.*

Elin laid two books side by side. "These tide marks aren't decoration."

June came away from the door. Faint horizontal lines had been ruled through several entries, each marked with a height and a time. On the corresponding pages, a separate column held initials.

"Watchers," June said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it says watch."

"Sometimes. Not here." Elin tapped the older page. "Here it's only initials."

The initials changed at tide turn. On some nights there were three sets; on others, two. The guest-place entry always appeared beside the first watch. The clearing entry followed the last. Where there was a release time, it came later in another hand.

Several entries had no release.

Elin photographed those too.

A scrape sounded at the back door.

June swept a box of dressings off the counter and began restacking it. Elin closed the older ledger over her phone and opened the newest at a medication page.

"If I was a constable," Ruairidh said through the crack, "I'd knock louder."

June let him in with enough irritation to cover her relief. Rain shone on his hat and the shoulders of his coat. A beekeeper's veil hung over one forearm, black netting trailing near the floor.

"You followed us," Elin said.

"Thing is, you weren't hidden."

His cloudy eye moved over the open cupboard, the ledgers and June's deliberately crooked pile of gauze.

"Does Moira know you have a clinic key?" Elin asked.

"She'll know when she wants it." June looked at Ruaridh. "Why are you carrying that?"

He glanced at the veil. "Had it in my hand."

"That explains everything."

"It explains the carrying."

Elin opened the ledger again. "What does guest place reset mean?"

Ruaridh removed his hat. Water ran from its brim onto the floor. "Plate goes down. Plate comes back. Folk sleep easier if the count matches in the morning."

"That's what they do. I'm asking why."

"Aye."

He gave her nothing more. Elin had learned the shape of his evasions. Some were ignorance protected by age; others were warnings he did not trust himself to enlarge. Asking the same question harder only made him retreat into weather.

She turned the book toward him. "Who are the initials?"

"Whoever stayed."

"With whom?"

Ruaridh looked toward the closed door.

"If you hear someone you know through wood," he said, "leave them there till you see a face."

"I've heard that already."

"Hear it again."

He opened his hand. A paper twist of salt rested in his palm. Elin touched the packet already in her coat pocket and left it there.

June made a low impatient sound. She reached behind the invoice boxes and drew out a narrow ledger stamped with the chapel seal.

"This was in Gran's room before supper." Red wool was looped through the hole in its spine. "It didn't walk here by itself."

"You took it from her?"

"Don't ask twice."

The chapel volume was older than the clinic books and had been recopied more than once. Different paper had been stitched into the binding. A page near the front listed names and burial dates. Farther in, harvest records displaced the dead.

The same language appeared.

Guest place set.

Guest place cleared.

Guest place reset.

The dates reached farther back than any living islander could remember. Elin compared the hands. Copyists had modernized spelling elsewhere, corrected surnames and expanded weather notes, yet these three phrases passed from book to book nearly untouched.

"No gaps," she said.

"Bad years had sloppier ink," Ruaridh answered.

She found the watcher columns again. First names repeated across decades without the surnames repeating beside them. Maire. Eamon. Tomas. June. Names returned to use in families, but the recurrence blurred the books' chronology. A line written before the oldest person in the village had been born could look, for half a second, like an entry from this week.

"Why first names only?"

"Everybody knew who was meant," June said.

"That's useful until everybody who knew is dead."

Elin traced one watch column with the capped end of her pen. In the earlier sections, watchers arrived in pairs or relieved one another at tide turn. Later books grew sparse. One initial. A blank. A name crossed through without replacement. The guest-place language continued even as the records of company failed.

A bell struck outside.

The sound came through the clinic walls with enough force to disturb dust along the cupboard top. Elin looked through the open inner door. The clinic's bell rope hung in the hall, its tassel motionless above the tiles.

June had stopped with her hand on the chapel ledger.

The bell sounded again.

The rope did not move.

Elin raised her phone and photographed it. The image showed a dim corridor, the vertical rope and the clock above the dispensary door. It could not contain the sound. It could show that at the recorded time nobody had pulled what hung in front of her.

"That bell isn't connected to the chapel," she said.

"No," June answered.

"Is there another rope?"

"No."

Ruaridh put on his hat. "Crypt."

Elin looked at him.

"If you want the older book," he said, "stop taking pictures of a rope."

* * *

Rain found the gap between Elin's collar and neck before they had crossed half the chapel yard. June went first with the stolen key clenched inside her fist. Ruaridh used his shoulder against the side door, protecting the latch from the wind while Elin slipped through.

The stair to the crypt was narrow enough to turn descent into single file. Lime bloom whitened the stone. Their wet soles marked the steps, and the smell changed below ground from rain to cold mineral damp.

June lifted the lamp wick.

A chair stood against the far wall beneath a dust sheet.

It was plain wood, broad-seated, one front leg wrapped with red ribbon. The cloth covering it had kept off dust but not damp; mildew stippled one corner. Elin pulled the sheet away. The arms had been polished by handling. There were no restraints, no carved emblems, no stain she could call evidence.

"Guest chair?" she asked.

Ruaridh nodded.

“Why keep it down here?”

“Chair’s for keeping, not storage. Folk like cupboards.”

The answer irritated her because it carried a practical distinction she could not yet use.

Shelves had been cut into the crypt wall. The books there were swollen and furred at the edges. Elin tested the first binding before opening it flat. Forcing the spine would destroy the pages and turn Tomas’s accusation of trespass into something easier to prove.

She selected records by date rather than reading every line. Clinic entry, chapel entry, watcher column, tide mark, release. Once she understood the architecture, deviations showed themselves.

A year of influenza had six watchers and no clearing time until late morning. Another entry recorded linen boiled twice and lamp oil carried down from the hall. In a winter hand, the guest place was reset before a burial listed elsewhere in the same volume. The guest and the dead were not consistently the same person.

Elin took another photograph.

She had wanted a repeated procedure that culminated in a body: selection, confinement, death, concealment. A sequence a prosecutor could name. The ledgers refused to line up that cleanly. Some guest nights ended in release. Some had no death anywhere near them. Some deaths occurred while the guest place was still recorded as set.

The pattern remained coercive if people had been forced to sit, watch or submit to confinement. It remained concealment if outcomes had been omitted. She could still build from obstruction, sabotage and the island’s declared refusal to let Eamon leave.

Yet the paper required her to preserve the parts that damaged her theory. She had spent too many years correcting family accounts after a death to pretend omission proved the fact she most feared. A blank was a blank until another record gave it edges.

She photographed the watcher columns.

Above them, the chapel bell sounded a third time.

The noise entered the crypt through stone. June turned toward the stairwell. No rope shadow moved against the strip of light at the top.

Elin set her phone on the shelf with the camera running. She watched the still stair and listened to the reverberation decay.

"Wind?" she asked.

Ruaridh tilted his head. "Wind does plenty."

"Does it ring that bell with the rope still?"

"No."

"Has this happened before?"

"Aye."

"When?"

"When it rings."

June swore under her breath.

Elin picked up the phone and entered a note without interpretation: *Three strikes heard. Clinic rope observed still after first and second. No visible movement at crypt stair after third.*

Writing it felt faintly absurd. So had recording a dying patient's report of a wet woman while the floor remained dry. Clinical notes could hold an experience without endorsing its cause. The discipline was useful here. Observation first. Explanation later, if one survived.

She copied the oldest relevant dates onto the back of her transfer forms. Rain had already softened the paper. Ink spread through Eamon's transport authorization and blurred the edge of his printed name.

"Give me your arm," June said.

"What?"

"You're writing on pulp."

Elin pushed up her sleeve. She transcribed the dates along the inside of her left forearm, small enough to fit from wrist to elbow. Harvest date. Tide turn. Watch gap. Release absent. The pen dragged over gooseflesh.

Ruaridh watched. "That's new."

"It won't blow away."

The final date belonged to Maire.

Elin wrote it last, below the others. The ink looked blacker over the blue track of a vein. She did not circle it.

A torch beam crossed the shelves.

"Step back," Tomas said.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs with rain on his shoulders. One hand held the clinic's bent latch plate. The other held the torch, its white beam fixed across Elin's phone and the open books.

June moved the chapel ledger behind her leg.

Tomas saw the movement. "Put it down."

No one obeyed at once.

He descended the remaining steps. He took in the mud on the flags, the displaced dust sheet, the chair exposed against the wall and the open bindings on the shelf. His assessment was as quick as Elin's in a treatment room, and just as material.

"Phones," he said. "Papers. Keys. Fuel key if you've got one."

"No." Elin kept her hand beside the phone.

"Now."

"You blocked a medical transfer."

"You broke into the clinic and chapel."

"My father can't walk ten feet without desaturating."

"And you're in a crypt after midnight pulling records out in damp air." Tomas held out his hand to June. "Key."

June's jaw shifted. Then she dropped the storeroom key, red wool and all, into his palm.

"From where?"

"A pocket."

"Whose?"

"You know whose."

Tomas put the key into his coat. "The ledger too."

Elin lifted her phone before he could take it. "These records show a repeated watch around a designated guest. People disappear from the release column. You cannot confiscate evidence of unlawful confinement because you dislike where it was found."

"Show me your warrant."

"You're the constable. Preserve it."

"I am preserving the books. From you."

He reached for the transfer papers. Elin pulled them against her chest. The wet corner tore beneath her thumb.

"They're trapping a dying man," she said.

The sentence came ready-made, suitable for a complaint form or a mainland room where procedure had weight. In the crypt, the exposed chair stood between the records and the stair. She heard again the gaps she had documented: releases, burials, years without a corresponding death. *Trapping* might still be true. It no longer described the whole shape.

The chapel bell gave one short strike.

Tomas heard it. His gaze shifted upward for less than a second.

From the nave above came a child's laugh, bright and close. It stopped in the middle of the sound.

June moved nearer Elin.

Tomas's face settled harder. "You don't get to stir folk up and walk away to the mainland after."

"I'm reading what they wrote."

"Reading's done."

He took the papers. The torn corner remained pinched between Elin's fingers. His hand stayed out for the phone.

Its screen held the last photograph: Maire's date beside a watcher column. Elin enlarged it once, taking in the numbers, then locked the screen and gave it to him.

"Harbor office lockbox," Tomas said. "You can request it after the observance."

"You don't have authority to hold my phone."

"I've authority to stop a trespass in a clinic, secure copied patient records and prevent another attempt tonight. Argue the edges when the ferry runs."

The legal wording was imperfect. The island did not require perfection from him. He controlled the harbor office, the fuel store, the road barrier and whichever volunteer held the next key.

June began, "Tomas—"

He silenced her with a look, then faced Elin. "Turn out your pockets."

"No."

"Then I do it."

Ruaridh appeared beside the stair, the wet veil still looped over his arm. "Thing is, if she wanted the whole island in a fever, she'd have chosen market day."

"Not helping."

"Wasn't expecting to."

Elin spread her arms. Tomas searched her coat in plain view of the others. He removed the paper twist of salt, examined it, and put it back. From the inside pocket he found the spare jerrycan key.

"That is mine," she said.

"Fuel isn't."

"I paid for it."

"You won't be using it after dark." He clipped the key beside the clinic key. "No vehicle, no boat, no generator draw without me present."

"You're disabling medical transport."

"The harbor is closed. The road ends at the harbor."

"My father still needs oxygen."

"His concentrator has power. If it fails, you send for the clinic and I escort the cylinder."

Every route returned to him. Oxygen, fuel, road, harbor, records. Tomas needed no folklore to confine them. His authority was a ring of ordinary locks.

He checked her remaining pocket and found only gloves and the old ferry tag behind her identification. He left both.

"Out," he said.

Elin lowered her sleeve before climbing the stairs. At the top she looked back. Tomas covered the guest chair himself, drawing the mildewed sheet over its arms with unexpected care.

* * *

A church volunteer waited in the yard under a black umbrella. Tomas handed over Elin's phone, papers and the two key loops.

"Harbor office," he said. "Lockbox. Bring me the lock key when it's done."

The volunteer tucked the bundle beneath her coat and hurried downhill. She did not look at Elin.

Friday morning had arrived without dawn. Rain whitened the torchlight and made the chapel path shine. Tomas positioned himself behind Elin, June and Ruaridh, turning the three of them into a group under escort.

"After dusk," he said, "house to house. No lanes. No harbor. If you need to move, you ask."

"Like schoolchildren," June said.

"If that helps you hear it."

He directed the torch toward Eamon's cottage.

Ruaridh lagged a step, palm open to the rain as if checking its force. "Don't answer a shut door," he said to Elin.

Tomas's beam snapped onto him. "Enough."

Ruaridh closed his hand.

They walked. At the clinic turning, Elin saw the umbrella volunteer cross toward the harbor road with her evidence held dry beneath one arm. By breakfast the phone would be behind steel. The photographs might be erased; the forms could be called contaminated records; every accusation she made would rest on recollection and the testimony of people Tomas could separately instruct.

She rubbed her thumb across the inside of her forearm. Rainwater smeared one edge of the writing, but the dates remained legible beneath her sleeve.

At Eamon's gate, Tomas waited until June had gone toward her own house and Ruaridh had disappeared into the wet dark. Only then did he let Elin through.

"Friday night will be worse," he said.

"Operationally, or is that another village sentence?"

"Stay where someone can find you."

He shut the gate between them.

Elin entered the cottage with no phone, no papers, no key and no independent way to move Eamon. On her forearm, Maire's date remained beneath the others, written

where Tomas had not thought to take it.

Chapter 8: The Missing Watch

Eamon's oxygen tubing had kinked beneath his wrist.

Elin freed it before she spoke. The concentrator resumed its full low rush, and after four breaths the grey at the edge of his mouth eased. He sat propped against two pillows with a blanket over his knees, twine moving through his fingers. The unfinished knot seemed to require less air than conversation.

Friday afternoon pressed a dim yellow square through the bedroom window. Rain ticked the glass. On the chair beside the bed lay Maire's old raincoat, still damp at the hem, with the satchel held inside its lining. Elin had put the cassette on top where Eamon could see it.

He had been looking everywhere else for ten minutes.

"The boat was stuffed with barley," Elin said.

His thumbnail worked the filed edge of his ring. The twine crossed, looped and returned.

"Tomas has my phone and the transfer forms. He has the fuel key. He's imposed an escort after dusk."

Eamon pulled the knot tight.

"Look at me."

He looked toward the window.

Elin checked the concentrator flow again, though the ball sat exactly where she had set it. His respiratory rate had fallen since morning. At rest he could still complete a sentence if he chose its length. The refusal was not confusion, fatigue or hypoxia. She could not convert it into incapacity without lying to herself.

"I need the truth about the guest," she said. "No village saying. No weather."

Eamon's fingers paused over the twine. "Bad weather with a ribbon on it."

"No."

She lifted the cassette. Its plastic case was cracked across one corner. No label showed through the cloudy lid.

"This was in her satchel. You kept her raincoat, her district bag and this recording in the same chest for twenty years. What is on it?"

"Put it back."

“Was she trying to leave?”

His gaze moved to the cassette at last.

“Did they stop her? Did Moira choose her?” Elin asked. “Did you?”

“Elin.”

“Did she volunteer?”

He drew a breath that caught halfway. Elin waited for him to clear it. She would not let concern become an exit he had not asked for.

When he could speak, he said, “Storms are simpler than people.”

“That’s your answer.”

“It’s the one I have.”

She set the cassette on the blanket between them. Eamon did not touch it.

“Then give me the words,” she said. “What do they say when they make someone do it?”

He picked at the edge of the transfer bracelet around his wrist. The plastic had reddened the skin beneath its clasp. Elin reached to check the pressure point, and he moved his arm away.

“You came with straps in your bag,” he said, “before you came with questions.”

“They’re transfer straps. For a stretcher.”

“Aye.”

“You can’t safely sit through a rough crossing. Your saturation drops when you walk to the toilet. You need medication reviewed, pressure areas watched, oxygen that doesn’t depend on one old concentrator and Tomas deciding whether to open a cupboard.”

“Managed.”

The word was quiet. It stayed between them with the cassette.

Elin drew her hand back. “Yes. Your symptoms need managing.”

“And me along with them.”

“That’s unfair.”

“Could be.”

“I am trying to get you somewhere safe.”

Eamon touched the twine to the edge of the cassette case, then withdrew it. "Water says no. Folk say no. Boat says no."

"People did that to the boat."

"Aye."

"Then tell me how to beat them."

He turned the knot over in his palm. It was a compact net of crossings with no visible use.

"You don't beat a tide by shouting at it."

"This isn't tide."

"No."

There it was again: agreement without disclosure. Eamon could distinguish the danger from weather and still shelter behind weather's language.

Elin picked up the cassette. "Maire's clinic entry has no death, release or burial. There's no named person taking the watch after tide turn. If she was alive, where did she go?"

The muscles beside his mouth pulled tight. It was the first clear injury she had made.

"Who was supposed to relieve her?" Elin asked.

Eamon looked through the window toward the village. The buoy bell sounded far below the cottage, regular and moved by something the eye could imagine.

"Dad."

"Not tonight."

"It's Friday afternoon."

"Still no."

He shifted onto his side, facing the window. The movement cost him. His breathing shortened for nearly a minute, and Elin stood beside the bed counting while anger and training occupied the same narrow space. She offered the prescribed breakthrough dose for breathlessness. He refused with one movement of his head. She adjusted the fan instead, directing air across his cheek, and waited until his shoulders lowered.

When she asked whether he wanted the window cracked, he nodded.

Wet air entered with the bell.

"If you know what happened to her," Elin said, "say it."

Eamon pulled the blanket higher. "Put her things away."

It was the last sentence he gave her.

Elin returned the cassette to its case. She slid it into the satchel, folded the raincoat around the bag and placed both on the chair where he could still see them if he turned.

She left his water within reach, checked the tubing once more and went downstairs to find what paper he had not taught himself to silence.

* * *

The dates on Elin's forearm had transferred faintly onto the kitchen table.

She wiped the damp ink from the wood without rubbing her skin. June stood at the dresser sorting the contents of Maire's satchel onto a clean tea towel: rusted thermometer case, blunt scissors, two medicine spoons, a linen roll, pencil stubs and a district-nursing notebook bound in cracked green cloth. The cassette remained boxed inside the satchel.

"You're certain he's settled?" June asked.

"He's breathless, lucid and refusing to speak to me. Those are separate conditions."

"Sounds like Eamon."

"Does he speak to you about her?"

June's hands slowed over the linen. "He asks where things are. He asks whether Gran's been in. Sometimes he asks what day it is and then tells me I've got it wrong."

"Maire."

"No."

Elin opened the nursing notebook. Moisture had rippled its pages, but Maire's writing remained legible: small, upright, impatient with wasted space. Dates ran down the left margin. Doses and temperatures occupied the centre. Tide heights appeared on the right, fitted wherever a gap allowed.

June leaned over her shoulder. "She wrote weather in her work notes?"

"Transport. If she was visiting houses, tide and weather decided when she could cross the causeway or get a boat."

Elin found the first date from her arm and copied it onto the back of a nitrile glove. Without her phone, she needed a surface she could carry and replace. She had done the same during understaffed night shifts when pockets filled with keys and no clean

paper remained: initials at the thumb, dose time over the palm, room number along the index finger. The habit had once earned a reprimand from infection control.

Maire had compressed information in the same manner. Tide figures sat close to dose times because one altered the feasibility of the other. A line could mean six miles between houses, a boat delayed, a child's fever reviewed after dark.

"What are we looking for?" June asked.

"The dates the chapel ledger repeated. Anything that places Maire with the people recorded as guests."

The first match belonged to an elderly woman with pneumonia. Maire had recorded penicillin doses, fluids taken and a change of linen. Beside the midnight dose were two initials. At tide turn, one pair replaced another.

"Watch changes," Elin said.

"Could be family."

"Likely."

The notebook showed a lamp refill at the same time. A plate had returned to the kitchen with most of the broth taken. Nothing in the entry suggested ceremony. It resembled bedside care in a house without enough equipment: warmth, fluids, medicine, somebody awake to notice deterioration.

The chapel ledger for the same year had called the guest place set.

June brought down a stack of household tide books from the dresser. They were the kind once given away by feed merchants, each month printed beside moon phases and water heights. The blank spaces had been used for domestic accounts.

"Gran kept everything," she said. "Even other people's rubbish, if it had a date on it."

"Whose writing?"

"Some Moira's. Some Eamon's. Some was here before either of them had the house."

Elin aligned the tide books with Maire's notes. The household records listed what had been carried out on harvest nights: lamp oil, clean sheet, broth, plate, coal, water. Names appeared beside some items, indicating who had taken them. The timing matched the watcher changes in the clinic and chapel columns.

Earlier entries distributed the work. One house supplied linen. Another sent food. A third relieved the first watcher after tide turn. In later years, the lists shortened. Supplies still arrived, but fewer names accompanied them.

June read over one page. "That isn't how Gran tells it."

“How does she tell it?”

“She doesn’t. She gives jobs.”

The kitchen ceiling creaked as Eamon shifted overhead. Elin waited, listening for a change in the concentrator or a call. Neither came.

She returned to the notebook.

The phrase *guest place* did not appear in Maire’s clinical entries. Maire wrote about bodies. Temperature. Cough. Skin intact at the sacrum. Mouth care. Dose repeated with consent. Someone sleeping for forty minutes while another person sat in. The work was recognizable enough to make Elin feel watched by the page.

A patient could not always be cured or removed. Sometimes the useful acts were smaller and more exact: turn, wash, relieve pain, replace the exhausted daughter before she became too tired to notice a change. Presence belonged to safe care. It was not, by itself, treatment. Company could not reverse sepsis, pulmonary oedema or malignancy, and no bedside rota justified keeping Eamon beyond reach of proper support.

She wrote the second matching date on another glove.

“What did your mother call it?” June asked.

“She didn’t.”

“She never took you on rounds?”

“Once or twice.”

The memory arrived as a smell before an image: wet wool warming beside a stove, boiled milk, the carbolic bite inside Maire’s bag. Elin had sat in kitchens while adults lowered their voices in adjoining rooms. Her mother would emerge carrying used linen separately from clean supplies, then write against the steering wheel before driving on.

“Did she write on gloves?” June asked.

Elin looked at the blue numbers across her palm. “No. Anything she put on paper survived longer.”

Near the back of the notebook, the handwriting changed pressure. The letters remained neat, but the pencil had bitten deep enough to emboss the next sheet.

Maire’s final Friday began with routine visits. A dressing changed at the south cottages. Tablets counted for a man who had taken two days together. Eamon’s name appeared beside a note about lamp fuel. Then, at first bell, Maire recorded her own admission.

Elin read the line twice.

"Admission to where?" June asked.

"It doesn't say."

The next notation was a dose and a tide figure. No drug name appeared, only an amount. A watcher's initials stood beside first bell. At tide turn, those initials had been crossed through.

The replacement space was blank.

Below it, Maire had written *lamp filled* and *linen dry*. A plate mark appeared in the household book at the same time. The practical rota continued around an absence no one had named.

Elin checked the next page. It was blank except for tide figures. The page after that began three days later in another hand.

"There," June said. "That's the gap."

"It's a documentation gap."

"No one took the watch."

"We don't know that."

"There should be a name."

"There should be many things in records that aren't there." Elin heard the sharpness in her voice and reduced it. "A blank doesn't tell us why it's blank."

June sat opposite her. "You want it to say she was killed."

"I want an accountable sequence."

"That's a cleaner sentence."

Elin closed the household book. "If someone selected her, confined her and failed to bring her home, then yes, I want the record to show it."

"And if she went herself?"

"Consent can be manufactured."

"Aye." June looked toward the ceiling. "So can helplessness, if everyone keeps telling a person what they couldn't have chosen."

Elin's forearm rested beside Maire's notebook. Their notation systems met at the wrist: Maire's tide-and-dose pairings on paper, Elin's copied dates on skin. Resemblance did not confer agreement. She knew that and still felt the small,

unwanted intimacy of it.

She reopened the notebook.

"Who is crossed out?" June asked.

"The initials are blurred."

"Eamon?"

"I said no guessing."

The answer came too quickly. June leaned back.

From upstairs, Eamon coughed. The first cough was dry, the second productive. Elin was out of the chair before the third. She reached the bedroom with the bowl, tissues and prescribed medicine ready, but he accepted only help sitting forward. She supported his shoulder without hauling him upright, let him set the pace and held the bowl while he cleared a small amount of sputum.

When his breathing settled, she offered the dose again.

"No," he whispered.

"All right."

She washed his face with a warm cloth, replaced the damp pillowcase and checked the skin beneath the oxygen tubing. Indicated care. Asked for, or permitted, step by step. She could do all of it without surrendering the transfer plan.

Eamon watched her knot the waste bag.

"You found her book," he said.

"Yes."

His eyes closed.

"Who failed to replace the watch?"

He turned his face into the clean pillowcase.

Elin carried the bowl downstairs.

* * *

By late Friday afternoon the village had begun lighting lanterns before dark.

Elin saw them pass the cottage window in crates: clean chimneys nested in straw, tins of fuel, bundles of red ribbon kept dry beneath sacking. Men carried trestles toward the hall. Two women crossed the lane with covered pots. Tomas appeared at the

junction long enough to speak to each group, then continued toward the chapel with his patrol torch hanging unlit from his belt.

The system worked because much of the work was useful. People were fed. Glass was cleaned. Fuel was counted. Moira had distributed tasks so thoroughly that the island moved in her preferred direction while each person carried only a manageable burden.

June returned near sunset with soot along one cheek and oat chaff caught in her hair. A folded cloth protruded from her coat pocket. It smelled faintly of machine oil and cut grain.

Elin let her into the kitchen. "What happened?"

"Festival work."

"You've got sickle oil on your cuff."

June looked down. "Have I?"

"And soot on your face. You've been trimming lanterns."

"Maybe I've taken up farming in the dark."

She reached for the basin. As she washed, something red showed at the inner edge of her sleeve. Elin caught the wool loop between two fingers before June could pull away.

A small iron key hung from it.

June shut off the tap.

"Which door?" Elin asked.

"You could try saying hello first."

"Hello. Which door?"

June dried her hands slowly. "The cliff path gate. And one inside."

"The fever house."

Her silence confirmed it.

"You took it from Moira."

"Don't sound pleased."

"How?"

June glanced toward the hall, checking that Eamon had not come downstairs. "She had me in the grain-barn loft. Lanterns at dusk. Ribbon when she asks. Sickle wrapped until the words are done. All the useful little arrangements."

“What words?”

“She made me repeat the order. I didn’t ask what each bit meant, because she’d only tell me I already knew.” June rubbed at the soot on her cheek and spread it. “Then she told me if you asked about the cliff house, I was to send you to her.”

“And Maire?”

“If you said her name, I was to let it pass by.”

The phrasing had Moira’s gentleness in it. No command to lie. Only an instruction to make truth socially impossible.

“Why give you the sickle?” Elin asked.

“She didn’t give it. She showed me how to carry it. Cloth on in front of children. Words first. Bare blade after.”

“Did she say who it was for?”

“No.”

Elin examined the key. Its shaft was narrow, dark with use, and cleaner at the teeth than at the bow.

“How did you take this?”

“She left it on a bale. Then she hugged me and told me loyalty was quiet.” June’s mouth shifted around a humorless smile. “Turns out pockets are quieter.”

The admission cost her after it had been made. She sat at the table and picked oat husks from her sleeve one by one.

“Does she know?” Elin asked.

“She will.”

“Then we go now.”

“Tomas is on chapel road until supper. In daylight, half the village can see the gate.”

“After dark he escorts us.”

“Only if he catches us.”

June took back the key. “I can get you ten minutes between the chapel road and the smokehouse. Maybe more if somebody stops him to complain.”

Elin looked toward the stairs. Eamon could not be left alone without preparation. She checked his concentrator, placed the spare cannula and prescribed medicines within reach, and told him she needed to go out after supper.

"With June?" he asked.

"Yes."

"To where?"

"You first."

He gave a weak sound that might once have been a laugh. "There she is."

Elin set the call bell on his blanket. It was an ordinary wireless door chime June had rigged because the cottage had no clinical alarm. The receiver waited downstairs, loud enough to bring the neighbour if Elin arranged it.

She asked Eamon's permission before telling the woman next door that he was alone. He granted it after a long pause, with the condition that Moira not be sent for unless he asked. The neighbour agreed without argument and brought her knitting to the kitchen.

Elin put on Maire's raincoat. The satchel fitted inside the lining where it had rested for years; she checked the cassette case, closed the inner fastening and kept the bag against her body.

At the door Eamon called her name.

She returned to the bedroom.

He had taken the unfinished knot from the bedside table. "If a door's lined," he said, "leave it."

"With what?"

His fingers closed over the knot.

"Dad."

He looked beyond her toward the landing. "You came asking. That's what I have."

It was more than he had given before and less than she needed. Elin left before she could spend it by forcing another refusal.

* * *

Dark had settled by the time June appeared at the cliff path gate.

Her cap was pulled low, and she carried a lantern wrapped in her coat to hide its light. Elin waited against the stone wall with a penlight between her teeth. She had rewritten the forearm dates onto the back of a glove where rain and friction could not erase them all at once.

"You came alone," June said.

"The neighbour is with him. He consented."

"How long can we be?"

"How long are the patrols?"

"Tomas goes chapel road, smokehouse, harbor turn, then back. Ten minutes if he keeps walking. Fifteen if old Calum asks him about the hall roof."

June inserted the key and lifted the gate until its weight came off the latch. Metal grated inside the post.

"You took the inner key too?" Elin asked.

"One loop. Two keys."

"Moirá carried them separately in the clinic."

"She's consolidated her secrets." June pushed the gate open. "Come on."

They crossed bent grass silvered with mist. The fever house stood above the drop, its limewash flaking in long strips. One wall showed dark horizontal stains like old tide marks, though the sea lay below the cliff. Quarantine pegs leaned beside the entrance, their ends softened by rot.

June extinguished the lantern before reaching the yard. For several seconds they had only Elin's penlight and the grey remnant of sky.

"Door sticks," June whispered. "Lift, then pull."

The outer key turned. June jerked the latch upward and leaned her weight back. The door opened with a wet release from its frame.

Inside, iron bedsteads were bolted to warped boards. Damp filmed the stone walls. A speaking tube hung near the entrance, its mouth clogged with nest fluff. The air smelled of lime, rust and cloth left too long in a closed room.

June relit the lantern behind her coat.

Elin examined the nearest bed. The mattress had been removed, but the frame was clean where hands had touched it recently. Dust remained beneath the rails. Someone had wiped the top surfaces without cleaning the floor.

"Record room?" she asked.

"If they called it that."

June led her past a row of narrow wards. Old hooks remained in the walls for curtains or equipment. A chipped enamel basin stood upside down on a stool. Elin checked the

floor at each threshold. No salt. No footprints except their own damp soles.

The cupboard in the lower ward was built into the stone. Its door had swollen like the clinic cabinet, but June knew where to press while lifting the latch. Inside lay ledgers, tied bundles and a mug containing dead pencils.

Elin carried the top book to the table.

The pages buckled beneath her hands. She weighted one side with the thermometer case from Maire's satchel and turned carefully through names, dates and short entries in different inks.

The familiar language returned.

Guest place set.

Guest place cleared.

Guest place reset.

Farther into the volume, the records widened. Fever names occupied the first column. Watchers filled the second. Release, death and burial had separate narrow spaces. The arrangement was crude but specific enough to expose omission.

Elin matched the dates from her glove.

The early guest nights resembled Maire's notebook. Doses at fixed intervals. Linen changes. Lamp oil. Broth, water and plates counted out. Watchers relieved at tide turn. Some patients were released. Some died later and received burial entries. In several years, the person receiving care was not named as the guest at all.

June held the lantern closer. "So what was the place for?"

"I don't know."

"You've been saying that more."

"Because these categories don't match the claim I came to prove."

Elin turned another page. A watcher's name had been scraped away, yet the release entry remained. On the next matching date, two sisters shared the watch and the guest place was cleared before either patient left the house.

This was not a record of one person selected to die each year. If murder existed in the pattern, it had entered through a practice that once contained more care than the village admitted.

Care could be used to beautify coercion. A clean sheet and measured dose did not absolve confinement. Yet these older entries showed coordinated bedside work, and over the years that work had thinned while the fixed phrases survived.

June touched one line. "That's my great-aunt's name."

"As watcher?"

"Aye. Gran said she went mainland before the bad winter."

"The dates might support both."

"No one said she did this."

"No one says anything plainly enough to be contradicted."

Elin reached the later pages. The handwriting became familiar before the name did. Maire's upright letters filled the lower half of a sheet.

Elin stopped turning.

Maire Mora. Admitted at first bell.

Watched through tide turn.

Guest place set.

The first watcher's initials were crossed through. The replacement column was empty.

There was no death time. No release. No burial note.

The clearing and reset lines had been entered elsewhere in the book, in another hand, without a witness attached.

Elin pressed the page flat with spread fingers. Damp had blurred the lower margin but left the absence intact.

"That's it," June said.

"No."

"It's her."

"It's incomplete."

Elin checked the preceding and following leaves for inserted pages. None had been cut out. The stitching remained continuous. The next sheet held only tide figures, copied without a patient name. After that, the record resumed days later with a different admission.

June shifted the lantern. "No one took over."

"No one wrote that they did."

"You found the same blank at the cottage."

"Yes."

"And in the chapel book."

"Yes."

"How many records have to leave a space before you let it be a space?"

Elin did not answer. She had required corroboration, and now she had it: three systems preserving the same failure. The household rota stopped at tide turn. Maire's notebook crossed out the expected watcher. The fever-house ledger named no replacement.

Someone should have come.

The conclusion damaged the clean shape of murder. Murder gave Maire one role and Eamon another: victim and coward, victim and accomplice. An abandoned watch allowed choices before the abandonment. Maire could have entered knowingly. She could have prepared the linen and dose marks herself. Eamon's guilt might lie in leaving rather than delivering her.

That version was harder to prosecute and harder to hate correctly.

June looked toward the ward entrance. "Take the book. We've got enough to put in front of Gran."

"Tomas will call it stolen."

"He called your phone stolen first."

"We need the original intact."

A drop struck the floor somewhere beyond the table.

June turned the lantern toward the rear of the ward.

A narrow stair rose behind a partition. Boards had been nailed across its rail, although they did not block passage. The first step lay in shadow.

"Nobody uses the upper floor," June said.

Elin closed the ledger but kept one hand on it. "This cupboard has been cleaned recently."

"Gran comes up for records."

"Does she?"

"I assumed."

Another drop fell.

Fresh water shone on the boards between the table and the stair. One print had formed near the cupboard, bare and narrow. A second lay beyond it. The boards around them were dry.

Elin crouched. She touched the edge of the nearest print with two fingers and lifted them. Cold water beaded on her skin. It held no dust or grit from the yard.

"You've got a leak above," she said.

June's lantern glass fogged with her breath. "No rain gets in there."

"The roof looks half gone."

"Roof over that side was redone."

Elin moved the light along the track. The prints continued toward the stair, each distinct at heel and toe. There was no pool beside the door, no cast-off footwear, no returning line.

June stood very still. "We should go."

"You said nobody uses it."

"Nobody says they do."

Elin rose. The ledger behind her held Maire at first bell, watched only until tide turn. Ahead, the wet marks reached the first step.

A line of salt had been laid across it.

The salt was fresh enough to remain white in the damp house. It ran from wall to wall, carefully poured along the join between board and stone. The footprints passed through without scattering a grain. Water darkened the wood on both sides, yet the salt itself remained dry and whole.

Eamon's warning returned with exact wording: *If a door's lined, leave it.*

This was a stair, not a door. Elin recognized the distinction as the kind frightened people made when they meant to proceed while claiming obedience.

June came beside her, holding the lantern low. "We can take the book and go."

"This doesn't prove murder," Elin said.

"Good."

"It proves the record was closed without a release or a replacement witness."

"And there are wet feet where nobody's been."

Above them, something moved once across the upper floor. The boards gave a measured complaint beneath its weight.

Elin put Maire's ledger back on the table, open to the incomplete entry. The satchel remained fastened inside the raincoat against her ribs. She could feel the hard corner of the cassette case through the cloth.

Elin and June stood at the foot of the salted stair while fresh water gathered in the next print above the unbroken line.

Chapter 9: The Lined Door

The wet prints continued up the stair without disturbing the salt.

Elin stepped over the line. June made a small sound behind her, frustration rather than fear, and followed with the lantern held low. The stair narrowed between limewashed stone and a boarded rail. Water shone in the hollows worn by feet, each print distinct enough to show the press of a heel and the separate pads of toes. The wood around them remained dry.

At the turn, Elin touched one print. Cold struck through her fingertips. Colder than collected rain, colder than the water in the fever-house jug downstairs. She wiped her hand on her trousers and looked up.

The upper landing was barely wide enough for two people to pass. Three iron bedsteads had been folded against one wall. Opposite them, old quarantine pegs carried a length of cracked rubber apron and a beekeeper's veil rolled into itself. At the far end stood a single door, its boards banded crosswise with darker timber.

Salt enclosed the doorway. It ran thick across the sill, climbed in paste along both jambs and had been pressed into the seam above. The line was intact. The wet tracks led to it and stopped on the far side as if the person making them had passed through the closed door.

June raised the lantern. "That wasn't here last month."

"The door?"

"The fresh salt."

Something shifted behind the wood. A bed rope drew taut with a soft fibrous complaint.

Elin moved nearer. There was no keyhole, only an iron latch on their side and a wooden pull polished by use. The water gathered against the inner edge of the salt without soaking it.

"Is this where they kept her?" she asked.

June stayed by the stair. The lantern showed every part of her: wet hair stuck to her brow, one hand wrapped around the handle, the other empty against her coat. "I don't know."

"You knew there was an upper room."

"I knew there were rooms nobody used."

"Someone uses this one."

"That's far enough."

The words came from the recess behind the folded bedsteads.

June swung the lantern. Ruaridh Sorn stepped out of the dark with the rolled veil tucked under one arm and a paper twist open in his hand. Salt dusted the hairs on his wrist. His coat was buttoned wrongly, one side higher than the other, and mud streaked his boots as if he had come by the cliff path rather than the lane.

June swore. "How did you get in?"

"Same way as you, only quieter." His eyes went to the wet prints and then to Elin's position beside the door. "You should both be downhill."

Elin showed him her wet fingertips. "What's inside?"

"Step away first."

"What's inside?"

Ruaridh came forward, quick enough that she understood how much effort his usual slowness concealed. "Access and welcome aren't the same thing. You've access because a key was taken. That doesn't make you welcome here, and it doesn't give you leave to welcome anything else."

June's gaze dropped.

"You knew we had the key," Elin said.

"I knew she'd take it if Moira pushed hard enough."

"Then you could have told me plainly before now."

"Aye." His mouth worked once, accepting the charge. "I should have."

A drop struck the boards inside the room.

Ruaridh looked at the door. "You asked for plain. Have it now. If a voice comes through wood after dark, don't answer unless you can see the mouth speaking. If a door has been lined, leave it lined and shut. Salt where folk cross. Salt again if the line is broken."

Elin glanced at the tracks. "They crossed an unbroken line."

"Then the line isn't for keeping everything in."

"What is it for?"

"For telling you where your part begins."

It was another saying shaped to survive without explanation. Elin had no patience left for it. "A person could be in there."

"A person could," Ruairidh said. "You still don't answer a voice you can't place with your eyes."

June edged toward the stair. "We can go."

Elin stayed where she was. The ledger downstairs had recorded Maire's entry at first bell, the tide turn, the doses, the food. Then nothing. No release, no death, no burial, no next watcher. The room behind this lined door held an iron bed; she could smell its rust beneath the damp.

Ruairidh held out the paper twist. "Take this."

She did. The paper was warm from his hand.

"If the line breaks, mend it before you do anything else," he said. "Before you call out. Before you reach. If it speaks, let it spend itself."

Three taps sounded from behind the door.

They were evenly spaced, knuckle against wood. June's lantern moved half an inch and steadied.

A woman said, "June?"

The voice was muffled but clear. Young. Breathless.

June stared at the door. Her lips parted.

Ruairidh lifted one finger without looking at her. "Don't give it your no."

The voice knocked again. "June, open. I can't get my hand free."

June clasped her own wrist.

Elin looked back at her. June stood three paces away by the stair, visible from boots to face. Her mouth was closed.

"That's her voice," Elin said.

"It has what's near," Ruairidh replied. "Your ears do half its work."

"Near how?"

"Near enough. Downhill."

From the room came a scrape, wood dragged once over boards. Then June's voice again, sharpened by pain. "Please. It's caught."

Elin had heard that register hundreds of times: the effort to remain reasonable while fear pushed breath high into the chest. A patient refusing to shout because shouting would make the emergency real. She knew how fast a trapped limb lost circulation. She knew that people described the visible injury and omitted what was killing them.

She also knew June was standing outside the room.

Ruaridh put himself between Elin and the latch. "It can be a child with a cough. A man under a boat. Anyone you'd rather save than think. Same door."

The voice inside went quiet.

June began backing down the first step. "Elin."

A different woman said her name from behind the wood.

Not loudly. Almost with embarrassment.

"Elin, love."

Her mother had used *love* when annoyed and *pet* when frightened. The distinction had survived when entire years had gone missing. Elin saw a yellow kitchen curtain breathing inward over a sink. Maire's wet cuffs folded back from her wrists. A hand closing the throat of a satchel before the ferry.

Ruaridh's shoulder blocked the door. "Don't answer."

"Elin," the voice said. "I waited."

The paper twist bent in Elin's fist.

"Maire is dead," June whispered.

Ruaridh turned his head. "No names."

Inside, a chair leg scraped. "He left me here."

Elin's attention fixed on the latch. Iron, rusted at the pivot but recently oiled beneath. It could be lifted in one motion. The door opened inward. If someone had fallen behind it, there was enough clearance at the hinge side to enter.

The thought assembled itself with the speed of any emergency plan: open, assess, remove. She understood the warning. She understood that the speaker could not be June and that no evidence made it Maire. Understanding did not quiet the voice or alter the ledger below.

Ruaridh watched her face. "This house uses what you haven't finished."

"Then tell me what happened to her."

"Not here."

"You've all said that for twenty years."

"Elin," June said. "Come down."

From behind the door, June screamed.

The sound struck the boards at head height. It broke into a wet choking gasp and stopped.

Elin answered before she knew she had chosen to.

"June?"

Ruaridh seized her sleeve. "No."

She drove past him. Her shoulder hit his chest; his grip slid to her elbow. June lunged from the stair and caught the lantern as Ruaridh knocked it sideways.

Elin's boot came down across the sill.

The salt compressed under her sole and shot outward in white streaks. Her heel dragged through the paste climbing the left jamb. Water rushed into the furrow she made, filling it with a black shine.

"Mend it," Ruaridh said.

He still held her sleeve. She tore free. The paper twist dropped from her fist, spilling its contents over wet boards. She reached across the broken line, lifted the latch and pulled.

The door resisted for the length of one heartbeat. Then the lower edge scraped through salt and opened inward.

Cold water covered Elin's boots.

The room held one iron bed, its mattress dark with damp, and a straight-backed chair lying on its side. Tide stains climbed the plaster higher than Elin could reach. There was no window in the seaward wall, yet water fell steadily near it, each drop appearing in the lantern light only an inch before it struck the floor.

No one stood behind the door.

June was beside Elin now, outside the room. She caught the back of Elin's coat with her free hand. "I was here. You saw me here."

Something moved in the far corner.

A woman stepped into the lantern wash.

Her dress clung to her legs, blackened by water. A red ribbon lay against one shoulder. Hair plastered her cheeks and brow. The skin beneath it had the pale,

swollen sheen of flesh kept too long in cold water, but the mouth was Maire's mouth, broad at the lower lip, and the left eyelid folded exactly as it had when she laughed.

Elin's mind supplied the name with no consent from her.

"Mam."

The woman lifted one hand. Water streamed from the fingers. The nails were packed with black husk.

Its gaze passed over Elin and settled on the broken sill.

Ruaridh hit the door with both palms.

The edge caught Elin across the shoulder and drove her backward onto the landing. June pulled her clear. Ruaridh planted one boot against the boards and shoved, but the fallen chair had shifted in the water and blocked the door from closing by the width of a hand.

"Back," he said.

Elin reached for him. "Ruaridh—"

"Downhill."

He dropped to one knee at the sill. The salt twist lay split near his boot. He scooped wet grains into his palm, packed them into the furrow beneath the door and swept the loose dry salt after them with the side of his hand. Water soaked his cuff.

The woman crossed the room.

She did not hurry. Her bare feet made no sound Elin could separate from the dripping water. Maire's face remained turned toward Ruaridh with the mild attention she used to give a difficult knot.

"The chair," Elin said. "It's blocking—"

Ruaridh put his shoulder into the gap and forced the door inward far enough to kick the chair clear. The wood slammed almost shut. His fingers moved along the sill, joining white to white.

For one second the line was complete except where his own wrist crossed it.

The woman's hand appeared around the door edge.

It closed high on his coat. Ruaridh struck the frame with the heel of his other hand and shoved Elin with his shoulder. She stumbled into June. His beekeeper's veil fell from beneath his arm and unrolled across the wet boards.

"Outer sill," he told June.

Then the door pulled him hard against it.

There was one close crack, like a boot breaking thin ice. Ruaridh's knees folded. His cheek struck the jamb, and he slid sideways across the line he had nearly repaired.

Elin dropped beside him. His eyes remained open. The angle of his neck told her before her fingers reached it. She found no useful pulse, no movement beneath the jaw, no airway position she could correct without moving a cervical injury that had already ended him.

Water crawled through the salt beneath his shoulder.

"Help me move him," she said.

June grabbed her coat. "We can't."

"We get him clear and close it."

The door shifted against Ruaridh's body.

Elin took hold beneath his arms. His weight came toward her, slack and warm inside the wet coat. The opening widened another inch. Beyond it, Maire's face appeared close to the floor. One eye watched through the gap.

June hauled Elin backward with both hands. "That's what it wants."

"We can't leave him in the threshold."

"He's dead."

Elin knew. Her hands still tightened in Ruaridh's coat.

The door moved again. A pale set of fingers slid over his shoulder.

June stamped on the fallen veil, tore Elin's grip loose and dragged her toward the stair. Elin caught one bedframe to stop herself. The iron screeched across stone.

"Salt," June said. "He said outer sill."

Above them, Ruaridh's boot knocked once against the boards.

Elin turned. His body lay across the threshold with the upper half hidden by the door. The white line ended at the dark shape of his coat. Behind him, wet hair lowered into view.

June shoved the lantern into Elin's hands and pulled her down the stair by the back of the raincoat. Light struck the walls in hard arcs: quarantine pegs, speaking tube, the ledger table below. Elin's boot slipped on the first wet print. She hit one knee, felt skin tear through her trousers, and rose because June would not release her.

The upper door slammed.

A hand struck the banister above them. Five fingers appeared between the nailed boards, pale and pouring water. They withdrew. A bare foot came onto the top step.

Elin reached the lower hall and turned toward the ledger. Maire's incomplete entry lay open where they had left it.

"Leave it," June said.

"It proves—"

"Leave it."

June drove the outer door open. Harvest fog blew into the hall in a cold sheet. They crossed the threshold, and June fell to one knee in the grass, digging through her apron pocket. Her hand came out with a crushed paper packet she must have taken downstairs. She tore it with her teeth and poured salt across the sill from stone to stone.

The line landed unevenly. Elin saw a gap near the hinge and dropped to mend it.

Her fingers stopped above the salt.

The upper line returned with perfect clarity: white grains compressed under her boot, the dark channel filling with water, her own hand on the latch while Ruaridh told her what to do. She had understood him. There had been no confusion to excuse, no missing term in the rule. A voice had offered her the chance to reverse twenty years in one movement, and she had valued that chance above the living people beside her.

June swept salt into the gap and caught Elin under the arms.

"Move."

"I answered it."

"I know."

"I opened the door."

"I know, Elin."

The words had no softness left, but June did not let go.

Inside the fever house, something descended with the unhurried weight of a person who knew the route. One stair complained. Then the next.

Elin looked through the open doorway. The lower hall lay empty. Above the boarded rail, a wet foot reached down and settled on the next step.

June dragged her into the fog and downhill while Ruaridh remained dead across the boundary Elin had broken.

Chapter 10: A Better Bunker

Ruaridh's body came into the chapel hall on a door taken from its hinges.

The men carrying him had wrapped him in a horse blanket before lifting him from the upper landing. Water had soaked through at the shoulder and along one side. His hive knife hung from a belt loop beneath the blanket, knocking softly against the wood whenever the bearers changed their grip.

It was Saturday before dawn. The hall windows were black, and wet coats steamed above the range. Someone had stripped the dust sheet from the yearly guest chair. It waited against the wall with red ribbon wound around one leg, the empty seat turned toward the trestles.

"Stove side," Moira said. "He hated a draught."

The bearers adjusted their course. One was Tomas. He kept his eyes on the door beneath Ruaridh rather than on the shape above it.

Elin stood near the back with June. Her wet trousers had stiffened at the knees, and each time she bent her right leg the torn skin stuck to the cloth. June had a bruise rising at one temple where the fever-house lantern had struck her during the descent. Neither injury required attention before Ruaridh did, and Ruaridh required nothing she could give.

Moira unfolded a clean sheet. She laid it over the horse blanket, drew it straight across his chest and tucked the lower corner away from the hive knife. Her hands were steady. She checked that his boots did not project into the aisle where someone might trip.

The competence of it angered Elin more than ceremony would have done.

A woman beside the range began to cry into a dish towel. The kettle muttered on. No one else spoke until Tomas and the second bearer had set the door across two trestles.

Calum Venn, whose family owned the larger generator above the north crofts, broke from the wall. He was young enough that sleep loss made him look ill rather than merely old. "We stop it."

Several faces turned toward him.

"No bell tonight," he said. "No guest. We keep everyone down from that house."

His mother gripped his sleeve, but he shook her off. "He knew more than any of us, and look at him."

Moira smoothed the sheet once over Ruaridh's shoulder. "I'm looking."

"Then say it's finished."

A spoon slipped into the washbasin. The room moved around the sound: shoulders changing angle, feet easing apart as if people might need room to choose sides.

Elin stepped away from the wall. The damp fever-house ledger was under her arm. June had seized it on the way out after all, though Elin could not remember seeing her take it.

"He died repairing a line," Moira said. "A line that was opened against warning."

Her gaze came to Elin without haste.

There it was: the true fact selected from the others and set where it would do the most work.

Elin did not look away. "I opened it."

June shifted beside her.

A few villagers had already heard. Elin saw the knowledge pass more cleanly now. Someone near the sink whispered Ruaridh's name. Calum's mother crossed herself and then seemed embarrassed by the gesture.

"What came through killed him," Elin said. "It was wearing my mother's face."

The woman with the dish towel began crying harder. A man near the stove muttered that wet clothes and grief could make anyone see things.

June spoke before Elin could turn on him. "I saw it too."

Moira's expression did not change. "Then we have two witnesses to why the rules stand."

"To why you stop," Calum said.

"To why we take proper care." Moira lifted the whistle cord at her throat and fed it once through her fingers. "We have lost people by rushing. We have lost people by deciding weather will wait while we argue. Delay kills more readily than obedience."

"Obedience to what?" Elin asked.

This time the room faced her fully.

She opened the ledger to Maire's page. The paper had wrinkled in the damp, and one corner tore beneath her thumb. "My mother went in at first bell. There are doses recorded. Food. Watchers until tide turn. Then the record stops. No death, no release, no burial and no replacement witness."

Moira looked at the open page. "This is not the hour."

"What hour will be?"

"When the dead man between us has been washed, when the living have dry clothes and when your father is somewhere he can be properly tended."

"You don't decide where he goes."

"Then decide quickly." Moira's tone remained gentle. "He cannot stay alone at the cottage while you hold an inquest in wet clothes."

Elin hated the accuracy of it. Eamon's last oxygen cylinder had been running low when she left. His breathlessness worsened with exertion, cold and anxiety. June had been keeping the cottage warm, counting medication and bringing food, but June stood beside Elin now. Every person in the hall knew who had failed to be at his bedside.

Moira took a cup from the tea table and offered it across the space. "Drink."

Elin did not move.

"Your hands are shaking."

"They work."

"For the moment." Moira set the cup within reach on the windowsill. "We'll bring Eamon nearer before light. Lanterns in pairs after dusk. Salt at every inhabited door. No one walks the north lane alone, and no familiar voice is answered through wood unless the speaker is seen."

A murmur moved through the hall. This was language people could act on. Fear had arrived without handles; Moira supplied them.

She turned to Tomas. "Cliff road and harbor approaches."

"Pairs on forty-minute turns," he said. "I'll mark them."

"To the women at the range: broth to the watch house and north cottages. Fresh loaves divided before noon. Mrs. Venn, can the generator carry the clinic and chapel if the lines go?"

Mrs. Venn held her son's sleeve again. "It can, if we're given fuel back."

"The fuel stays pooled at the harbor," Tomas said.

"Then it carries our house only."

Calum looked at Ruairidh's covered body. "It carries none of this."

Tomas walked toward him. His voice lowered, forcing the people nearby to quiet if they wanted to hear. "Your generator gives us no road light without fuel. Take the east lantern turn instead. Two hours, with me."

"We said no after-dark work." Mrs. Venn's grip tightened.

"You'll have the harbor lamp and a second pair in sight."

Calum's eyes went from Tomas to Moira. He did not agree. His mother did it for him with one short nod, trading fuel they would not receive for a patrol narrow enough to survive.

Moira was already assigning salt stores. One household offered two sacks because their children slept in the back room and they wanted the lanes watched. Another woman accepted broth duty after asking whether the clinic would still send her husband's tablets. The man who had doubted June's sighting volunteered for the chapel lamps and would not meet Elin's eyes. Belief was not required. The work moved through fear, debt, habit and the wish to be useful while a dead man lay ten feet away.

"June," Moira said. "Fresh cloths."

June stayed still.

Moira looked at her.

After a moment June took the folded stack from the sideboard. She did not carry it toward Ruaridh. She held it against her chest like something confiscated.

Elin watched the hall come back under Moira's hands. Tea was poured. Patrol names went onto the back of a church circular. Someone found a basin deep enough for washing. Ruaridh's death, which might have broken the village open, became a reason to close every road more tightly.

A drop fell from beneath the sheet and darkened the chapel floor.

Elin saw again the water entering the furrow her boot had cut through the upper line.

"I'm taking Eamon to the lighthouse," she said.

Moira paused over the patrol list.

"It has one approach, stone walls and a room above the spray," Elin continued. "I can control the doors. He'll have oxygen and heat."

"You'll need help carrying."

"I'll choose who."

"Of course." Moira passed the pencil to Tomas. "We'll see that the road remains clear."

The concession came too easily. Elin recognized that and took it anyway.

* * *

Eamon was awake when Elin returned to the cottage. He sat at the kitchen table wearing his old deck boots and the fisherman's sweater June had laid out for him. The oxygen cannula looped beneath his nose. Maire's raincoat lay over the other chair with the satchel fastened inside it, where Elin had left both before following the men back for Ruaridh.

"You look drowned," Eamon said.

Elin checked the cylinder gauge before answering. Less than a quarter remained. "We're moving."

"To where?"

"The lighthouse."

He considered this while she clipped the oximeter to his finger. His hand was cold enough to delay the reading. When it came, the number was low but consistent with the labor visible at his neck and ribs.

"High place for a man short of air," he said.

"We'll stop on the stairs."

"That a medical treatment now?"

"It is if you need it."

He looked at her torn knee, then at June's bruised temple as she entered behind Elin. "Who came off worse?"

June set a bundle of blankets on the table. "Ruaridh."

Eamon's thumb stopped against the flat side of his wedding ring.

Elin crouched to change his oxygen tubing. She kept her hands occupied with the connector because the next sentence had no task inside it. "He died at the fever house."

"Upper floor?"

She looked at him. "You knew there was something there."

His attention shifted to the dark window. "Knew enough to tell you leave a lined door."

"I opened it."

June stood at the stove, sorting medicine into a biscuit tin. She had already heard the admission. It became different in this room, said in front of Eamon.

His face altered by very little. A deeper fold appeared beside his mouth. "Aye."

"Is that all?"

"What answer would put him back?"

Elin tore the old tape from the oxygen tube harder than necessary. "You could have told me what the rule was for."

"Would you have listened?"

Ruaridh had told her plainly. The memory took away the reply before she could use it.

Eamon pushed himself upright. The effort raised his respiratory rate at once. "If we're climbing, do it before my legs hear about it."

The lighthouse stood on the lower headland, closer to the village center than the cottage but apart from the occupied lanes. Its keeper's room had not housed anyone for years. June had found the key in the clinic drawer while Elin assembled what they could carry: the working oxygen cylinder and one empty spare, Eamon's medications, clean linen, a camp cot, kettle, basin, food, battery lamps and the canvas clinical bag. Elin wrapped Maire's satchel inside the raincoat and placed both on top of the bedding.

Tomas sent two men with a handcart. One was the man who had doubted what June saw. He spoke only to ask which cylinder was live. The other had a daughter with asthma and kept checking the oxygen straps himself. Neither entered the cottage after Elin told them to wait outside.

Eamon refused the cart.

"I'll walk while I'm walking," he said.

"You'll sit for the hill."

"I'll sit when the hill says."

June asked, "Can I take your left arm?"

He nodded. Elin took the right without asking and felt him stiffen beneath her hand. She loosened her grip, then matched June's hold at his forearm rather than under his shoulder.

They covered the lane in sections. Cottage gate to stone wall. Stone wall to the old signal post. At each stop Eamon sat on the handcart while Elin assessed his color and

counted the recovery time between breaths. He remained oriented, irritated and capable of telling them when the cannula pulled. The relocation cost him. By the lighthouse steps his lips had lost color and sweat stood cold along his hairline.

The men offered to carry him.

"No," Eamon said.

One of them glanced at Elin for permission to ignore him.

"We rest," she said.

His pulse slowed by degrees. When he stood again, June asked for his arm. This time he gave it before she touched him.

The keeper's stair turned twice inside the tower. Iron treads rang under every foot. Elin went ahead to clear the landings, then came back down for the oxygen. They moved Eamon one flight at a time, the live cylinder between them and the empty one left below with the handcart until someone could fetch it. By the last turn he no longer joked. He concentrated on placing each boot fully on the tread.

The keeper's room contained a rusted iron bed, a table, two mismatched chairs and a chart of shoals curled away from the wall. One window faced the harbor. The other looked toward the cliff road and, beyond it, the fever house lost in fog.

Elin turned Eamon's chair away from that window.

"Ask before turning the room into a box," he said.

She caught the correction in time. "Do you want to see the house?"

"No."

She closed the shutter.

June made the bed while Elin assessed the room. One main door from the stair. A narrow cupboard with an inner door. Hearth and flue, both long unused. Two windows with catches corroded but functional. Gaps beneath the skirting large enough for draught, too small for a hand. No water supply above the lower store.

The room could be defended. The thought arrived with the same relief as a clear diagnosis.

She taped blackout cloth over the cliff window and doubled it at the edge. The harbor window remained available for daylight until evening, with cloth cut and ready beside it. She marked the main threshold on a rough floor plan, then the cupboard and hearth. Salt went across the door and cupboard sill and into the hearth seam. She did not circle the bed. If they had to move Eamon quickly, a low line around its legs would become a trip hazard.

The broken upper threshold kept returning under her hands. Her boot compressing the white ridge. Water finding the gap. Ruaridh saying *before you do anything else* while she reached for the latch.

"Elin," June said.

Salt ran between Elin's fingers onto the cupboard floor.

"What?"

"You're spilling it."

Elin folded the paper tighter. She swept the grains into a continuous line with the side of her hand and checked both corners.

"Doors stay shut after dark," she said. "If you hear me through wood, you don't answer unless you can see me. Same for anyone. No one opens an inner door. If a line is damaged, repair it first."

June tucked a blanket around Eamon's feet. "I know."

"I need you to say it."

June looked at her across the bed. "I won't answer what I can't see. I won't break a line."

Eamon leaned back in the chair, eyes closed. "Aye."

"Say it."

He opened one eye. "I heard you."

"That isn't the same."

"Enough, girl."

Elin pressed the paper twist flat on the table. She wanted compliance she could verify. She also knew he was spending breath because she had demanded words from him.

"All right," she said.

June's attention stayed on her a moment longer before she returned to the blankets.

Elin assembled the room by consequence rather than neatness. Oxygen first: the live cylinder beside the bed, gauge visible, tubing routed where no chair leg could pinch it. One empty cylinder by the stair and another partial cylinder promised from the clinic after daylight. At Eamon's present flow, the live supply would not carry them through Saturday night without replacement.

Medication next. His regular tablets covered the day if nausea did not prevent swallowing. The comfort medicines were finite: enough for several episodes of pain or

breathlessness, fewer if symptoms escalated. She separated those from the drugs in her clinical bag that could quiet agitation and make a transfer possible. The distinction was clear in indication, consent and intended effect, even before she laid anything out.

Fuel was worse. The lighthouse stove had paraffin for perhaps six hours. The battery lamps held charge, but the radio drained cells quickly and the generator in the lower store needed fuel Elin did not possess. Warmth would depend on blankets, hot water brought from outside and people willing to carry it up.

Her bunker already depended on the village she meant to exclude.

She wrote the amounts on the back of a funeral card and pinned it beside the shoals chart.

Oxygen: one live, one empty, one promised.

Heat: six hours if the stove behaved.

Comfort medication: sufficient at current need, uncertain if breathing worsened.

Food and water: one day, provided Eamon could take them.

Salt: enough to renew each marked threshold twice.

The list omitted labor. June had carried the kettle and linen. Two villagers had hauled equipment. Someone at the clinic would have to release the spare cylinder, and someone else would bring hot water once the stove failed. Elin could lock the door against people only after accepting what their hands supplied.

The handcart men left when Tomas whistled from the road. Before going, the father of the asthmatic girl set the empty cylinder upright under the stair rather than abandoning it on the wet step. The other man asked whether Ruaridh had spoken after they found him.

"No," Elin said.

The man rubbed his palms on his trousers. "Moirá said it was quick."

"It was."

He nodded as if she had offered comfort. Perhaps she had. He went down without looking toward the cliff.

June brought Maire's raincoat and satchel from the bedding pile and set them against the wall beside Eamon's old coat.

"You want these unpacked?"

"No."

"The clothes are wet."

"Leave them together."

Maire's cassette remained inside the satchel. Elin had carried it through the fever house and back without listening. The impulse to open it rose and was pushed aside by the oxygen gauge, the uncovered window and Eamon's need to recover from the climb. Evidence could wait. Bodies did not.

That principle had led her to the upper latch.

She took the raincoat from June and spread it over a second chair to dry, with the fastened satchel still tucked beneath its fold. She placed both near the wall, away from the stove and the salt lines.

Eamon watched her through half-closed eyes. "You planning to sleep?"

"No."

"Then you'll be stupid by evening."

"I'll manage."

"Aye. That's what frightens everyone."

June covered a laugh with a cough. Elin checked Eamon's oxygen saturation again. It had improved with rest, though his respiratory effort remained high. She offered him prescribed medicine for breathlessness, named it and told him what effect she expected. He considered, then agreed. She gave the proportionate dose and recorded the time.

He remained awake. His shoulders lowered after several minutes, and the panic edge left his breathing without erasing him from the room.

That was the effect she wanted from good symptom control. Relief, with the person still present to choose what came next.

She looked toward the clinical bag.

The later possibilities were different. If Eamon heard a voice and tried to open the door; if Moira came; if the weather cleared enough to move him; if he panicked on the stair. Elin could prepare for those events. Prepared medication meant no fumbling under pressure. It also meant she had already imagined his resistance and assigned it a chemical answer.

She opened the bag anyway.

June was at the lower store fetching the larger kettle. Eamon had dozed lightly, his hand resting outside the blanket with the mainland transfer bracelet around his wrist.

Elin placed a steel tray on the table and checked each label. She prepared two small symptom doses in case swallowing failed. Then she drew up larger reserves intended to quiet agitation during emergency movement. She wrote no patient request beside those. There was none.

The orange transfer straps lay coiled in the canvas bag. She took them out, tested the buckles and placed them beside the tray.

A gust struck the shutter. The blackout cloth lifted at one corner. Elin crossed to retape it, then wedged a boathook beneath the window latch. At the main door she tested the bolt twice and fitted another length of wood under the handle.

Every improvement narrowed the room.

Eamon woke when she dragged the second chair away from the bed. It was a folding camp chair, placed where someone could sit at his shoulder without blocking access to the oxygen.

“No room?” he asked.

“Need a clear route to the door.”

“For who?”

Elin pressed the release. The chair’s legs folded together with a flat metal snap.

Mr. Vale’s room returned without warning: the visitor chair folded against the wall, his gaze following the empty space, his daughter sent away for cloths that had not needed replacing. Clearing the bedside had created no clinical benefit then. Here it created a straighter path for a stretcher.

She held the folded frame upright.

Eamon’s eyes had closed again. His breathing moved the blanket in small regular lifts. The chair belonged beside him if June returned, if he woke afraid, if either of them found words worth hearing. It also occupied the route Elin had mapped.

She reopened it.

The legs locked with a click. She placed it beside the bed, far enough back to leave access to the oxygen, close enough for a seated person to take Eamon’s hand.

Then she continued sealing the room.

At the cupboard, she pressed salt into a thin place near the jamb. She taped the floor plan beside the resource list and marked the Saturday sunset bell in block capitals. The radio gave weather static when she tested it, then one broken phrase about gale force winds before the signal dissolved. She switched it off to save the batteries.

June returned carrying the kettle with both hands. She stopped at the table.

Her gaze moved from the loaded syringes to the orange straps, then across to Eamon asleep beside the reopened chair.

Elin slid the bolt home behind her and checked the salt line remained unbroken.

Chapter 11: Safer for Whom

June set the kettle down without taking her eyes off the syringes.

Water slopped from the spout and spread across the table. Elin caught it with the funeral card before it reached the medicine tray, blurring the bottom line of her inventory. The larger prepared doses lay beside the orange transfer straps. Two smaller syringes, intended for breakthrough breathlessness if Eamon could no longer swallow, remained separated on a folded cloth near his regular medication.

June pointed at the larger pair. "No."

"Mind the salt behind you." Elin moved the wet card aside. "You've brought half the stair in on your boots."

"I said no."

Eamon lay with his eyes closed, one hand above the blanket. The oxygen cannula remained in place. His breathing had settled after the medicine he had accepted, though the climb still showed in the pull beneath his ribs. The mainland transfer bracelet circled his wrist.

Elin capped the syringe in her hand. "He's more breathless. I want everything ready."

"You've got what he takes for breathlessness over there." June nodded toward the smaller doses. "Those aren't it."

"If swallowing becomes difficult, the smaller ones cover symptoms."

"I know."

"And these are for a different emergency."

"Aye. The emergency where he disagrees with you."

Elin wiped the last of the water from the table. The kettle clicked as its metal cooled. "Lower your voice."

Eamon said, "Hearing's still all right."

His eyes stayed shut.

June stripped off her wet coat and hung it on the back of the reopened chair. "Good."

"This isn't a discussion for him to lie listening to."

"Then don't discuss him as if he's gone."

Elin checked the gauge on the live cylinder. The needle had fallen since the last reading, as it had to. She noted the time on her glove. "The larger doses are contingencies. If he becomes acutely distressed, if he hears something through the door, if we need to move before the weather worsens—"

"Does distress mean pain?"

"It can."

"Does it mean his breathing frightens him?"

"It can."

"Then you give what he agrees to for that. You already did, and it helped." June came to the table. "What are these for?"

The labels and volumes answered more plainly than Elin wanted to. They were beyond what she would choose merely to ease the respiratory panic Eamon could describe. They were intended to reduce resistance, memory and movement long enough to secure him for transfer.

"In a crisis," she said, "there may not be time to debate every step."

June picked up one of the orange straps. Salt had stiffened its webbing near the buckle. "You planning for weather or prison?"

"For a safe evacuation."

"From a sealed room you chose."

"The room is sealed because Ruaridh is dead."

June dropped the strap. The buckle struck the tabletop beside the syringes. "Don't spend him like that."

Elin looked at her.

"He died because you broke the line," June said. "He didn't die so every next thing you do becomes right."

The statement entered the room without force and left nothing to push against. Elin saw again Ruaridh's sleeve darkening as he packed salt into the furrow. She had used both hands to open the door. One decision, made quickly, had killed him. That did not make speed itself the error. Delay killed too. She had watched it happen in hospitals while families argued and clinicians waited for permission no one had authority to give.

Eamon opened his eyes. "June."

She turned to him at once. "Do you want more for the breathing?"

"No."

"Want the bed raised?"

"A bit."

June approached only as far as the mattress. "Can I?"

He nodded.

She put one hand behind his shoulder while Elin adjusted the bedhead with the other. They raised him by a few degrees, paused while his breath caught up and stopped when he lifted two fingers. June tucked the pillow without touching his neck. Eamon's breathing eased into the changed position.

The improvement was modest and real. No restraint had been required. June knew where the pillow needed supporting because she had watched him sleep and cough for days before Elin arrived.

"Better?" June asked.

"Aye."

She stepped back. "That's care."

Elin straightened. "Don't lecture me on care."

"I'm telling you what he asked for."

"I heard him."

"Did you?"

Elin crossed to the harbor window and checked the cloth cut for blackout. Daylight entered around the shutter, gray enough that the room seemed already near evening. Below, a handcart squealed on the road. Someone called to another person near the lighthouse gate. Moira's network was waking into its tasks.

June lifted one of the larger syringes by the barrel. "Did he ask for this?"

"Put it down."

"Did he?"

"No."

Eamon turned his wrist against the blanket. The plastic bracelet made a dry sound on the iron bedframe.

Elin took the syringe from June and returned it to the tray. "His consent now doesn't settle what I do if his capacity changes."

"What change?"

"Hypoxia. Delirium. Panic. He could answer a copied voice or break a salt line. He could try to leave in weather he can't survive."

"And if he stays clear?"

"Then I won't need it."

"You loaded it before knowing."

"Because preparation matters before a crisis."

June rubbed the bruise at her temple and winced when she found it. "You say *crisis* and suddenly your hands get to decide what everyone means."

"My hands kept him breathing Wednesday."

"Aye."

"I got oxygen onto him when your clinic equipment failed. I found the medications that had been left unrecorded. I arranged a mainland transfer while the mast and telephones were useless."

"You fastened that bracelet on him while he told you not to."

"He was critically unwell."

"He was still himself."

"He would have died waiting for the island to agree."

Eamon said, "Present tense, if you don't mind."

Elin faced the bed. His color remained poor but stable. His gaze moved from her to June without confusion. He knew the day, the place and what they were arguing over. She could assess all of that and still fear what illness, exhaustion or a familiar voice might do after dark.

June saw her looking. "He's awake enough to hear you make him into freight."

"I am trying to keep him alive until the weather opens."

"So you can unload him onto a stretcher."

"If that is what it takes."

"There. That's the word. *Takes*." June picked up the straps and laid them across the transfer papers, the buckles on top. "You've already pictured him tied down."

"They prevent falls during transport."

"They also stop a person getting up."

"Both things can be true."

"And which one do you want?"

The question was unfair only because it was exact. Elin wanted Eamon secured on a stretcher, sedated enough not to fight, carried downhill and placed on the first viable boat. She wanted his pulse, oxygen saturation and medication times converted into a handover another clinician would sign. At the mainland hospital, every door would be ordinary wood.

She had built the route before asking what he would choose if the choice remained his.

Eamon shifted higher against the pillows. "You could ask."

Elin looked at him. "Would you agree to transfer if the sea clears?"

"No."

June's eyes remained on Elin.

"You're dying," Elin said.

Eamon considered the statement. "Aye."

"You need investigations we cannot do here. The breathing could be infection, fluid, a clot. Some causes are reversible."

"Some."

"If you stay on the island, we can't distinguish them."

"Didn't ask you to."

"You asked me to come."

"No." His thumb found the flat side of his ring. "Moira asked."

The correction hurt because Elin had built Wednesday's journey around the opposite assumption. She had treated his willingness to leave if she came as a request for rescue, though the words had reached her through Moira.

June said, "He can refuse the mainland and still accept medicine here."

"Until he refuses something that could save him."

"That's allowed."

"Easy for you to say when you won't be signing the certificate."

June recoiled as if Elin had struck the bruise on her temple.

Eamon's gaze hardened. "Enough."

Elin knew at once what she had done. The death certificate belonged to a future hour, and she had dragged it into the room to win an argument. "I shouldn't have said that."

"No," June replied. "But you meant it."

"I meant that responsibility doesn't disappear because refusal is uncomfortable."

"Whose responsibility?"

"Mine, while I'm the person equipped to keep him safe."

June gestured around the room: taped windows, salt, boathook under the latch, resource lists, transfer straps. "You're the one who chose this place and shut everybody else outside it."

"Everybody else includes Moira."

"It includes me."

"You're here."

"For how long?"

Elin's attention went to the main door. After dusk, she had intended to keep it bolted. No deliveries, no watchers, no interruptions. She had also expected June to fetch supplies, warm water, extra oxygen and whatever else the bunker exhausted.

June followed her gaze. "You want my hands and none of my say."

"That isn't true."

"Then put those away."

Elin moved between June and the tray. "I will not leave myself without options because you dislike what they look like."

"I dislike what they're for."

"They are safer than letting him panic or listen to voices tonight."

The sentence ended. The room held it.

Eamon looked at her without blinking. June's anger gave way to something quieter and worse.

"Safer for who?" she asked.

Elin's first answer was clinically available. Sedation could lower agitation, limit oxygen demand, reduce unsafe movement and permit transport. Each point depended on context and proportion. None justified the doses she had prepared before Eamon showed those symptoms, beside straps intended to enforce a destination he had refused.

The larger syringes were for Elin's emergency as much as his. They protected the plan from his voice.

She opened her mouth and found no honest sentence that preserved what she wanted.

The kettle ticked on the table.

June nodded once, as if Elin's silence confirmed a result she had hoped not to obtain. "You hear yourself now."

"If he answers something through wood—"

"Sit beside him."

"If he becomes delirious—"

"Treat what's happening. Don't drug him in advance for what he might say."

"If we lose the transfer window—"

"Then hear him refuse it." June pointed to the open chair. "That's the work. Tea going cold. Your arm dead because he's leaning on it. The same story twice because he forgets he told you. Being there when you can't fix the ending."

Elin's hand rested on the edge of the steel tray. "You think I don't know what a vigil costs?"

"I think you know exactly, and you'd rather carry him down three flights than pay it."

Eamon turned his face toward the harbor window. The movement pulled his cannula crooked. He corrected it himself.

June gathered her coat from the chair. For an instant Elin thought she meant to fold the chair away with it. Instead June laid the coat across her arm and left the seat open.

"The blankets stay," she said. "So does the kettle."

"June."

"No. You don't get to use my name like a hand on the latch."

"I need help with him."

“That’s the first true thing you’ve said to me all morning.”

June stepped over the salt line carefully and drew the bolt.

“If you leave,” Elin said, “don’t come back after dark.”

June stopped with the door open by the width of her body. Cold air ran over the floorboards without disturbing the salt.

“Hear that?” she said. “That’s you asking for help.”

She went out and pulled the door shut behind her.

Elin slid the bolt home. Below, June’s boots struck the iron stair, each step growing fainter until the wind took the sound.

Eamon remained turned toward the covered window.

Elin checked the salt line because it was something her hands could complete. June’s heel had left a shallow indentation near the jamb without breaking it. Elin smoothed the grains with one finger.

“Do you want anything?” she asked.

“A quiet minute.”

She gave him one.

The loaded syringe remained in her other hand. On the bed, Eamon turned his wrist, and the transfer bracelet flashed white before disappearing beneath the blanket.

Chapter 12: Kindness Siege

By late Saturday morning, a casserole dish waited outside the lighthouse door.

Elin saw it through the gap when she opened the door to retrieve the empty oxygen cylinder. The dish had been placed on a folded tea towel so its hot base would not mark the boards. A note under the handle read *Eamon—soft lentils, little salt*. The handwriting belonged to Mrs. Venn.

At the foot of the lighthouse, an old man in a wax coat stood beside the gate. He had one hand on the latch and no tool with which to mend it. When Elin came down carrying the cylinder, he bent to inspect the lower hinge.

“Morning,” he said.

“You’ve been looking at that hinge for twenty minutes.”

“Stubborn thing.”

“It opens cleanly.”

“Aye.” He remained beside it.

The road beyond him was occupied in pieces. A girl approached with folded blankets over both arms. Two women followed carrying seedcake tins. Farther down, a handcart stood crosswise near the lane while its owner spoke to Tomas. None of them blocked the road alone. Together they left no route Elin could take unseen.

She set the cylinder on the step. “Where’s the clinic spare?”

The old man nodded toward the village. “Being checked.”

“By whom?”

“Folk who know cylinders.”

“I know cylinders.”

“So I hear.”

The girl reached the gate. “Moirá said these were the warmer ones.”

“Leave them there.”

“They’ll damp on the ground.”

“Then put them on the wall.”

The girl did so, arranging the pile under the waxed side of a fishing sack. She glanced up at the keeper’s window. Elin waited until the girl looked back at her.

"Is he awake?" the girl asked.

"He's resting."

"Can I tell Mam he took the broth?"

"No."

The answer startled her. "Only she'll ask."

"Tell her the food was delivered."

The girl hurried away. The two women with seedcake slowed as they passed her and received whatever warning she gave them.

Elin lifted the empty cylinder again. Her shoulders ached from moving equipment and from the hour she had spent upright after June left, unwilling to sit in the chair that remained beside Eamon's bed. She had slept for perhaps twelve minutes with her forehead against the table. The resource list blurred whenever she looked at it too long.

At the lane, Tomas stood beside his truck with the red fuel can at his boots.

Elin had sent one of the handcart men to fetch it from the cottage after dawn. The paraffin upstairs would heat the keeper's room for part of the day; the can held enough petrol to run the lower generator if the batteries failed. Tomas lifted it by the handle as she approached.

"Put that down," she said.

"Fuel's pooled at the harbor under emergency authority."

"That came from my father's shed."

"It came through the harbor last month with the island order."

"He paid for it."

"He can put in a claim Sunday."

"If he is alive Sunday."

Tomas's jaw shifted. He placed the can in the truck bed rather than answering.

Elin set the empty cylinder between them. "I need the clinic spare now."

"Moir's checking what can be released."

"Moir doesn't know how much flow he needs."

"She knows the clinic has other patients."

"The clinic spare was promised."

"And you took the portable oxygen from the cottage, plus what was brought Wednesday."

"One is empty. The other won't last through tonight."

Tomas looked at the cylinder as if it were another disputed item on a loading list. "I'll send word."

"I am the word."

"Road checks begin before dusk. North lane every forty minutes. Cliff road on the half hour. No one walking alone."

"You're posting me or helping me?"

"Both if needed."

Behind Elin, one of the seedcake women called, "We've hot water as well."

"Leave it at the gate," Elin said.

"It'll cool."

"Then it cools."

The other woman raised her voice to carry past the old man. "Moirra said Eamon likes the heel of a fresh loaf."

Tomas shut the truck bed.

"Ruaridh died because people kept deciding what was necessary for everyone else," Elin said.

The latch paused in his hand.

"He died because a lined door was opened," Tomas replied.

"I know who opened it."

For a moment he looked directly at her. His eyes were red from a night without sleep. Then he secured the truck and walked around to the driver's side.

"Clinic spare," Elin said.

"I heard you."

The truck carried the fuel downhill.

When Elin turned back, another neighbor had arrived with a foil-covered pan. The road looked busy and harmless: food, blankets, hot water, old people lingering to be useful.

Every delivery required Elin either to open the lighthouse or leave the supplies where someone could watch whether they were taken. Kindness had provided its own patrol. She carried the empty cylinder uphill.

* * *

The keeper's table filled by inches.

Lentils. Broth. Seedcake. Bread wrapped in cloth. A jar of rowan berries tied with blue string. Two hot-water bottles whose rubber smelled perished but held. Elin admitted each item only after checking the landing and requiring the deliverer to step back from the salt. No one argued. Their readiness to obey made the arrangement more oppressive.

Eamon sat propped in bed, shaved badly with the electric razor June had packed. He had done it himself. One cheek held a missed white strip, and a shallow nick marked his jaw.

"Mrs. Venn sent lentils," Elin said.

"Punishment for what?"

"You need food."

"Doesn't answer me."

He managed several spoonfuls and half the heel of the loaf. Elin gave him time between mouthfuls and removed the plate when he said he was done. His breathing remained labored, but the medicine he had accepted still controlled the worst sensation of air hunger without making him drowsy.

A knock sounded at the door. Three taps, ordinary and firm.

Elin put the plate down. Eamon's gaze went to the wood.

"Who is it?" she called, then caught herself.

She had answered a knock without seeing a mouth. Ruairidh's instruction had concerned familiar voices, but the lapse sent her across the room at once. She looked through the narrow gap beside the shutter covering the stair window.

Moira stood on the landing with a covered bowl in both hands. Two women waited several steps below her.

Elin opened the door only as far as the wooden brace allowed. The salt line remained between them.

"We'll leave this here, love," Moira said. "Broth strained fine. June says he'll take it from the blue cup."

Eamon shifted on the bed.

"June isn't here," Elin said.

"I know."

"Then don't use her as permission."

Moira lowered the bowl onto the landing. She had tied a spoon beneath the cloth so it could not slide free. "Fresh bread is at the gate. Hot water every two hours. If the stove goes out, hang the white cloth from the harbor window."

"No one comes up unless I ask."

"Of course."

"You've already sent half the village."

"People are worried."

"You assigned them."

"I told them what was needed. They chose what to carry." Moira looked past Elin, though the narrow opening gave her no clear view of the bed. "How is the breathing?"

"Still mine," Eamon said.

Moira smiled. "A stubborn habit."

Elin closed the door before the exchange could settle into familiarity. She slid the brace back and checked the salt. The bowl remained outside.

"That was rude," Eamon said.

"She came to see whether you'd answer."

"She knew I would."

"That isn't better."

A child's voice sounded from the landing. "Mum said the kettle's still warm."

Elin went to the viewing gap. A boy stood there holding a second kettle with both hands.

"Leave it," she said through the closed door.

His eyes widened. Footsteps clattered down the stair.

Eamon rubbed the edge of his wedding ring. "You'll have the whole island scared to knock."

"Good."

"Then who brings your oxygen?"

The question stayed with her while she reopened the resource list. The live gauge had dropped below the point she had expected to reach by midday. One clinic spare might last into the night if it arrived full. The paraffin stove could be run lower, and blankets could replace heat. Oxygen could not be improvised from domestic labor.

She opened the medicine lockbox.

The larger prepared doses lay in their steel tray. Since June's departure, Elin had moved them twice: first away from the straps, then into the box where Eamon could not see them. Changing their position had not changed their purpose.

Eamon watched from the bed. "Decision made, is it?"

"I haven't said anything."

"You're loud with your drawers."

Elin brought the tray to the table. The smaller symptom doses remained separately labeled and timed. Those stayed. If Eamon's breathlessness became severe and he agreed to medicine, they could relieve it without suppressing his ability to speak. The larger prepared syringes had been drawn up against resistance she had imagined in advance.

She placed a steel dish beside them and took off the first cap.

"That for me?" Eamon asked.

"It was."

She pressed the plunger. Clear fluid threaded into the dish.

The second followed. Then the third. She dropped each empty barrel into the sharps tin and shut the lid. The small sound of the catch was less satisfying than she had expected.

One sealed emergency dose remained in the original packaging at the bottom of her clinical bag. It was intended for acute rescue if symptoms could not be controlled by the medicines already available or if immediate treatment became necessary during movement. It had not been prepared beside the restraints. Keeping it could be clinically defensible.

It could also become another route back to force.

Elin held the packet long enough for the printed label to blur. Then she wrapped it in dry cloth, folded the cloth twice and placed it in the inner pocket of her coat. She knew the difference between retaining an emergency option and promising never to misuse it. The difference was her future choice, which made the compromise less reassuring.

Eamon saw where she put it. "Kept one."

"Yes."

"For what?"

"An emergency."

He looked at her until she added, "A real one."

"Those grow quickly round you."

Elin shut the clinical bag. The orange straps remained on the lower shelf. She did not discard them. Weather could still create a legitimate transfer need, and safe carriage required restraint against falls. Yet she could no longer look at the buckles without hearing June say *freight*.

Two fast knocks came at the door.

Elin checked the viewing gap. June stood on the landing with a blister pack in one hand. She wore the same jumper as before, her hair damp from the road. The bruise at her temple had darkened.

Elin opened the door a few inches.

"You left your antibiotics at ours when you raided the cupboard," June said. "Gran's down by Mrs. Vale's gate discussing pies as if military rank depends on pastry."

She slipped the blister pack across the threshold without touching the salt.

"You shouldn't be here," Elin said.

"Aye."

Eamon lifted a hand from the bed. "Come in."

June's gaze went past Elin to him. She did not step forward.

"I'm not staying."

The words were for Eamon, but Elin received their boundary.

"Did Moira send you?" Elin asked.

"If she had, I'd be carrying a bowl and saying *love* every third word." June glanced down the stair. "Tomas has north road every forty minutes. He cuts behind the smokehouse on the half hour before he comes up the cliff side. They've added a pair at the harbor gate."

Elin lowered her voice. "Why are you telling me?"

"Because if your dad needs a toilet, you'll be carrying him yourself, and you've arms like coat hooks."

The joke failed between them. June looked toward the table and saw the steel dish clouded with wasted medication.

"How many?" she asked.

"Most."

"Most isn't all."

"I kept one sealed rescue dose."

June's mouth tightened.

"I destroyed what I prepared for restraint," Elin said. "The symptom medication stays."

"As it should."

"I know."

June met her eyes. "Knowing wasn't the bit in doubt."

Below them, Moira laughed at something in the lane. The sound carried up the iron stair, warm and social.

June stepped back. "Half hour behind the smokehouse. Forty on north road."

"Will you come back?" Eamon asked.

June touched her chipped front tooth with her thumb. "If you ask me when she's not standing in the door."

She went down before Elin could answer.

Elin closed the door softly. The patrol times remained in her mind, useful in a way that carried its own accusation. June had provided what might help them move unseen. She had not restored trust.

Eamon turned toward the covered cliff window. "You could let folk sit."

"They aren't coming in."

"One folk would do."

"Moira would use it."

"Maybe I would."

Elin checked the oxygen gauge again. "That's what I'm trying to prevent."

He gave a tired sound that might have been a laugh. "There you are."

* * *

The live cylinder began to hiss unevenly in the early afternoon.

Elin heard the change while washing the lentil bowl. She dried her hands, checked the connector and opened the valve fractionally. The flow steadied, then faltered again. The gauge needle sat near empty.

The promised clinic spare had not arrived.

Eamon sat on the edge of the bed with the cannula looped over one ear. "Take it off."

"Not yet."

"It's blowing wishes."

Elin crossed to the empty cylinder by the wall and tested its weight as if the gauge might have lied. Nothing. She had seen another cylinder in the lighthouse lower store when they moved in, behind old lamp oil and a coil of rope. It had been unmarked and likely empty, but the clinic sometimes rotated equipment through storage without updating labels.

"I'm checking downstairs."

"Stairs won't shorten because you hurry."

"Stay on the bed."

"I know where it is."

She checked his orientation anyway. Saturday. Lighthouse. Afternoon, though he could not see the sun. He named June's last visit and complained accurately about the lentils. His breathing was faster without reliable oxygen, but he remained able to speak in complete short sentences.

Elin set the bell within his reach. "If you need me, ring once. Don't answer anyone through the door. Don't open it."

"Go."

She checked the salt line, the bolt and the live cylinder, then went.

The iron stair amplified every step. At the first landing she found the lower-store key hanging where the keeper's log said it should be. The lock resisted. She lifted the door, turned the key and forced it inward with her hip.

The store smelled of paraffin, old rope and salt damp. She moved lamp boxes aside and found the cylinder behind a stack of warped tide boards. Its cap was stiff. When she freed it and opened the valve, only a brief breath of pressure escaped.

Empty.

Above her, a knock sounded through the tower.

Elin froze with one hand on the valve.

A woman's voice followed, too muffled by floors and iron to make out. She set the cylinder down without answering and climbed.

At the first turn she heard Moira clearly.

"I won't come in."

No reply reached Elin.

She took the next flight fast enough to make the railing vibrate. Eamon's voice came through the keeper's door above.

"You kept that?"

"We keep many things," Moira said.

Elin reached the final turn. Moira stood on the landing with her back to the stair. A folded blue blanket rested in her arms. She had pushed one corner beneath the door, where it stopped against the salt line.

"How is the breathing?" Moira asked.

"Still at it," Eamon said.

"A stubborn habit."

The same exchange as before, repeated until it became theirs.

Elin stayed below the landing, hidden by the curve of stone. If she announced herself, Moira would leave and Eamon would say nothing useful. The thought was surveillance answering surveillance. She remained still.

Moira laid the blanket down. Its edge touched the salt without crossing it.

"She's wearing herself thin up here," Moira said.

"That's her trade."

"And yours was knowing bad weather before it took the boat."

Silence followed. Elin could hear Eamon working something between his fingers, a faint dry pull she recognized from the net twine he kept under the blanket.

"One willing step," Moira said, "and she needn't fight every hinge on the island."

"You make it sound light."

"No. Clean."

Elin climbed one stair. The empty cylinder knocked her knee, and she caught it before it struck the iron.

Moira turned her head slightly. If she heard, she gave no sign.

"She's your child," she said through the door. "You know what she'll do before she admits a room cannot be fixed."

"Aye."

"Then spare her the tearing. We can carry the rest with you."

The net twine drew tight inside.

"Won't spare much," Eamon said.

"It will spare her your place."

Elin stepped onto the landing.

Moira looked at her. No surprise showed. She rose, leaving the blue blanket against the threshold.

"What place?" Elin asked.

"A father's," Moira said.

"Get away from the door."

"I haven't crossed your line."

"You knew I was downstairs."

"I brought warmth."

"You brought words."

Moira smoothed one cuff. "Only what he asked me for."

Inside, Eamon coughed. The fit stayed shallow but continued too long. Elin stepped over the blue blanket, taking care not to scatter the salt, and worked the bolt.

Moira moved toward the stair.

Elin caught her sleeve. "What did you tell him?"

Moira looked down at Elin's hand until Elin released her.

"That his choice still belongs to him," Moira said.

"In a village you've sealed around him."

"We have all been sealed around one another since Wednesday."

Moira went down. Her steps kept an even pace. She did not touch the salt or ask to enter.

Elin opened the door and pulled the blue blanket inside after checking both sides of it. The keeper's room was as she had left it, apart from Eamon.

He sat on the bed edge without the oxygen cannula. The net twine lay between his hands. He had tied a new knot in it, tight and unfamiliar, with one cut end pulled longer than the other. The transfer bracelet showed below his sleeve.

Elin shut the door and repaired the shallow indentation where the blanket had pressed into the salt. The line had held.

"You answered her," she said.

"I could see her shadow under the door."

"That is not the rule."

"Wasn't hiding who she was."

"What did she give you?"

"A blanket."

"Eamon."

He looked at the empty cylinder in her hand. "Find any air?"

"No." Elin set it down. "What words?"

His fingers worked the new knot. His nails had gone pale with the pressure.

"Moira said you asked for the words."

"I did."

The admission came without apology.

Elin crossed to the bed. "Do you understand what she wants?"

"Aye."

"Tell me."

"To end the waiting."

"For whom?"

"All of you."

"You are not a payment."

"Never said I was."

"She intends to put you in the fever house."

"I know where it is."

"You can barely reach the toilet without oxygen."

"Still reach it."

"This is hypoxia and guilt talking." Elin heard the professional conclusion arrive before she had assessed whether it was true. She forced herself to slow. "Look at me."

He did.

"What day is it?"

"Saturday."

"Where are we?"

"Lighthouse keeper's room, with half the village feeding the steps."

"Why did I bring you here?"

"To keep Moira out."

"And what happened to Ruaridh?"

"You opened a door. He tried to shut it."

The answers were immediate and correct. His judgment could be shaped by fear, illness, secrecy and guilt without being absent. Elin could not make him incapable merely because Moira had reached a decision Elin hated.

"What exactly did you ask her?"

His thumb pressed into the knot. "What I have to say."

"Did she tell you?"

"At the lanterns. Sickle in hand. She'll guide it."

The bell tested earlier in the day seemed to sound again in Elin's memory. First bell would come at Saturday sunset. Before then the village would gather, and Moira would place the required language within Eamon's reach while calling the result free.

Elin took the twine from his hands. The knot held. Fresh fibers stood up where he had pulled it tight.

"She used me," Elin said. "She told you I would destroy myself trying to save you."

"Would she be wrong?"

"That does not make this your choice."

"Asked for the words myself."

"You asked inside a room I locked you in while the village watched every road."

"Aye."

"That isn't freedom."

"Maybe none of us have much."

Elin set the twine on the table. "Tell me you don't intend to use them."

Eamon looked at her for a long time. The room contained the quiet hiss of a cylinder with almost nothing left to give, the cooling kettle and footsteps on the road below.

"You want me to lie?" he asked.

"No."

"Then don't ask."

Elin stood between him and the door while the blue blanket rested against the unbroken salt line behind her.

Chapter 13: I Go Willing

Eamon was buttoning his coat when the first lantern reached the lighthouse gate.

It was early Saturday afternoon, roughly six hours before sunset, but the storm had reduced the day to a gray that needed lamps. Light moved behind the salt-streaked window, disappeared, then returned with another beside it. The village was gathering along the road below.

Elin took Eamon's coat from his hands. "Sit down."

He let her have it and remained standing.

Without oxygen, his breath came fast and shallow. The last useful cylinder had emptied after Moira left the blue blanket at the door. The clinic spare had never arrived. Eamon's lips were pale, though not blue, and he held himself upright without swaying.

"Sit," Elin said again.

"Been doing that."

"You're short of breath at rest."

"Still know what standing is."

She placed two fingers against his wrist. His pulse was rapid and regular. "What time of day?"

"After dinner, before the island makes a show of itself."

"What day?"

"Saturday."

"Where are we?"

"Lighthouse keeper's room." He looked toward the covered window. "With half the village below it."

"What did Moira ask you to do?"

"She told me nothing I hadn't asked for."

"That isn't an answer."

"To take the place."

"And what do you believe happens then?"

His thumb worked the flat side of his wedding ring. "They take me uphill before first bell."

"To the fever house."

"Aye."

"Where Ruaridh died."

"I remember."

She searched his face for a lapse she could use without lying to herself. He understood the setting, the immediate danger and the consequence Moira had offered. His judgment had been shaped inside a locked room by illness, guilt and a village controlling every exit. None of that made him unaware.

A second lantern stopped below. Voices carried up the tower: Tomas giving positions, someone asking where to leave the handcart, Moira answering in the soft collective tone that made an instruction sound already agreed.

Eamon held out his hand for the coat.

Elin did not return it. "You're staying here."

"You asked whether I knew what I was doing."

"I asked whether you understood."

"Same road."

"No. Capacity isn't agreement."

"Good." He took the coat from her. "Then stop waiting for mine to become yours."

He pushed one arm into the sleeve and had to pause before finding the other. The effort cost him several breaths. Elin reached automatically to guide his wrist. He pulled away.

A knock sounded at the keeper's door.

Elin looked through the viewing gap. Tomas stood on the landing with June behind him. June carried no bowl or blankets. She wore an oilskin over the same dark jumper, and her bruise had spread yellow along one temple. Beyond them, more lantern light climbed the stair.

Elin left the bolt in place. "Why is she here?"

"To walk Eamon down," Tomas said.

"He isn't going."

Eamon came behind her. "Open it."

"No."

June looked through the gap at him. "You asked for me?"

"Aye."

Elin turned. "When?"

"Sent the bread boy."

The occupied road had carried more than surveillance. Every delivery had been a route in both directions.

June kept her gaze on Eamon. "Do you want my arm?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll give it if Elin opens the door."

The distinction was deliberate. June would not cross the line to help remove him against Elin, and she would not pretend his request had not been made.

Elin faced Tomas. "You withheld oxygen and fuel until he had no choice but to come out."

"The clinic cylinder is needed at the watch house."

"By whom?"

"I don't have diagnoses for you."

"You don't have a patient."

Tomas looked past her toward Eamon. "I have an island to keep through first bell."

"Then keep Moira away from my father."

Moira's voice rose from the stair below. "We're not dragging anyone, Elin."

Lantern light climbed behind Tomas. He moved aside enough for Moira to reach the landing. She carried no medical bag, only a folded red cloth over one forearm.

Eamon said, "Open the door."

Elin could keep the bolt shut. Tomas would not readily break a salted threshold after Ruaridh's death. Moira wanted a willing declaration, and a man imprisoned by his daughter could not stand publicly beneath the lanterns. For the moment, the bunker still worked.

Eamon put his hand over Elin's on the bolt. His skin was cold.

"If you keep me here," he said, "call it what it is."

She looked at the bed, the orange straps on the lower shelf and the open chair beside it. The larger restraint doses were gone, but the room still held the structure she had built around them.

Elin drew the bolt.

June stepped back before the door opened, leaving space beyond the salt. Moira remained lower on the stair. Tomas watched Elin lift the wooden brace away.

Eamon crossed the threshold without breaking the line. He stopped on the landing, breathing through his mouth, and held his left arm toward June.

"May I?" she asked.

"Aye."

June placed his forearm across hers and set her other hand lightly at his elbow. Elin took his right side after he nodded. Together they descended the iron stair one turn at a time.

Moira went first with a lantern. Tomas followed behind. The arrangement looked protective from below: a dying man supported by his daughter and carer, the village steward lighting the steps, the harbor master preventing a fall. No one watching from the road would see the confiscated fuel, the missing oxygen or the hours of voices and food stationed outside the sealed room.

At the gate, two men offered the handcart. Eamon shook his head.

"I walk."

"You won't make the barn," Elin said.

"Then I stop."

He did stop. At the stone wall, at the old signal post and again where the lighthouse track joined the village lane. Each rest took longer. Elin counted his breaths and watched the tendons stand in his neck. June waited for his nod before moving again.

Lantern bearers formed around them without being asked twice. Some had been assigned by Tomas; Elin recognized the Venns' east-patrol lamp and the chapel lantern with its repaired blue pane. Others had come because an event was easier to face from inside a task. An elderly woman carried a flask and offered Eamon water. A crofter who had doubted June's account of the fever house walked ahead scattering fresh grit over mud.

The road did not feel like an escort until Elin tried to change direction.

At the turning for the cottage, she shifted Eamon toward the lower lane. Tomas stepped across it.

"Barn," he said.

"He needs his own bed."

Eamon remained on June's arm. "Barn."

Tomas did not have to touch Elin. Eamon's stated choice performed the restraint for him.

The grain barn stood open beneath two rows of lanterns. Oat sheaves had been tied to the posts with red wool. Inside, villagers occupied the walls shoulder to shoulder, leaving a central aisle from the doors to the yearly guest chair. Its red-ribboned leg faced the entrance.

Elin stopped at the threshold. "You prepared this before he left the lighthouse."

Moira turned. "The guest gathering is held every Saturday."

"You knew he would come."

"I knew he had asked how."

Eamon's weight increased on their arms. June looked at Elin over his bent head. "Chair first."

They took him to a plain bench near the side wall, away from the guest chair. Elin checked his pulse and watched him recover. His left palm was unmarked. His fingers still carried the faint impression of the net twine.

Moira moved to the center of the barn. She set her lantern on a grain measure and unfolded the red cloth. The guest sickle lay inside, its handle worn smooth and its crescent blade clean.

Relief passed through the room in small visible changes. A man lowered his shoulders. Mrs. Venn pressed her hands together. Others stared at Eamon and looked ill. Calum Venn remained near the doors with his cap crushed between both fists.

Elin crouched in front of Eamon. "Listen to me."

"Doing little else."

"You are critically unwell. Your oxygen has run out, and you've walked farther than you have in days. That can affect judgment even if you know where you are."

"Can."

"You asked Moira for the words after she used your guilt about me."

His gaze moved past Elin to the sickle. "Aye."

"You know volunteering won't undo whatever happened to Mam."

His jaw tightened.

"What did happen?" Elin asked. "What are you paying for?"

"Not here."

"Then don't give them your life before you tell me."

Moira lifted the sickle by its handle. "Eamon."

He pushed against the bench.

June held his arm. "Do you want to stand?"

"Yes."

Elin remained in front of him. "No."

Eamon looked directly at her. "Move."

She could call him delirious. No one in the barn could challenge a clinical assessment with her authority, and enough of them feared his death to accept it. Yet he had answered every question correctly. He had requested June, chosen to walk and repeated the purpose of the gathering. Declaring him incapable now would be another dose prepared because refusal endangered Elin's plan.

She moved half a step, enough for him to rise.

June took his weight. Eamon stood until his knees steadied, then walked into the aisle beneath his own strained power.

Moira offered the sickle handle first.

Elin followed. Tomas extended one arm across the aisle.

"Back," he said.

"He cannot consent freely under conditions you created."

"Only if freely given," Moira said to the room.

The phrase produced several nods. Calum made a harsh sound by the door.

"Free?" Elin pointed toward Eamon. "You took the fuel. You withheld oxygen. You watched every road and spoke to him through a door while he was isolated."

Mrs. Venn's eyes went to Tomas. The crofter near the wall stopped nodding.

Moira kept the sickle extended. "No one has touched him."

June said, "You don't need to touch someone to close the road."

Moirá's gaze met her granddaughter's. "He asked you to support him here."

"He did." June's grip remained under Eamon's arm. "That doesn't make this clean."

Eamon took the sickle.

Elin tried to pass Tomas. He caught both her forearms. She twisted, but his grip held without jerking her shoulders.

"Dad."

Eamon turned toward her. He did not look past her or through her. His eyes were tired and fully his own.

"Don't make one choice carry everything," Elin said.

His thumb rested along the sickle handle. "Could say the same to you."

Moirá raised the lantern. "When you are ready."

Eamon drew the blade across his left palm.

The cut opened in a thin red line. Blood welled, then ran into the creases of his hand. June flinched but did not release him.

Elin drove against Tomas's hold. "Stop. Dress the wound. He needs to sit."

Eamon closed his fist around the blood.

"I take the place," he said.

The lantern flames shortened.

Elin went still for one beat, hearing the first sentence complete itself inside the barn.

"Don't say another word."

Eamon's breathing caught. He gathered enough air.

"I go willing."

Every lantern guttered at once.

A wet impact sounded near the guest chair, as if a full bucket had been overturned onto the boards. Water spread beneath its legs.

The woman standing beside it had not crossed the aisle or entered through either door.

Maire's red ribbon lay dark against her soaked dress. Her hair clung to the familiar fold of her left eyelid. Water ran from her sleeves and gathered around bare feet pale

with cold. Black husks showed beneath her nails.

The villagers nearest the chair recoiled. One woman said Maire's name. Another covered her mouth with both hands. Calum dropped his cap.

Tomas's grip loosened.

Elin tore free and moved toward the figure.

June caught her sleeve. "Don't answer it."

The woman wearing Maire's face turned at June's voice.

Its attention landed with physical weight. The head tilted. One wet hand lifted.

"June, back," Elin said.

June tried to pull Eamon away from the aisle. She had time for one step.

The Long Guest crossed the distance too quickly for Elin to follow the movement. Its arm struck June high across the chest and shoulder. June left her feet and hit the barley bins sideways.

Wood split. The lid of one bin jumped free, and grain poured over June as she folded to the floor.

The barn broke into noise.

Villagers surged from the center. Someone dropped a lantern; Calum kicked it upright before the oil reached the flame. Mrs. Venn went to June, then stopped when the Long Guest turned its face toward her. The crofter who had laid grit backed into the wall, whispering that this was wrong. Two men near Moira closed around Eamon by reflex, while one of them stared at June and let his lantern sag almost to the floor.

Tomas shouted, "Doors clear. Lamps up."

His order gave panic a route. People moved toward the walls and opened the central aisle.

Elin dropped beside June. Barley covered her hair and jumper. She lay curled around her right side, mouth open, unable at first to draw a full breath.

"Look at me." Elin cleared grain from June's face. "Can you breathe?"

June managed a shallow inhalation and cursed on the exhale.

"Any blood in your mouth?"

June shook her head.

Elin put a hand lightly against her upper back, feeling movement on both sides despite the guarding. June's pulse hammered at her neck. No obvious deformity showed through the jumper, but pain fixed her right arm against her ribs.

"Don't move yet."

"Get him," June said.

Across the barn, Moira had reached Eamon. She did not touch him. She held the lantern where he could see the open doors and angled her body toward the uphill road.

The Long Guest stood beside the emptied guest chair. Its face had turned away from June. Water continued spreading across the boards, darkening barley and dust.

Several villagers were crying now. Others looked relieved enough to shame themselves. Eamon's spoken claim had given them an end point; June's body on the floor showed its cost.

"Elin," June said through clenched teeth. "Go."

Elin rose, but two people carrying the fallen lantern blocked the aisle. Tomas ordered them aside. By the time the doors cleared, Eamon had reached the threshold.

He walked without being carried. His bleeding fist stayed closed at his side. Moira went beside him with the lantern, and two men followed at a distance uncertain enough to resemble respect.

"Eamon!" Elin shouted.

He looked back once.

The Long Guest turned Maire's face toward Elin at the sound, but it did not follow him through the doors. It remained by the chair while the lantern line formed outside.

Elin ran to the threshold. Tomas caught her shoulder and released it when she rounded on him.

Beyond the barn, gray daylight lay over the road. Lanterns climbed through it one by one. The procession had cleared the grain barn about five hours before Saturday's first bell.

Eamon's bent shape moved among the lights under his own strained power while June lay injured behind Elin in the spilled barley.

Chapter 14: The Causeway

June coughed once in the smokehouse and stopped because the pain would not let her finish.

Elin shut the door against the wind and guided her onto a low workbench. Barley fell from June's clothes and scattered across the flagged floor. The smokehouse smelled of old peat, salt meat and rain entering through gaps in the boards. Hooks moved above them whenever a gust found the roof.

Outside, the last procession lanterns were climbing the cliff road.

"Coat off," Elin said.

"Bit forward for us."

"Can you lift your right arm?"

June tried. It rose halfway before pain pulled it back against her side.

Elin helped her out of the oilskin and eased the jumper upward only far enough to inspect the injured area. Bruising had begun below the right breast and along the side of the chest where June had struck the bin. No broken rib end showed beneath the skin. Her chest rose on both sides, though she guarded the right and took breaths too shallow to test properly.

"Any blood when you coughed?"

"Only swearing."

"Dizzy?"

"Since you came off the ferry."

"June."

"A little when I stood."

Elin pressed gently along the ribs. June jerked at one point near the side seam of her jumper and gripped the bench.

"Could be cracked," Elin said. "Could be severe bruising. I can't tell without imaging. You need rest, pain relief and someone watching your breathing."

"Lovely. After."

"You can't run."

"Was never elegant."

"You can't carry him."

June looked toward the door. "I know."

The admission cost more than the examination. Eamon would need support downhill if Elin reached him. June could hold a door, carry a lantern for short distances and provide the key. She could not take his weight on stairs.

Elin found a clean flour sack on a shelf, tore it into a broad strip and folded it. She wrapped the cloth around June's lower chest as support for movement, loose enough to allow a full breath.

"Tell me if this makes breathing worse."

"It makes everything rude."

"That isn't an observation."

"Breathing's the same."

Elin tied the cloth at June's left side where she could reach it. "If you become more breathless, cough blood, faint or can't speak, we stop."

"And leave him there?"

"We stop long enough to keep you alive."

June's face tightened while she pushed her jumper down over the binding. "There she is."

Elin heard the accusation and accepted the useful part. She took the proportionate pain medicine from her bag, named it and offered it. June swallowed it with cold tea from a jar on the worktable.

"How long since they left the barn?" Elin asked.

"Ten minutes. Maybe twelve."

The first bell remained about five hours away. Moira had time to settle Eamon into the upper room, line the thresholds and place patrols along the approaches. Elin had less. Every hour in the fever house would tax his breathing without oxygen.

June reached under her collar and drew out a length of red wool. An iron key hung from it.

"Took it before supper yesterday," she said. "Inner upper door."

Elin closed her hand around the key. Its teeth were dark with old oil. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Was waiting to see whether you'd bring straps."

Elin looked toward the grain sack she had carried from the lighthouse. The orange straps were coiled inside it.

June followed her gaze. "Of course."

"They're for the stair."

"They're for him."

"If he collapses, we need to move his weight safely."

"And if he says no?"

"He said yes inside a barn built to make that answer possible."

"He still said it."

Elin fitted the key into her inner coat pocket. "He can refuse again after he is out of the fever house."

June sat very still. "You hear what you've made there?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't seem to slow you."

First bell. Failing oxygen. The wet woman beside the guest chair. Elin could recognize the moral failure in her plan and remain unable to leave Eamon inside. Action still offered itself as the only shape she knew how to inhabit.

"Tell me the patrols," she said.

June leaned against the workbench, conserving her side. "Tomas does north road every forty. Smokehouse side on the half hour. After the procession he'll take the cliff road himself before posting pairs. He swings his lamp inland over the oat field because the causeway's taking spray."

"Outer lock?"

"Usually lifted while you turn. Sticks low."

"Other entrance?"

"Seaward store, but tide reaches it first."

Elin wrote on the back of her glove: *NORTH 40. SMOKE 30. LIFT/TURN.*

The smokehouse shelves held more than they could carry: two stub lanterns, wax matches, coils of line, jars of rowan, three tins of salt and a covered basket of provisions meant for the fever-house vigil. Clean linen lay beneath the basket. Beside it stood a second chair folded against the wall.

June pointed at the provisions. "Those go up every year."

"Food for the guest?"

"And watcher, once. Gran stopped saying that part."

Elin looked at the linen, lamp oil and enough food for more than one person. The fever-house ledgers had recorded the same arrangement. The supplies could support a vigil in place.

She left them untouched.

Her objective remained removal. For that she chose one lantern, the orange straps, the red-wool key and a tin of salt. The tin was half full and clumped at the corners. She broke the clumps with the handle of a spoon, then divided the salt between a waxed pouch and a paper twist inside her coat. Enough for the outer entrance and one serious breach if it stayed dry.

June watched. "Nothing for staying."

"We aren't staying."

A search lamp passed across the wall slats.

Both women lowered themselves. June's movement stopped midway. Elin caught her under the left arm and eased her behind the bench without touching the injured side.

Boots ground outside. Tomas's voice carried through the rain.

"Check the lower path. Two at the road after."

Another man answered. Light narrowed across the smokehouse floor, then swung toward the oat field.

June looked at the back of Elin's glove. "That's his sweep."

The beam moved inland.

Elin shouldered the grain sack and handed June the lantern. "Can you hold it?"

"For a while."

"You set the pace. If you need to stop, say it before you fall."

"And if you hear me where I'm not?"

"I look at you."

June opened the smokehouse door. Wind drove rain across the threshold.

They went out while Tomas's lamp faced the field.

* * *

The lower path dropped between the smokehouse and the cliff, then turned onto the tidal causeway beneath the fever house. Spray had already crossed the stones. Each wave left a thin wash that pulled seaward through the joints.

June could not bend fully into the wind. She kept her right arm against the binding and carried the lantern low in her left hand. Elin stayed half a step behind on the injured side, ready to steady without dragging.

They reached the first exposed section when a wave broke against the outer rocks. Water struck their knees. June's boot slid.

Elin caught the back of her oilskin and braced against the causeway wall. The movement wrenched June's chest.

"Stop," June said.

They crouched behind the stone parapet. June took short breaths through her nose until she could speak.

"Still both sides?" Elin asked.

"Aye."

"Dizzy?"

"Less than before."

Ahead, the causeway rose toward the oat field below the fever house. Tomas's search lamp moved across the cliff road above, a white bar through rain.

June watched it reach the far wall. "When it turns inland."

The lamp paused, then swept over the oats.

"Now."

They crossed the remaining stones. Elin spent one hand keeping the salt pouch beneath her coat and the other supporting June at the left elbow. Water filled Elin's boots. The cold reached the torn skin at her knee and sharpened it awake.

They left the causeway and entered shoulder-high oats flattened by the storm. Wet stalks slapped their faces and caught at the grain sack. June could not crouch low without compressing her ribs, so they moved along a furrow on hands and knees only where the lamp returned.

Halfway across the field, a man called from the dark behind them.

“Nurse.”

Elin stopped.

The voice was not Eamon’s or Ruaridh’s. It belonged to no islander she could name. The single word carried the thin restraint of someone trying not to alarm a ward.

“Nurse, the bottle’s empty.”

Rain ran from Elin’s hair into her eyes.

For one second the oat field vanished beneath a mainland corridor at three in the morning: low lights, rubber soles on vinyl, a patient calling from behind a partly closed door while an infusion pump alarm failed to sound. Elin remembered the exact pressure of urgency—an empty bottle could mean nothing or a line open to air, medicine stopped, blood backing through tubing. You answered first and assessed while moving.

“Can’t breathe,” the voice said. “Please.”

It came from the seaward side of the field, where the ground ended at the causeway wall. No building stood there. No patient could be waiting beyond a door.

June remained visible beside Elin, one hand pressed to the oats. She started to turn toward the voice.

Elin caught her wrist and shook her head.

“Nurse?”

The plea moved closer without any sound of feet through the crop.

Elin kept her mouth shut. She counted the things she could see: June at arm’s length. Fever-house windows above. Search lamp turning inland. Her own hand on the waxed salt pouch.

The voice gave one final breathless cry. It ended where a response should have begun.

Elin moved on.

At the upper edge of the field, they lay beneath a low stone wall while Tomas’s lamp swept the causeway they had just crossed. It found the spray, the empty path and the oats moving in broad patches under the wind.

June whispered, “Someone you knew?”

“A patient voice.”

“Real one?”

“Not here.”

The distinction was enough. Elin did not explain the old clinical reflex. She had heard distress and left it unanswered because place contradicted sound. The act felt less like courage than withholding a drug until the indication was clear.

The lamp passed. They crossed the wall.

The fever house stood thirty yards uphill. Its limewash gleamed wet beneath the eaves. No procession remained outside. One lantern burned in a lower window, and a second weak light showed above. The front door appeared shut.

They reached the wall under the blind side of the lower window. June leaned into the stone, eyes closed.

“How bad?” Elin asked.

“Bad.”

“That isn’t useful.”

“Eight moving. Six still. Sharp if I breathe deep.”

Elin checked her color in the lantern’s hooded light. Pale, sweating, fully alert. “We rest two minutes.”

“Search sweep?”

“Three, maybe four.”

“Then one minute.”

Elin let her choose the lesser rest. She took the outer key June had also lifted from the clinic ring and moved to the door.

The lock stuck low exactly as June had warned. Elin lifted the iron ring, turned the key and felt the bolt resist. She raised the door farther on its hinges and turned again. The mechanism gave with a dull internal knock.

She caught the door before it scraped the stones.

Inside lay the lower hall: damp flags, folded bedsteads, the ledger table and the stair rising behind its boarded rail. Tide stink mixed with lamp smoke. The salt June had thrown across the outer sill after Ruaridh’s death was smeared into gray paste by the procession’s boots.

Elin opened the waxed pouch.

She poured a new line from jamb to jamb, using more than she had planned because the stone was wet. Salt darkened where it touched the old paste. She reinforced the

corners and left enough clearance for June to step through without scattering it.

The pouch was nearly half empty when the line joined.

“Costly door,” June murmured.

“Still cheaper than the last one.”

Elin regretted the sentence as soon as it left her. Ruaridh’s death was not a unit of measure. She closed the door and tested the latch.

They began the stairs.

* * *

The first flight remained dry. At its landing, an old speaking tube hung crooked beside quarantine pegs. Nest fibers clogged its mouth. Elin kept her eyes away from it.

June climbed with her left hand on the wall. Each step lifted and compressed her injured ribs. After six risers she stopped, counted three breaths and continued. Elin did not urge her. Without June, the inner key and the route knowledge ended here.

Water covered the second landing.

It entered through no seam Elin could identify, a shallow sheet cold enough to numb her ankles through the boots already soaked by the causeway. Their lantern reflected in it as a broken yellow track. Salt stains marked the next threshold, but the old line had dissolved.

Elin crouched to pour from the pouch. The salt struck water and vanished at once.

“Use the clumps,” June said.

Elin took the paper twist from inside her coat. Its contents remained drier. She packed a ridge along the raised wooden seam rather than wasting it across the flooded boards. The line held on the higher surface, uneven but continuous.

A search lamp flashed through a shutter crack and barred the stair above in white.

June pressed herself to the wall. The movement forced a cry through her teeth. Elin covered the lantern with her coat and kept one hand against June’s left shoulder while boots passed in the yard below.

Tomas shouted outside, “Lower path next.”

The words moved away from the house.

June sagged against the stone. “He’ll find the outer salt.”

“Then we’re already inside.”

"That usually comforts criminals."

She tried to smile and failed when the effort moved her ribs.

Elin uncovered the lantern. "Do you need to stop?"

"Need and get are cousins here."

"We stop."

They remained on the landing until June could draw one deeper breath. Elin watched both sides of her chest. Movement remained symmetrical enough. Pain, not collapse, limited the breath.

Above them, a door opened.

A lantern line appeared beneath it on the top passage.

"Elin?" June called from the landing above.

The voice was exact. Domestic, impatient, slightly roughened by pain.

The June beside Elin lifted her head.

"Don't leave me on the stair," the upper voice said.

Elin looked at the visible June. She stood with her left shoulder against the wall, right arm fixed across the binding, lantern light on the bruise at her temple. Her mouth had not moved.

The copied voice called again, closer to the top of the stair. "I can't breathe."

June beside Elin whispered, "Rude."

The voice above gave a small, pained laugh in the same rhythm.

Elin took June's left hand. "You stay where I can see you."

"Planning to."

They climbed.

The upper June began to plead. It described a rib beneath the skin, a lung filling, a darkness coming down over the stair. Each claim selected a danger Elin could not fully exclude in the real June beside her. Elin watched the person she could see instead: alert gaze, warm hand, skin pale but not gray, no sudden respiratory decline.

At the final turn, the copied voice moved behind them.

"Elin, wait."

June's visible hand tightened around hers. Neither answered.

The top landing came into view.

Ruaridh's beekeeper's veil was gone. A dark stain remained in the wood near the lined door Elin had opened Friday night. New salt had been packed around its frame, thicker than before, though one section near the sill had washed away. Water crept from beneath the boards and crossed the passage toward Eamon's room at the far end.

The weak lantern light came from under that last door.

Elin checked the grain sack. Straps. One lantern. The empty waxed pouch. Only the bottom third of the paper twist remained.

June leaned against the rail. "Key."

Elin drew the red-wool key from her pocket.

Between them and Eamon's door lay a second threshold, its salt broken where procession boots had crossed. Elin could step over the damaged line and preserve what remained, or spend the last salt making a route they might need again on the way out.

She remembered water entering the furrow beneath her boot and Ruaridh's hand trying to close it before the Long Guest reached him.

She knelt.

The remaining salt was not enough to restore the whole width. Elin swept the wet grains together, built two short ridges at the jambs and joined them across the driest raised board with everything left in the twist. She used her bare fingers to press the corners closed.

The last grains adhered to her wet skin.

"No breach salt left," she said.

June's face had tightened to a waxy pallor. "Then don't breach another."

They crossed without touching the line.

A soft step sounded near the door behind them—the room where the Long Guest had worn Maire's face. Elin did not turn. She kept June visible at her side and moved to Eamon's door.

The lock was old iron set below a wooden bar. The bar had been left on the inside; only the key offered access. Elin fitted it into the keyhole. Her wet fingers slipped on the red wool.

Inside, Eamon coughed.

The sound was spatially right: close, contained by the door in front of them, followed by the scrape of someone shifting on an iron bed.

"Dad," Elin said, then stopped. He was visible to neither of them. She had answered through wood.

No borrowed voice replied.

June braced her left palm against the doorframe. "Turn it."

Elin wiped the key on her trousers and tried again. It entered fully but would not rotate.

"Lift the door," June said. "Same as below."

Elin put her shoulder beneath the iron ring and raised the sagging boards. June took the lantern, but her injured side failed when she tried to help. She folded against the frame, breathing in shallow bursts.

"Don't lift," Elin said. "Hold the light."

Behind them, June's copied voice whispered from the lined room, "She's falling."

The real June remained in Elin's sight, upright only because the frame supported her.

Elin lifted harder. The door rose a fraction. She turned the key.

Metal grated inside the lock.

The copied voice said, "You'll have to carry both."

Elin kept her eyes on the key and on June's reflection in the iron plate. The first salt pouch was empty. The second had been spent. June could not carry Eamon, and Elin had brought straps to move him whether he agreed or not. Successful entry had changed none of that.

The key turned.

Elin caught it before the lock sprang back and left it in her hand. The door opened inward on an iron bed, a low lantern and Eamon sitting upright against the wall. His bandaged left palm rested on the blanket. His gaze went first to June's injured posture, then to the orange straps hanging from Elin's shoulder.

June held the door with her left hand while Elin entered Eamon's upper room.

Chapter 15: The Door He Took

Eamon looked at the straps before he looked at Elin.

They hung from her shoulder in two orange loops, wet from the causeway and stiff where salt had dried into the webbing. His left palm rested on the blanket beneath a blood-marked bandage. The mainland transfer bracelet showed at his wrist.

The upper room held an iron bed, one chair and a low lantern set on the floor. Tide marks climbed the wall above Eamon's head. The ceiling sloped toward the seaward side, where rain struck the roof in bursts. Roughly three and a half hours remained before Saturday's first bell.

June pulled the door almost shut behind them. Her left hand stayed on the frame. The other arm remained fixed across her bound ribs.

Eamon nodded toward the straps. "Brought the whole weather with you."

"Sit forward," Elin said.

"Already sitting."

"I need to check you."

"Then ask."

Elin stopped beside the bed. His breathing was worse than it had been at the barn: rapid, shallow, with a pause before each sentence as he measured what speech would cost. His lips were pale. Sweat dampened his hair despite the room's cold.

"May I check your pulse and dressing?"

"Aye."

She took his right wrist, leaving the cut hand undisturbed. His pulse ran fast and weak beneath her fingers. She loosened one corner of the palm dressing. The sickle cut was narrow but still seeping, the cloth too tight where his hand had swollen.

"I'm changing this."

"Do it."

June lowered herself onto the chair by the door. Her face had gone gray around the mouth. She set the lantern beside her boots and concentrated on breathing without moving her injured side.

Elin cleaned Eamon's palm and replaced the binding with one that would hold pressure without restricting circulation. He watched her hands.

"June can't carry you," she said.

"Wasn't planning on being carried."

"You won't manage the stairs alone."

"Then I stay."

Elin opened the grain sack. A small oxygen bottle lay beneath the straps, taken from the smokehouse emergency shelf. She had checked its seal there but not spent it during the crossing. The gauge showed a limited reserve.

She fitted the key and tested the flow. "This gets you down, not through the night."

Eamon accepted the mask for three breaths. Air eased the hard pull at his neck, though it could not restore what the walk and illness had spent. When Elin tried to secure the elastic, he moved the mask away.

"Enough."

"Keep it on."

"I said enough."

She let him hold it near his face. "We leave before Tomas returns to the house."

Eamon looked at June. "You came for that too?"

June's reply was delayed by a careful breath. "Came to open the door."

"For her."

"For you, if you want it."

"And if I don't?"

June glanced at the straps. "Then she and I are still arguing."

Elin uncoiled one strap. "We can argue downhill."

"No," Eamon said.

The word was quiet and complete.

Elin threaded the strap beneath his knees. "You are critically short of breath, without sustained oxygen, in a house where a man died last night."

"You brought me up worse stairs to the lighthouse."

"To protect you."

"Now these ones protect me the other direction."

"They get you out of immediate danger."

Eamon put his uninjured hand over the buckle. "Listen first."

"We have about an hour before Tomas finds the new salt at the entrance."

"Listen."

June shifted on the chair. Pain caught her before she could stand. "Elin."

Elin kept one hand on the strap. Eamon's fingers remained over the buckle. His grip was not strong, but removing it would require a choice she could not mistake for assistance.

She released the webbing.

"All right," she said. "Talk."

Eamon lowered the oxygen mask to his lap. For several breaths he did nothing except remain upright. Rain moved across the roof. From somewhere below came the slow knock of water inside a wall.

"Your mother wasn't dragged into this room," he said.

Elin looked at the tide marks behind him. "I know she entered willingly."

"Part of it."

"What part did you leave out?"

He took the flat side of his wedding ring between thumb and forefinger. "She asked me to stay."

June's gaze lifted from the floor.

Eamon continued before Elin could question him. "First bell had gone. There was food, lamp oil, linen. Ruairidh brought salt. Others came and went until the tide turned. Your mam asked me sit by the bed and mind the door."

The chair stood two feet from June, its rush seat bowed by use. Elin looked at it and then back at Eamon.

"You were her watcher."

"One of them."

"Until tide turn."

"Aye."

"What happened after?"

His fingers tightened on the ring. "Folk stopped coming."

"Because Moira sent them away?"

"I don't know what she said to each. I know the stair went quiet."

"You stayed."

Eamon looked toward the closed door.

The answer arrived before he gave it. Elin felt its shape in the room: the empty chair, the incomplete ledger and the missing name after Maire's last recorded watcher.

"How long did you stay?" she asked.

"Not long enough."

"What did you do?"

"Stood at the door."

"Inside or outside?"

"Inside first."

His voice thinned. He raised the mask and took another breath of oxygen.

"Maire asked you to sit," Elin said.

"Aye."

"And mind the door."

"Aye."

"What did you do?"

Eamon lowered the mask. "I left."

The directness of it emptied the next second.

June shut her eyes.

Elin remained beside the bed with the loose strap in her hand. "You left her alone."

"Aye."

"For how long?"

"Long enough."

"That is not an answer."

"Through tide turn. Through the weather getting worse. I told myself I was fetching help."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Where did you go?"

"The yard first. Then the lane. I found work that didn't need doing." His ring turned once beneath his thumb. "Checked storm boards. Secured the shed. Took a coil of line down to the harbor and brought it back because nobody wanted it."

"While she sat here."

"Aye."

"What was happening to her?"

"I don't know."

"You never came back?"

"I came to the lower door. Heard things through it. Her voice. Other voices. Couldn't make myself climb."

Ruaridh's rule returned with the sound of his hand packing salt into a broken threshold. Do not answer what you cannot see. Mind the door. The older arrangements had required changing watchers, supplies and someone in the chair. Whatever had spoken beyond the wood, Eamon's failure had happened before any impossible explanation: Maire had asked him to remain, and he had gone looking for useful work.

Elin's grip closed on the strap until its edge cut her palm. "Then you raised me in that house and let me believe she chose to leave us."

"She chose the room."

"You chose the leaving."

"Aye."

"You watched me spend twenty years thinking she preferred this place to me."

Eamon's gaze dropped to his bandaged hand. "Moirá said the island needed one story."

"And you needed it too."

"Aye."

The repeated assent no longer sounded honest. It sounded like another way to finish a conversation before he had to survive it.

"You could have told me Wednesday," Elin said. "You could have told me when I found the ledger. You could have told me before Ruaridh died."

"What use?"

"Use?"

"Wouldn't bring her home."

"So you decided silence was kinder."

"No." He looked at her. "Easier."

The admission struck more cleanly than an excuse.

Eamon's strength was failing while he spoke. His shoulders had sunk, and every phrase required a longer recovery. Yet the rally was unmistakable: he had walked from the lighthouse, crossed the barn and climbed toward the fever house on reserves his body could not replace. Terminal exertion could look like improvement to anyone who wanted the dying person to perform one final task. Elin had seen families mistake it for recovery. Moira had treated it as readiness.

Eamon touched the orange strap. "You're on my old ground now."

Elin pulled it out of his reach. "I haven't left you."

"You're leaving the room before you've sat in it."

"I am taking you somewhere safer."

"So was I. Fetching help."

"That is not the same."

"I had knots. You've got buckles."

June made a low sound from the chair. "He's right."

Elin turned on her. "He is dying in the building that killed Ruaridh."

"And he still gets to say no."

"He gets to say it after we are across the outer threshold."

June stared at her.

The sentence had already been spoken in the smokehouse: Eamon could refuse after removal. Elin had carried it through spray, patrols and copied voices. Every operational rule she had learned had served an objective she had not permitted him

to reject.

She picked up the second strap.

Eamon pushed the mask aside. "No needles either."

Elin's hand stopped.

He had seen her glance toward the inner pocket of her coat.

"The prepared restraint doses are gone," she said.

"Kept one."

"For emergency rescue."

"Whose?"

June looked at Elin. The argument from the lighthouse returned intact between them.

Elin put the strap around Eamon's lower legs. "I am not sedating you if you cooperate."

"Then you're asking with a threat behind it."

"I'm telling you what has to happen."

"Freight talks more than you expected."

Elin buckled the strap.

Eamon reached down to undo it. His breath failed before his fingers found the release. Elin secured the second strap around his torso, leaving room for chest movement and threading it beneath his arms so it could support rather than compress. He fought through leverage rather than strength, bracing one boot against the bedframe and catching Elin's wrist with his bandaged hand.

Blood darkened the clean cloth.

"Stop," June said.

"Help me stand him."

"I can't lift."

"Take the lantern and oxygen."

"Elin."

"Now."

June did not move.

Elin looked at her. June's injured side had exhausted what argument could ask from it. Her face was damp with sweat, and each breath remained shallow. She could carry the lantern or the oxygen bottle, not both, and she could not hold Eamon upright if he collapsed.

Elin slung the oxygen bottle across her own back, placed the lantern in June's left hand and brought Eamon's arm over her shoulders.

"Feet under you," she said.

He stayed seated. "No."

"We do this upright if you help."

"No needles. No straps. No hauling."

"I heard you."

"Then act like it."

Elin stood with his wrist in her hand. The transfer bracelet flashed between their skin.

She reached into her coat.

The sealed dose remained wrapped in dry cloth. She had preserved it while destroying the others because genuine emergencies existed. The label was undamaged, the barrel clear. She had promised no one that she would not use it. That omission had been the hidden purpose of keeping it.

June put the lantern down. "Don't."

"He cannot survive here alone."

"Then stay."

"First bell is coming."

"So sit with him until it does."

The room offered no clean choice, but it did offer a requested one. Eamon had asked her to leave the needle, straps and hauling. June had named the alternative.

Elin tore the packet open.

Eamon watched her fit the needle. He did not misunderstand.

"Don't make me cargo," he said.

Elin caught his shoulder and injected the dose into his upper arm.

June swore and turned away as the barrel emptied.

Eamon struck weakly at Elin's wrist. His hand slid off before she withdrew the needle. She dropped it into the portable sharps tin and pressed gauze to the site.

"It will ease the panic," she said.

"That's not why you gave it," June replied.

Eamon's body began to soften against the straps. The change was gradual enough for him to know what was happening. Anger remained in his face after his muscles could no longer sustain the struggle.

Elin put the oxygen mask over his mouth and nose. "We're going down."

His eyes closed.

* * *

They left the upper room with Eamon's weight divided badly between them.

Elin carried most of him under the shoulders, the torso strap looped across her own chest as an improvised support. His boots dragged until his legs found two uncertain steps. June went ahead with the lantern and inner key, though pain forced her to stop at each landing before working the lock or door.

The Long Guest did not call to them.

That silence worsened the house. Water covered the upper landing where Elin and June had spent the last salt. Their repaired ridge had collapsed at one corner. Elin had no grains left to mend it. She stepped over the remaining line with Eamon sagging against her and felt his boot smear the wet edge.

June saw. "Nothing left."

"I know."

A deep knock traveled through the seaward wall.

They descended.

On the flooded stair, Eamon's boots repeatedly slipped from the treads. Elin tightened the straps and took his weight against her hip. The oxygen mask shifted. She stopped long enough to reseal it, though the bottle's limited reserve fell with each hiss.

June reached the second landing and leaned against the wall. "Need a minute."

"We don't have one."

"You drop him if I fall on you."

Elin stopped. June held the lantern against her thigh while she counted shallow breaths. The broad binding beneath her jumper had shifted upward. Elin adjusted it without compressing the ribs further.

“Dizzy?”

“A little.”

“Can you see clearly?”

“Enough to know you did wrong.”

Elin looked at Eamon. His head rested against her shoulder. His eyes were closed, and the tension had gone from his jaw. The dose had made transport possible. It had done so by removing the resistance he had stated with complete clarity.

“I know,” Elin said.

June’s face changed slightly. She had expected defense and did not have strength to answer the absence of it.

They continued.

At the lower hall, the outer door shook beneath a gust. Water had crossed the flags from the seaward wall and reached the feet of the folded bedsteads. The salt Elin had poured over the entrance was broken by several dark prints. Tomas or another patrol had already entered, or something wet had crossed before the line was laid. There was no time and no salt to distinguish them.

June lifted the door while Elin worked the sticking lock. Her left arm trembled. She could not raise the sagging boards high enough alone.

“Put the lantern down,” Elin said.

June did, braced her left shoulder against the wood and immediately folded from the pain.

Elin lowered Eamon into the quarantine chair beside the wall. His head fell forward. She checked his airway, pulse and breathing. Sedated, exhausted and hypoxic, he still responded when she pressed his shoulder.

“Dad.”

His eyelids lifted a fraction.

“Stay with me.”

A bitter sound came from him, too faint to shape into words.

Elin left him strapped in the chair and forced the door upward herself. June turned the key. The lock released.

Wind drove the door inward. Spray reached across the hall.

Together they moved Eamon again. June carried the lantern and oxygen bottle now, unable to assist with his weight. Elin dragged the chair as far as the threshold, then transferred him to her shoulders. His boots crossed the broken salt.

For one second they were outside.

The fever-house yard sloped toward the cliff path. Rain sheeted from the eaves. The procession lamps were gone, and no search light showed on the lower road.

Eamon drew a sudden deep breath beneath the mask.

His eyes opened.

Elin felt awareness return through his body before strength: a rigid shoulder, one foot seeking ground, his bandaged hand closing on the strap. The medication had not reversed his illness. What followed was a brief expenditure pulled from whatever remained.

"Easy," she said. "You're out."

Eamon tore the mask away.

His elbow drove back into Elin's throat. She lost her grip. He hit the wet stones on one knee, caught the doorframe and wrenched at the torso buckle.

"Dad, stop."

June set down the oxygen and reached for him with her left hand. Eamon shoved the strap free and lurched upright.

Elin caught his coat. He turned and pushed her with both hands.

The force was neither healthy nor sustainable. It was enough.

Elin went backward off the threshold and struck the yard stones. Pain flashed through her torn knee and both palms.

Eamon stumbled inside.

"Eamon!" June tried to follow, but her injured side failed when she hit the step.

Elin rose. The door slammed before she reached it.

The bolt dropped from inside with a metal crack.

She drove her shoulder into the boards. The door jumped in its frame and held.

"Open it."

Eamon's breathing rasped close to the other side.

"No more dragging," he said.

"You need oxygen. Open the door."

"No."

"You've been sedated. You aren't steady."

"Aware enough."

Elin struck the door with both palms. "I can still get you down."

"I know."

"Then open it."

Rain ran from her sleeves and mixed with blood where the stones had split her skin. June sat on the step beside the wall, one arm around her ribs. The lantern guttered at her boots.

Inside, Eamon leaned against the door. Elin could hear each breath through the wood.

"You said Mam asked you to mind the door," she said. "You left. Don't do this again."

"Wasn't the asking I failed."

"What does that mean?"

A pause. Then Eamon, thinner through the boards: "She asked for the chair."

Elin pressed her forehead near the door without touching it.

"I took the door," he said.

The condensed truth reached her through wood after she had spent days learning not to answer voices she could not see. This voice belonged where it sounded. Eamon had barred himself inside, and the answer he wanted from her was not another breach.

"You're taking the door now," she said.

"No. I'm choosing the room."

"So I carry it instead."

"Won't have you carrying me."

"That isn't what I meant."

"Best I can do."

"No. It's the clean thing Moira offered you. One last useful act so you never have to sit with what happened."

His breath caught beyond the wood. Elin waited, listening for the next one.

It came.

She put both hands flat against the boards. "Open the door and tell me where I can see you."

Eamon did not answer.

A scrape moved away across the lower hall. One boot, then the other. The sound faded toward the stair.

"Dad."

No reply came.

From the gap above the frame, black barley began to fall.

The swollen grains struck Elin's shoulder and gathered in the wet seam of the threshold. More sifted down, dark husks sticking to the blood on her hand. They resembled the wet barley packed into the ambulance-launch engine, but no engine or sack stood above this door.

June looked up. "Elin."

"I see it."

Elin hammered the boards until the split skin of her palms left red arcs on the wood. The bolt remained set. She tried the key, though it could not release a bar dropped from inside. She drove her shoulder into the frame once, twice, and felt the old timber absorb her strength.

Lights appeared below on the cliff path.

Tomas climbed with two searchers behind him. Rope crossed one shoulder. His torch beam found Elin at the door, June folded beside the wall and black barley striping the wet sill.

"Back away," he said.

"Open it."

"Move from the door."

"He barred it."

The searchers slowed. One carried a pry bar. The other had Maire's raincoat folded over his arm and the nursing satchel gripped by its strap.

Elin pointed to the pry bar. "Use that."

Tomas reached the landing and tested the iron ring. The door did not move. His gaze traveled over Elin's bleeding hands, the broken salt and June's posture.

"Where is Eamon?"

"Inside."

"Upper room?"

"He went toward the stair."

Tomas put his ear near the wood without touching it. "Eamon."

No answer.

"Don't call through it," Elin said.

He stepped back. "You saw anything move?"

"Only him. Then the barley."

The smallest searcher stared at the grains caught in the frame. "Moira said once he'd spoken, the house settled."

June gave a breathless laugh that ended in pain. "Does that look settled?"

Tomas crouched beside her. "Can you walk?"

"Ugly."

"Blood when you cough?"

"No."

He had heard Elin ask the same question in the barn. His attempt at assessment was crude but useful. He looked toward the man carrying the belongings.

"Give me those."

The searcher passed him the raincoat and satchel.

Elin recognized the satchel's fastened mouth beneath the fold of Maire's coat. "Where did you get them?"

"Lighthouse," Tomas said.

"You went into the room?"

"Door was unbolted after you left."

"Why bring them here?"

“Moira’s order. Said the guest room should have what belonged to Maire.”

The instruction reduced the objects to furnishings for Eamon’s confinement: wife’s coat, nursing satchel, the old recording Elin had not yet heard. Another arrangement completed before he could object.

Tomas held them out to Elin.

She took the satchel first. Its weight was unchanged. The cassette case pressed through the canvas when she tucked it beneath the raincoat.

“Moira wanted those inside,” the searcher said.

“They stay with Elin,” Tomas replied.

The man looked at him. “She said—”

“I heard her.”

Elin nodded at the pry bar. “You have the tool. Open the door.”

Tomas examined the frame, then the stone around it. “Bar’s seated deep. Prying here splits the jamb before it lifts the bolt.”

“Then split it.”

“Could bring the lintel down.”

“I don’t care about the house.”

“He’s beneath it somewhere.”

“Get another bar. An axe. Ladder to the upper window.”

Tomas looked up at the roofline. Rain and mist hid the upper sill. “Harbor shed has a ladder. Longer bars too.”

“How long?”

“Too long for first bell if the lower path floods.”

The answer settled among them. About two and a half hours remained before sunset.

Elin stepped close enough that Tomas had to face her rather than the door. “Your obedience locked a dying man inside.”

His mouth hardened. “He walked up here.”

“You cleared the road. You took our fuel. You helped withhold oxygen. You stood in the barn while Moira called that freedom.”

Tomas glanced at June. She remained curled around the injury the Long Guest had given her. His torch showed the black barley collecting against Elin's boots.

One searcher shifted the pry bar to his other hand. "Orders were to take them downhill once found."

"Whose orders?" Elin asked.

"Moira's."

Tomas rose.

For a moment Elin expected him to take her arm. He had done it at the harbor, on the road and in the grain barn. Practical force came easily to him when delay looked dangerous.

Instead he pointed his torch downhill.

"You two go," he told the searchers. "Keep everyone off the cliff path. No one comes up alone."

The man with the pry bar hesitated. "What about them?"

"They stay."

"Moira said bring Elin back before the bell."

"I'm changing the order."

The two men looked at each other.

Tomas's voice hardened. "Say the door rule."

The smaller man answered first. "Don't open for a voice you can't see."

"Even if it sounds like me," Tomas said. "Even if it gives you an order. Go."

They went downhill, one carrying the useless pry bar and both relieved to have distance between themselves and the house.

June watched Tomas. "That'll please her."

"Not the task." He set the rope against the wall. "Can you get down with help?"

"Later."

He looked at Elin. "I won't drag you."

"That doesn't open the door."

"No."

"Then get the ladder."

"I'll send for it."

"Go yourself."

His gaze returned to the barred entrance. Whatever certainty had brought him up the path did not survive the sight of the barley, June's injury and Elin's blood on a door meant to keep a willing man safe.

"I'll clear the road first," he said. "No one seals this approach without coming through me."

It was not enough. Eamon remained alone beyond the wood, the first bell was approaching and Elin had used the last dose meant for rescue to violate his refusal. Tomas's change could not restore any of it.

She tightened Maire's raincoat around the satchel and held both against her chest.

Inside the fever house, no footstep answered the weather.

Tomas lifted his torch and sent the searchers downhill while black barley continued to sift from the barred door.

Chapter 16: Maire's Voice

The cottage latch caught on the second attempt.

Elin put her shoulder against the kitchen door until the swollen frame gave and the iron tongue entered its slot. Wind pressed once from outside, testing the closure, then moved on around the wall. She stood with Maire's raincoat bundled against her chest and the satchel held beneath it, listening to her own breathing.

Too quick. Shallow from the climb down. No wheeze, no focal pain, no reason to attend to it except that Eamon's breathing was happening elsewhere, beyond a door he had barred against her.

She set the satchel on the table.

Saturday afternoon had darkened into a colorless hour. The clock above the range showed two hours and twenty-seven minutes before sunset, though the storm had already taken the distinction between sea and sky. First bell would sound at sunset whether anyone could see it or not.

Eamon's inhaler remained beside a cereal-box flap marked with June's medication times. A cup of boiled water had formed a skin of dust. Elin's damp glove lay palm down near the sugar bowl, dates and doses written along the back in ink that had bled into blue veins.

The room held the shape of a care plan abandoned halfway through. She had made that shape. She had filled it with straps, a needle, a route to a boat that could not sail. Then she had called movement rescue and kept applying force when the word no longer fitted.

Blood had dried stiff between her knuckles. When she flexed them, two cuts opened again.

She took Maire's coat from around the satchel and hung it on its old peg beside the pantry. Rain darkened the shoulders. The hem brushed the wall with a familiar domestic weight, and for one stupid second Elin expected a hand to come out of the sleeve and straighten it.

Nothing moved. It was a coat Tomas had carried from the lighthouse and placed in her arms. It smelled of damp wool, old peat smoke and the camphor blocks Eamon used in drawers.

She searched its pockets without tearing the lining. A wooden comb. Two safety pins linked together. A handkerchief stiff with age. In the inside breast pocket, her fingers found a rectangle of cardboard, but it was only a folded medicine label with the print washed blank.

The satchel clasp resisted both thumbs. Elin stopped before brute force tore it free. She fetched a teaspoon from the drawer, worked the handle beneath the tongue and eased the corroded catch upward.

Inside lay folded gauze gone yellow at the edges, a spoon wrapped in linen, two clouded ampoules and Maire's small nursing notebook swollen by damp. Elin had already read enough of that book to know its compressed habits: circles for a completed watch, crossed corners when a threshold had failed, a chair drawn as three short strokes beside entries that never used the word *guest*.

A stitched pocket ran beneath the satchel flap. The thread was newer than the leather but old enough to have browned. Elin cut one stitch with the sharp edge of the spoon handle and drew out a cassette in a cracked plastic case.

There was writing on the paper insert.

CHAIR / PLATE / LAMP, in Maire's block capitals. Beneath it, a square with its lower line doubled, then a small circle at one corner.

Elin opened the notebook to the page she remembered from the lighthouse. The same square stood in the margin beside three names, one of them Maire's. The lower line had been redrawn until the paper nearly split. At the corner sat the same circle, faint beneath a brown tide mark.

The marks had looked like private shorthand when Elin first saw them. Now the cassette case supplied the nouns.

She could have pocketed the tape and gone. Ninety seconds of instruction might be buried beneath an hour of family history, excuses, accusations addressed to Eamon, or words meant for the child who had left on a Wednesday ferry. She had less than two and a half hours. Eamon was alone in a house already shedding black barley through its doorframe.

The thought pushed her hands toward speed.

She made them slow down.

The cassette recorder lived in the cupboard beneath old church circulars and a box of plugs. Its lid had cracked at one hinge. The play key stayed down only while she held it, and the battery compartment contained two cells furred white at their ends.

Elin removed them. One had leaked into the contact spring. She scraped the corrosion away with the teaspoon, wiped the compartment with dry gauze from the satchel and tried the kitchen radio's batteries instead.

The motor turned, labored and stopped.

She opened the recorder casing with a blunt knife. The drive belt had slipped from the capstan and lay against the plastic housing like a narrow dead worm. It had stretched with age. She cleaned it, looped it back over the wheel and packed a sliver of folded medicine label beneath the motor mount to restore tension.

On the second attempt the spindles turned together.

Elin checked the cassette tape through its clear window. It had loosened on one reel. She wound it taut with the handle of a coffee spoon, inserted it and pressed play while holding down the reluctant key.

The speaker gave a low mechanical hum. Then a click. A wash of tape hiss filled the kitchen.

Elin sat in Eamon's chair because it was nearest.

A scrape came through the speaker, followed by paper moving and a woman's irritated breath.

"If that took, I'll be surprised."

The voice was older than the one Elin carried in memory. Memory had preserved Maire at odd distances: calling from the bottom of the stairs, singing badly while pegging sheets, saying Elin's name with pins held between her lips. The recorder brought her close enough for every dry catch in her throat.

Elin's thumb rose toward the stop key.

She lowered it to the table.

Maire cleared her throat on the tape. "Monday after the watch. Morning, though the weather would argue. I'm putting this down while I can keep the order straight."

A chair creaked. Somewhere behind her recorded voice, a kettle lid ticked.

"I went in at first bell on Saturday. I came out after dawn on Sunday. Those are the first facts, in case somebody has written otherwise."

Elin looked at the clock, then at the notebook open beside the machine.

The clinic ledger had admitted Maire at first bell and watched her through the turn of the tide. After that, the page had been blank: no release, no death, no burial, no witness replacing her. The omission had held more authority than a living woman's voice because it had been filed, bound and kept.

On the recording, Maire said, "I chose the watch. Nobody put my hand to it. Nobody kept the worst from me either, or so I believed at the time."

Her voice receded as if she had turned to look across the room.

"The guest is not the one given away. That's where they've bent it. The guest hosts the night beside the bed. One stays with the dying so the other thing has a place and no cause to go seeking through the houses."

The tape snagged. Maire's last word lengthened into a low distortion.

Elin released play at once. She took the cassette out, turned the reel by hand past the damaged section and reset it. Her hands wanted the clean efficiency of repair. Her mind wanted to race ahead, assemble rules from scraps and leave before the voice could become personal.

She pressed play again.

"Chair first," Maire said. "A sound chair. Keep its feet inside the marked room. Plate next. Empty is fine. Nothing from the sickbed on it. Lamp last, and keep enough oil or candles to mend the light if it fails."

Pages turned close to the microphone.

"Chair, plate, lamp. Those are terms. They are not welcome. Don't speak as if you're inviting anyone. Don't ask what it wants. Don't promise morning."

Elin drew the transfer paperwork from her clinical bag and found a blank margin. Her pen hovered over it.

Then she put the pen down.

She did not need to convert Maire's voice into orders before she had heard it whole.

"The threshold must be marked," the recording continued. "Salt if it's dry enough to hold. Rowan at the latch if you have it. Every opening counts. Door, shutter, inner stair. If a line breaks, mend that before you answer crying or knocking."

Wind struck the cottage window. The pane moved in its putty with a soft click.

Elin looked toward the kitchen door. It remained shut. Rain traced the lower glass in ordinary crooked streams.

Maire's voice sharpened. "Answer no one you can't see. If it uses a known face, name the person once and say nothing else. A face is not permission. A voice through wood is not company. Open nothing lined from the inside after the tide turns."

Ruaridh had given her pieces of the same rule and died repairing the threshold she broke. His worn voice returned with maddening restraint: *The one who stays keeps the night from spreading.*

Clinic pages. Chapel entries. Guest place set. Guest place cleared. Guest place reset. The repeated chair left wrong at meals. The plate no one used. The lamp kept where a practical household had no need of it.

The island had preserved the equipment and discarded the work.

On the tape, Maire shifted again. "There was water in the lower passage by midnight. It stopped below the third rung of my chair. I don't know why. I won't pretend I do. I kept the lamp trimmed. I mended the seaward line twice. Once I heard my own mother at the lower door, though she'd been buried nine years."

A long hiss followed. Elin heard Maire breathing near the microphone.

"I did not answer her."

The words were plain. No triumph in them.

"At dawn the lower chair was wet. Mine was dry. The room emptied by degrees. That is all I know of its leaving, and it's more than enough."

Elin flexed her injured hand against her thigh. The gauze on the table could bind it, but she would need June to tape the knuckles properly if she meant to carry salt without blood soaking the paper.

If she meant to.

The choice had arrived quietly enough to be mistaken for another task.

She could still go to the square and demand the village reopen the fever house. She could produce the cassette as evidence and make Tomas take responsibility for the road. She could use Maire's survival to argue that Eamon should never have been admitted, then return to the same locked door with a better explanation and no different act.

Eamon had refused the stretcher. He had refused her needle before she used it. He had named what she made of him and gone back inside under his own strength, however costly that strength had been.

No route remained that allowed Elin to love him by moving him elsewhere.

The recorder clicked. Maire's voice disappeared beneath the turning mechanism.

Elin leaned forward and struck the casing with the heel of her hand. The reel resumed.

"Eamon will hate waiting," Maire said.

Elin became very still.

"He'll call it useless because he can't mend a chest or pull weather apart. If he sits, tell him sitting is the work."

There was no accusation in the recorded sentence. Maire had not yet known that Eamon would leave her. Or perhaps she had known enough to make the instruction and still hoped he would choose differently.

Elin did not replay his confession. She did not need to hear again how he had gone downstairs, then outside, then anywhere his hands could find a task. The barred fever-house door had already supplied the shape of her own answer.

The tape continued.

"If I have a choice after, I won't let Moira make a bravery out of this. Brave is what people call you when they want the work repeated by one person. The watch was mine because I chose it. The next must be asked and told the terms."

Maire coughed, took a drink and set the cup down hard enough to distort the sound.

"Tell them the guest can live. I did. Tell them the dying still decides what happens to their body. A watch doesn't cancel that. Give comfort if it's wanted. Warmth, water, medicine. Don't drug someone because fear is inconvenient to the room."

Elin looked at the old clouded ampoules in the satchel. Whatever they had once contained was no longer usable. Her own rescue dose was gone, spent against Eamon's refusal. June would know what remained in the untouched vigil stores, and whether Moira had placed another coercive dose among the medicines.

Maire's voice softened. "There are worse things than being unable to mend a person. Leaving because you cannot bear that fact is one of them."

Elin closed her eyes.

Static moved like rain across the speaker. Beneath it came a small household sound, perhaps Maire setting her hand against the table.

"Elin, if this is you, you're likely listening too fast."

Her hand moved toward the stop key. It reached the recorder and rested beside it.

"You were quick when frightened. Quick up the rocks, quick with an answer, quick to leave a room before anyone saw you'd been hurt." Maire paused. "Keep the lamp filled. Mark the threshold. If you can't mend what's happening, stay anyway."

Elin bowed until her forehead touched the heel of her hand. The split skin pulsed against the wood. Tears struck the transfer forms one at a time and darkened the boxes for consent, destination and clinical justification.

The tape kept moving.

Maire listed practical failures after that. Damp salt clumped and had to be crushed before use. A plate with a crack should be rejected because water found it. Lamp smoke obscured the upper landing if the wick stood too high. A host who needed the privy should use the pot and keep the marked room closed. She spoke of fear without curing it. She said the unseen voices became more exact as dawn approached.

Elin listened to all of it.

The clock advanced through forty-one minutes. The kitchen darkened. Once the recorder slowed and deepened Maire's voice, Elin stopped it long enough to reseal the battery. Once she rose to feed the range because her wet clothes had begun to chill her. She did not search ahead. She did not skip silence.

Near the end, Maire said, "I don't know what it is. I don't know who first made a place for it, or whether there'll always have to be one. Anyone claiming certainty on that is selling fear back to you. I know the bounds I kept, and that daylight found me breathing."

The tape ran quiet for several seconds.

Then: "The terms have to be said before first bell, where people can hear. Otherwise someone will call it an offering after you're behind the door."

The final click was followed by the soft rush of blank tape.

Elin let it run.

Outside, the storm drove rain under the eaves. The cottage clock showed an hour and thirty-six minutes before sunset. Enough time to reach the square. Enough time for Moira to take Maire's words, smooth them into the old language and declare Elin another willing payment.

Elin removed the cassette only when the reel stopped.

She put it back in its case and closed Maire's notebook around the handwritten insert. The radio batteries went into her coat pocket; the recorder would need to travel with its power intact if anyone demanded proof. She discarded the clouded ampoules and kept the folded gauze.

The transfer forms remained on the table.

Her mainland request number ran across the first page. Beneath it sat Eamon's date of birth, the clinical summary she had composed, and the ferry route that had become impossible before she admitted it. The pages had given her authority in every room because they implied a destination beyond argument.

She set them beside the recorder rather than returning them to the waterproof sleeve.

June could refuse her. Tomas could refuse her. Eamon already had. The plan would have to survive those choices or it would be only another form of restraint.

Elin stood, took Maire's raincoat from its peg and put it on over her damp clothes. The sleeves ended short of her wrists. She left Eamon's bracelet where it was, uncut on his

arm beyond the fever-house door.

Before first bell, she would tell the village what a guest was and ask June and Tomas for only the help they chose to give.

Chapter 17: Older Terms

The guest chair had been brought into the square before Elin arrived.

It stood under the chapel eave where the rain could not reach it, its dust sheet removed and a red ribbon tied around one front leg. Someone had scrubbed the seat. A white plate rested on it beneath a folded square of cloth.

Moirá had kept the objects and changed their use. The chair was displayed as an absence waiting to be filled. The plate looked prepared for a meal no living person would be allowed to eat.

Elin entered the square with Maire's recorder under her raincoat and the transfer papers in her hand.

People had gathered in household clusters rather than a single crowd. The harbor men stood nearest Tomas's searchers, accustomed to taking direction from anyone who could close a quay. Two clinic volunteers waited beside the chapel wall with blankets over their arms. An older woman who had brought broth to Eamon every afternoon held an unlit lantern and would not look at Elin. Near the pump, three younger crofters spoke under the weather until Moirá glanced toward them; then only one fell silent.

June leaned against the chapel post. Her face had gone pale beneath its freckles, and one forearm remained braced across her injured ribs. She saw Elin and pushed herself upright too quickly. The effort showed in the short pause before her next breath.

Moirá stood on the lowest chapel step with a length of guest cloth folded over one arm. Her coat was buttoned to the throat. The ring of clinic and chapel keys hung from her waist, cleaned and ordered despite the mud.

"We'll keep this brief," she said. Her voice reached the edges of the square without strain. "Eamon made his choice before witnesses. We can spare his daughter further distress if we finish what has begun."

Several heads bowed. The woman with the unlit lantern began to cry without sound.

Elin walked between the household groups.

"No."

Moirá turned toward her with the measured attention she might have given a confused patient leaving a bed. "You needn't force yourself out in this weather. We've all seen what the last hours cost you."

"You saw what your orders cost."

"This is not the place."

"It has to be said where people can hear." Elin stopped beside the guest chair. "Before first bell."

A harbor man checked the chapel clock through the open porch. An hour and twenty-two minutes remained.

Moir's gaze settled on the papers in Elin's hand. "The mainland cannot help him now."

"I know."

"You've done everything anyone could reasonably expect."

The words offered release in the shape Moira preferred: Elin exhausted, Eamon accepted, the village kept whole by a decision already made.

Elin climbed onto the first chapel step. Moira moved half a pace aside, gracious enough to make it look as if the place had been given.

"These forms were my reason for every door I opened," Elin said.

Wind lifted the upper sheet. She held the stack by the clip.

"Transfer request. Bed authorization. Clinical summary. Transport risk. I wrote down where he was going and treated the destination as consent."

June watched her from the post. One of Tomas's searchers studied the mud on his boots.

Elin tore the packet across the middle.

The wet pages resisted, then separated with a fibrous sound. She tore each half again. The metal clip struck the chapel stone and bounced into the square. Paper scattered against her skirt and pasted itself to the mud.

The clinic volunteers reacted first. One made a noise of protest, as if a medicine chart had been destroyed. The younger crofter by the pump gave a single startled laugh and covered it with his hand. A woman who had signed Eamon's declaration stepped backward from the pieces.

"No stretcher," Elin said. "No ferry. No straps. I am not taking him out."

Moir's expression barely altered. "Then you've accepted what he asked."

"I've accepted that I cannot make care out of moving him against his will."

"A painful wisdom." Moira inclined her head toward the waiting chair. "Eamon has already taken the place. We receive what he offered."

"No." Elin lifted the recorder from beneath her coat and placed it on the chapel ledge. "You don't receive him. You don't receive me."

The red ribbon on the chair moved in the wind.

"I take the guest place," Elin said. "Freely, on the older terms."

Silence spread unevenly. Somewhere behind the chapel, a loose gutter tapped against stone.

Moirra looked at her for several seconds. "If that is what you can bear to offer, the island will honor it."

"Listen to the words. I am not an offering."

Moirra's mouth tightened.

Elin put one hand on the guest chair. The scrubbed wood was dry and cold.

"The guest is the host of the watch. One person stays beside the dying until dawn. A chair inside the marked room. A plate for the lower place. A lamp kept burning. Salt at every threshold. No answer to a voice that cannot be seen. No door opened because something familiar speaks through it."

The older woman with the lantern crossed herself. One of the harbor men muttered that those were children's warnings. His companion told him to be quiet without taking his eyes off Elin.

"Elin," Moirra said, "you've found scraps at the worst possible hour. Your mother had her own understanding of what happened."

"My mother made a recording after she survived it."

That changed the square.

People did not all believe her. She saw disbelief in the clinic volunteer's pinched mouth and raw hope on the face of the woman who had brought broth. Tomas's searchers looked toward the road as if expecting their absent commander to settle the fact. The younger crofter at the pump said, "Survived?" aloud, and no one rebuked him.

Elin pressed the recorder's play key.

The motor caught. Tape hiss entered the square, thin under the wind. Maire's voice came from the speaker:

"I went in at first bell on Saturday. I came out after dawn on Sunday. Those are the first facts, in case somebody has written otherwise."

Elin stopped the tape there. She would not turn her mother's whole account into a spectacle for Moira to dispute line by line.

Moira regarded the recorder. "A voice on an old tape cannot tell us what happened after it was made."

"It tells us she left the vigil alive."

"It tells us what Maire believed."

"It tells us what you left out."

A man beside the pump pushed his hood back. Elin recognized him as one of the witnesses who had stood in the grain barn when Eamon volunteered.

"He said it himself," the man said. "Eamon said he'd take it."

"He did," Moira answered at once. "Before all of us."

The man looked at Elin. "Was that free?"

The square waited for a clean answer. Elin could not give them one.

"He spoke for himself," she said. "He also spoke after the ferry was cancelled, the ambulance launch was sunk, the oxygen was withheld, the roads were controlled and he was told a Mora had to take the place before any Mora could leave."

The man rubbed rain from his beard. "Then it wasn't free."

"I don't know what he would have chosen if he'd been told everything." Elin kept her hand on the chair. "Neither do you."

Moira stepped down from the chapel. "Nobody here controlled the storm."

"No. You only used it."

A clinic volunteer spoke from the wall. "The launch was old."

"I saw wet barley packed into its engine."

The volunteer's gaze went to Moira, seeking either denial or instruction. Moira supplied neither.

"We have kept people alive through winters the mainland forgets," Moira said. "Food, fuel, medicines, births in bad weather, bodies washed when families could not manage it. You know enough about care to understand that decisions look cruel when you arrive after the labor."

Elin did understand. Every blanket in the volunteers' arms had been washed by someone. Every lantern had been filled. Moira's competence was visible across the square in dry bandages, assigned tasks and people who trusted her because she had

once come at three in the morning and stayed.

Useful labor did not turn concealment into consent.

"I know what you've done for people," Elin said. "I know what you did to the boat. Both are true."

The woman with the lantern lowered it to the ground. The harbor men exchanged a look. Near the chapel door, one of Moira's meal carriers picked up a fallen piece of transfer paper, then let it go again when the ink came away on her fingers.

Moira folded the guest cloth once more over her arm. "And what exactly are you promising them? That your mother solved this? That one night of old household tricks ends it forever?"

"No." Elin faced the square rather than Moira. "I don't know where the Guest came from. I don't know whether there will have to be another watch. I know Maire survived this one. I know the records repeat a place being set and cleared, and somewhere that became a person being shut away alone. I will not call uncertainty proof that your version is right."

A low conversation began among the people by the pump. It had no single tone. Fear, argument, calculation. The sound of authority ceasing to be unanimous.

Moira lifted her voice over it. "The fever house must be contained. Once the place is taken, the door is sealed until dawn."

"No one seals it behind me."

"The house has its ways."

"People have the keys."

That drew attention to the ring at Moira's waist.

She touched it with two fingers. "The inner lock is not a toy for grief."

June pushed away from the chapel post.

"Elin has the inner key."

Moira looked at her granddaughter.

June crossed the few steps between them carefully, protecting her left side. She took Elin's wrist and drew it out from the raincoat sleeve. Red wool showed beneath the cuff, looped twice around the wrist. The iron key lay flat against Elin's pulse.

Every head near the chapel turned toward it.

"I gave it to her before," June said. "She kept it through the breach. Gran knew it was missing."

Moira's face changed by a fraction. Her attention moved from the key to June's guarding arm.

"You should be lying down."

"Aye. You should've told the truth. We're both behind."

"June."

"No." June's voice shook, though she kept it loud enough for the square. "You don't get to make concern a hand over my mouth."

The clinic volunteers stared at the ground. The woman with the lantern picked it up again.

Elin took the guest cloth from Moira's arm.

Moira could have resisted. Her hand remained on the fabric for one second, and Elin felt the strength in it. Then she released the fold as if the exchange had always been planned.

"If you enter," Moira said, "you accept responsibility for what follows."

"I accept the watch."

"For every house."

"No. Those are your words." Elin folded the cloth over the back of the guest chair. "I will keep one room until dawn. Nothing beyond that is mine to promise."

The chapel clock showed an hour and four minutes before sunset.

Elin turned to June. "I need your help if you're willing."

June closed her eyes briefly, then opened them. "Specific help would be a refreshing change."

"I need my hands bound. Fresh salt to replace what we spent at the breach. A filled lamp and spare light. Rowan. Comfort medicine for Eamon, if there is any untouched stock."

"And me?" Tomas asked.

He had entered the square from the harbor road without Elin seeing him. A coil of line hung over one shoulder. His tool bag struck his knee as he walked. Mud reached halfway up his boots.

People moved aside for him from habit. The movement stopped before it became a clear lane.

Elin looked at him. "I need the cliff road kept open. No one follows to seal the door. If you choose to help, hold the lower bend."

Tomas's eyes went to Moira.

She said, "We need the road managed properly. You can escort Elin when the bell sounds."

"Elin asked me," he said.

The distinction landed without volume.

* * *

June made a work surface from the guest chair.

There was no return to the smokehouse and no time for privacy. She sent one of the younger crofters to the chapel store with a list and the unlit lantern. He looked to Moira before moving. When Moira gave no instruction, he went anyway.

Another woman brought the funeral tin from beneath the chapel bench. Its contents had been set aside before the year's observance: paper twists of dry salt sealed in wax, two books of matches, a rowan string, candles, lamp wicks and a narrow medicine case.

"Elin chooses what comes out," June said when a clinic volunteer reached for the case.

The volunteer withdrew her hand.

Elin sat on the chapel step. June knelt in front of her and immediately winced. She changed position, one knee down and the other foot planted, keeping her injured ribs from folding.

"You shouldn't kneel," Elin said.

"You shouldn't have put your fist through half the island."

"I didn't."

"Then the island's done a poor job of defending itself."

The joke ran out before either of them could smile.

June cleaned Elin's split knuckles with boiled water from a stoppered bottle. Grit had dried in the deepest cut. She worked it free with gauze, asking before each pass of pressure.

"This will hurt."

"Yes."

"Want me to stop?"

"No. Keep going."

June wrapped each hand separately, leaving Elin's fingers mobile enough to strike a match and turn a key. The tape crossed the back of her right hand without restricting the wrist.

"You asked," June said as she secured the final strip. "I nearly didn't recognize you."

"I heard you the first time."

"In the barn?"

"Yes."

"You carried on."

"Yes." Elin did not offer explanation as apology. "I was wrong."

June inspected the bandage rather than her face. "He said no to the needle."

"I know."

"And if he's frightened in there?"

"I ask what he wants. I treat pain, breathlessness, panic if he wants it treated. I don't make him unconscious because I need him easier to manage."

June nodded once.

The crofter returned with a storm lantern filled to three-quarters and a stoppered tin of oil. He set both by Elin's feet. "Store was locked."

"How did you get in?" June asked.

He held up a chapel key. "It was under the third hymn book where it always is."

Moirra heard him. Her gaze passed from the key to the people around the chair, cataloguing breaches.

June opened the medicine case. Inside lay four ampoules, a small bottle of oral solution, syringes, needles and printed labels from the clinic.

Elin checked each one against the light.

"Two morphine ampoules," she said. "In date. Low concentration. This one is for pain or breathlessness, titrated while he's awake if he can answer."

June touched the small bottle. "That was in Eamon's box before Gran moved it."

"Oral morphine. Also appropriate if he can swallow."

A third ampoule bore a sedative label.

June's mouth hardened. "That one?"

"Could relieve severe distress if he asks and other measures fail. It could also be used to stop him resisting." Elin put it back in the case. "I won't carry it."

"What about the prepared syringe from the barn?"

"Gone. I used it."

June held her gaze.

Elin added, "Against his refusal."

The answer hurt June more visibly than the movement of kneeling. She sat back on her heel and pressed one hand to her ribs.

"Then the needles stay here," June said.

"One sterile syringe and one morphine ampoule come with me. He may lose the ability to swallow. I won't withhold indicated relief to prove I can behave."

June considered that, then handed her the unopened syringe.

Elin packed the oral morphine, one ampoule and syringe into a small waterproof pouch. No sedative ampoule. No straps. No transport sling. She added gauze, matches, spare wick, oil, salt and the rowan string. The guest cloth fitted over the top.

The inner key remained tied to her wrist.

June put one paper twist of salt in each of Elin's raincoat pockets and another inside the kit. "Don't ration it for tidiness."

"I won't."

"Chair first."

"Then plate. Then lamp."

"Then your dad."

Elin checked the lantern wick. "He comes before the furniture if he's in immediate distress."

June gave her a tired look. "You know what I mean."

"I do."

Tomas had opened his tool bag beside the chapel wall. A pry bar, cold chisel, short-handled sledge, coil of line and flare pistol lay on the flagstones. The people nearest him kept a greater distance from the flare than from the tools.

He picked up the line and tested its lay between both hands.

"Seaward shutter is the weakest point," he said. "I can hold it from outside if it breaches. I won't widen it unless you call through an opening where I can see you."

"No opening a door for a voice," Elin said.

"Even yours."

"Yes."

He looked at the medicine pouch, then at her bandaged hands. "Moirra told me the person inside had to stay until morning."

June remained beside the guest chair. "Did she tell you the guest could live?"

Tomas did not answer at once.

The square quieted around him. He had given orders through every emergency most of them remembered. People had mistaken the absence of hesitation for complete knowledge.

"No," he said.

June's chin lifted. "Did you ask?"

"I asked what was required."

"Required of whom?"

His jaw shifted. He looked past June toward the cliff road.

"She never said there was a version where the person came out breathing," he said. "Not once."

A harbor man swore under his breath.

Moirra stepped away from the chapel. "Because no one can promise that. Maire's tape does not make the house safe."

"You told us sealing it was the safe part," Tomas said.

"It contains what must be contained."

"It contains the witness too."

"The witness accepted the risk."

Tomas looked at Elin's torn papers in the mud. "After you took away every other road."

Moira approached him with both hands visible. "You cleared unsafe routes in a storm. You did your duty."

"I blocked oxygen."

"You prevented equipment being wasted on a failed extraction."

"I carried your orders to the house where Ruaridh died. I stood in the barn. I saw what came through the grain." Tomas closed the tool bag. "Then I saw Eamon bar the door against his own daughter because we had made her rescue another attack."

The nearest villagers listened without moving. A clinic volunteer began folding and refolding the corner of a blanket.

Moira said, "And now you intend to correct uncertainty with disobedience."

"I intend to hold the road."

Elin fastened the medicine pouch inside the vigil kit. "You don't owe me obedience either."

Tomas met her eyes.

"No," he said. "I don't."

He lifted the tool bag and flare pistol.

The chapel clock showed thirty-eight minutes before sunset.

* * *

The lantern line formed behind them despite no one calling for it.

Some villagers remained in the square. The clinic volunteers stayed with the blankets. The older woman who had brought broth went into the chapel and shut the door, whether to pray or to avoid witnessing the division Elin could not tell. One of Tomas's searchers followed him with an unlit torch, then stopped when Tomas ordered him to stay below the pump.

Others came as far as the cliff road. They carried lanterns because Moira told them to, because Tomas had taught them never to approach bad ground without light, or because standing in the square had become harder than moving. Their reasons showed in the distances they kept.

June walked near Elin for the first hundred yards. Her gait shortened on the uphill grade. Each breath had to be placed around the injured ribs.

"Go back," Elin said.

"No."

"You've done what I asked."

"I know." June rested against the stone wall. "This is what I'm choosing."

Elin adjusted the weight of the vigil kit rather than trying to take June by the arm. "Then stop at the lower bend."

"I had already planned to."

Tomas moved ahead. At the narrowest turn, the road ran between a gorse-covered wall and the unguarded drop to the tide. He set down his tool bag and placed the coil of line where it could be reached without turning his back uphill.

The fever house was not yet visible. Elin could see the cliff gate above, black iron against the fog.

Twenty minutes remained.

Behind them, Moira's voice traveled along the line. "Keep together. No one leaves the road."

People obeyed the second instruction and ignored the first. The lanterns spread out. A fisherman whose boat depended on Tomas's harbor rulings moved to the front. The woman who signed Eamon's declaration stayed near Moira. Two young men dropped behind June and offered to support her; she accepted one elbow after telling them where to place it.

Elin continued uphill.

At the bend, Tomas stood across the road. "You go on," he told her.

"The bell hasn't sounded."

"It will."

"I need the terms claimed before it."

"They were." He looked back at the approaching lanterns. "Everyone heard."

Elin gave him the spare oil tin. "If I call from behind wood, don't answer."

"I know the rule."

"If you see me through an opening, ask something only I could answer."

"What?"

She thought of hospital verification questions and passwords, all the ordinary scaffolding used when identity had to be proved. "Ask what I destroyed in the square."

His gaze dropped to her empty hand. "And if it says transfer forms?"

"Ask why."

Tomas nodded.

She passed him and climbed toward the gate.

Moira reached the bend before Elin had gone twenty paces.

"Tomas," she called. "Good. Take her up and see the door made proper."

Elin did not stop. She could hear the arrangement behind her: Tomas occupying the width of the road, Moira below him, lanterns collecting in uneven tiers.

"The road's shut," Tomas said.

"We have no time for this."

"No one passes me."

A murmur followed. The people below had heard Tomas close roads for rockfall, tide, wreckage and bodies. His authority had always been easiest to trust when it pointed away from danger. Now it pointed at Moira.

"You have your order," she said. "Elin enters. You seal the door. We hold until dawn."

"No seal."

Elin's boots slipped on wet stone. She recovered against the wall without putting down the lantern.

Moira's tone changed. It softened for the crowd. "We're all exhausted. Tomas has carried more than his share since Wednesday."

"Back down," he said.

"You know what delay costs."

"Back down."

The chapel bell rope would already be in the sexton's hands. Elin could not see the square from the road, but she knew the clock face and the narrowing margin.

Moira stepped closer to Tomas.

"Your wife died because men stood arguing in weather and let the window close."

The words stopped several people at once.

Elin turned her head.

Tomas had not moved. Rain shone on the flare pistol at his side.

Moira continued, low enough to claim intimacy and loud enough to be heard. "We remember that night with you. We carried you through it. Don't shame her now by making this messy."

Tomas's grip shifted on the pistol.

June stood against the lower wall with one young man's hand under her elbow. Her face had gone white with pain. "That's enough, Gran."

Moira did not look at her. "This is not yours to decide."

"You decided enough for everyone."

The first bell sounded.

Its bronze weight entered the road through rain and fog. The stroke was slow, larger than the chapel that made it. Sunset existed somewhere behind the storm.

Tomas raised the flare pistol and fired.

Red light opened above the cliff road. It struck every wet face, the wall, the gorse and the low cloud. Gulls broke from the cliff below in a white confusion of wings. One villager dropped a lantern. It rolled against the wall with its flame guttering behind glass.

People recoiled from Tomas. Moira did not.

"I said back down," he told her.

Smoke trailed from the flare pistol. The fisherman nearest him stepped aside, creating space rather than attempting passage. One clinic volunteer retreated three paces and stopped. The woman who had signed Eamon's declaration stared at Moira as if waiting for the familiar instruction that would restore the world.

None came.

The bell's second stroke began.

Moira looked uphill at Elin. "If you leave that room wrong, what follows is on all of them."

Elin did not answer. The claim was another line meant to run from her body through every house on the island.

The dropped lantern lay on its side. June freed herself from the young man's support, crossed two painful steps and set it upright with her boot.

"Then maybe don't send her in wrong," she said.

Moirra turned toward her.

Tomas stepped forward and blocked her view. "Enough."

No one tried to pass him. Some trusted his order more than Moira's. Some feared the flare. Others had heard Maire's recorded voice and now possessed doubt where certainty had been. It was enough to hold the bend.

Elin reached the cliff gate as the red light faded from the clouds. The iron latch was slick beneath her bandage. Beyond it, the path narrowed toward the fever house, where Eamon waited alone above water already finding its way across the lower floor.

She lifted the latch, carried the lantern and the older terms through, and left the gate unsealed behind her.

Chapter 18: The Guest Place

The key entered the fever-house lock as Saturday's first bell began.

Elin lifted the door by its iron ring and drove her shoulder against the swollen wood. It opened six inches, stopped on a warped board, then yielded with a crack that travelled up the frame. Brine-dark water slid over her boots. It had already crossed the lower hall from the seaward wall, carrying splinters, dead flies and scraps of old plaster in a slow wash toward the door.

The bell sounded again behind her. Sunset lay under the storm somewhere, though the windows had gone black an hour before.

Above, metal knocked once against wood.

Eamon.

Elin had the clinical bag over one shoulder, a lantern in her left hand and June's oil lamp wedged under her arm. She set them inside and turned toward the stairs.

The first step showed beyond the dead lantern light. Twelve feet. She could reach him in three seconds.

A second knock came from above, followed by the long scrape of a bed leg.

She stopped.

Salt first. Where people crossed.

The canvas provision bag held three packets folded inside waxed paper, each one dry when June had passed it to her. Elin tore the first open with her teeth. Wind drove rain across the doorway and spotted the salt before it touched the floor. She closed the outer door until only her forearm remained in the gap, poured a hard white line along the inner sill, then shut and locked the door. The corners took most of her attention. The old stone dipped on the left, and the salt vanished into the joint unless she packed it with two wet fingers.

Something bumped the other side of the door.

She did not answer it.

The lower hall had once received fever cases through separate doors, one for entry and another for removal. Quarantine pegs lined the walls. A speaking tube hung beside them, its mouth furred with nesting grass. Brown tide marks rose shoulder-high on the plaster, recording floods no one had troubled to date.

Elin carried the opened salt packet to the stairs. Rowan cord went twice around the newel post, the knot pulled tight enough to bite the damp wood. She laid salt across the first step, climbed, and marked the narrowing at the upper landing. Her hand wanted the chamber latch while she was there. She could hear Eamon's breath through the door: a dry pull, a pause, another pull made with effort.

"Dad."

His bed frame knocked again.

Seen and answered. She had spoken to the man she had come to reach, with no wood concealing who stood on the other side. Even so, the sound of her own voice in the stairwell made her skin prickle.

"One minute," she said.

"Aye." His reply was faint but unmistakably his. "Always counting."

The words gave her enough to go back down.

She put June's lamp on the wall table, trimmed the charred wick and struck a match. The first flame blew out in a draught leaking from the old speaking tube. She blocked it with her body and lit a second. Yellow steadied inside the glass chimney.

A chair stood under the stairs with one leg sunk between two boards. Elin dragged it free and set it square to the table, facing the plate's place rather than the stair. Water rocked around its feet. From her coat she took the enamel plate wrapped in a dishcloth. White, blue-rimmed, chipped where someone had dropped it years ago. She laid it before the chair and put one peppermint lozenge in its centre.

A place set. A place bounded. Terms rather than bait.

She used what remained in the first packet to draw a half-circle around the rear and sides of the chair, leaving its open edge toward the table. Water darkened the salt at once. The line held white for the space of a breath, then softened at the margins.

Upstairs, Eamon coughed.

Elin took the steps two at a time.

The upper chamber had been barred from within. A rusted bed rail passed through both door handles, its end wrapped in cloth to keep it from clattering. Eamon had managed that after they left him. She set the lantern down, worked the rail loose and pushed the door inward against a blanket bunched on the floor.

Cold air came through the shutter seams. Water had found the room under the seaward skirting and spread beneath the bed, shallow enough to show the grain of the boards. The blanket over Eamon's legs had soaked to the knees. He lay half-turned

toward the door, one hand clenched around the sheet and the other resting over the subcutaneous port Elin had placed earlier.

His eyes went first to the lantern and then to her face.

"You came back."

"Yes."

"Door shut?"

"And lined."

He released the sheet. The movement cost him; his breathing shortened until each inhalation stopped before it filled his chest.

Elin hung the lantern from a peg and went to him. His fingers were cool. Pulse fast, irregular, present. She watched the rise below his collarbones and counted for half a minute. Twenty-six. No wet rattle, no obstruction she could clear. The portable oxygen cylinder stood empty beside the wall, its valve open. It would not have corrected what she was seeing now.

"Pain?" she asked.

"Aye."

"Where?"

He touched the lower ribs, then spread his fingers as if the answer had become too large for one site.

"Same pain as before?"

"More of it."

"Do you want morphine?"

He studied her hand as she opened the drug pouch. "For the pain."

"And the breathlessness. A small dose through the port. It may make you drowsy, but I'm not giving enough to put you under."

"I said no more cups."

"No cups."

Moirá's prepared sedative had been meant to make resistance quiet and transport easy. This was a measured dose for symptoms Eamon could name and treatment he had accepted. Elin checked the ampoule against the lantern, read the label twice and drew up only what the previous interval allowed. Her hand trembled when the needle touched the access port. She held it still against the tape until the tremor passed, then

administered the dose slowly.

"Tell me if the pain changes," she said.

"You'll be close enough to hear."

"Yes."

The wet bedding came next because he was shivering. Elin opened the clinical bag and found one thermal blanket, two ordinary wool blankets and a single dry sheet wrapped in oilcloth. She could not change the lower sheet without rolling him farther than his breath would tolerate.

"I need to get the wet things off your legs. Can you bend this knee?"

Eamon tried. His heel travelled an inch before the effort broke into a cough.

"That's enough."

She slid one forearm under his calves and lifted while he held the side rail. The soaked blanket peeled away with the weight of sailcloth. She drew the dry sheet beneath his legs in sections, covering him as she worked so the cold did not have all of him at once. The wool blanket went over that, then the thermal layer loose across his feet. She tucked nothing he might have to fight later.

His cough subsided. Elin raised the bedhead one notch and waited.

"Better there?"

"Leave it."

She left it.

The morphine began to show in what disappeared: the pinch between his brows, the guarded set of his mouth, the rapid little corrections at the end of each breath. His respiratory rate came down by two, then another two. He remained awake.

At the inner threshold, the old salt line had been broken by the corner of the bunched blanket. A boot had scattered another section toward the landing. Elin pulled the fabric clear, opened the second packet and pinched salt into the gaps. She followed the line with the lantern held low. White from frame to frame. No bare board.

Eamon watched her from the bed.

"Ruaridh teach you that?"

"Some of it."

"Too late for him."

The salt hissed softly where water reached it. Elin closed the packet before damp could enter the fold.

"I know," she said.

She could have filled the next minute with a pulse count, skin temperature, capillary refill—another assessment performed because the instruments were available and grief was not measurable. Instead she went back to the bed and put her hand over his where it lay on the blanket.

His fingers turned until they held two of hers.

"Do you want water?" she asked.

"Wet my mouth."

She used one of the mouth sponges from her kit, squeezed it until it would not drip and passed it over his lips and tongue. He closed his mouth around it once, then turned his head away.

"Enough."

She set it aside.

The second chair was at the far wall, its woven seat mildewed but intact. Elin carried it to the bedside and set it close enough that the blanket brushed its lowest rung. She lowered herself into it without releasing Eamon's hand.

Below them, wood creaked under a new weight.

Eamon looked toward the open chamber door.

"Is it in?"

"It has a place."

"That all?"

"For now."

He considered this and shut his eyes. "All right."

* * *

The first scrape below was short, the sound of one chair leg shifting on a board. The second crossed nearly half the lower hall.

Elin counted Eamon's breaths through it. Seventeen. Pause. Eighteen.

The lamp flame downstairs threw a moving bar of light across the stairwell wall. It swung toward the upper landing, steadied, then swung again.

Eamon opened his eyes. "Go see."

"I'm checking you first."

"Checked."

"Pain now?"

"Less."

"Breath?"

"Enough."

The word was becoming his unit of measure. Elin checked his pulse once more and tucked the blanket away from the damp edge of the mattress. She placed the call bell in his palm, though its wire ended at a dead box beside the door.

"If you need me, strike the rail with this." She gave him the lantern's metal snuffer. "I'm going downstairs and coming straight back."

"You don't need permission."

"No. I'm telling you where I'll be."

His hand closed around the snuffer. "Aye."

Elin took the salt packet and descended.

At the turn of the stair she saw the lower table first. The lamp had travelled a foot from the wall and stood close to the stair line. Its flame leaned inside the chimney, smoking the glass. The plate had moved with it. A wet hand rested on the enamel rim.

The woman in the chair wore Maire's face.

She sat with her back straight and her bare feet together in the floodwater. Her dress clung darkly from shoulders to ankles. Water slid from her hair, followed the line of her jaw and gathered at her wrists. Twenty years had not altered the face. That was among the ways Elin knew it false. The real Maire would have aged somewhere, even if only in the unfinished part of Elin's imagination.

The Guest looked at her without speaking.

The chair remained inside the half-circle, but it had turned several degrees toward the stairs. Its rear leg had ploughed through the salt. Floodwater carried the loosened grains away in white threads.

Elin stopped above the first-step line.

She could see the woman. She could see both hands and the pressure of one thumb against the plate. This was no end-of-life perception held in a dying person's gaze. The enamel shifted under that hand and made a thin grinding sound against the table.

Elin tightened her grip on the salt packet.

"The place is there," she said. "Leave it there."

The Guest's fingers curled over the plate. Maire's old red ribbon lay pasted to the side of her throat, bright as a cut in the lamplight.

A fist struck the outer door.

"Elin." Moira's voice carried through the wood. "Open now. We'll keep this orderly."

Elin looked toward the narrow pane beside the door. Rain sheeted over the glass, but a lantern lifted outside and showed Moira's face beneath a black hood. She stood on the step, one hand on the door ring. Visible. Human. Waiting to be obeyed.

Elin went down the final steps without crossing the salt at their foot.

The Guest drew the plate another inch toward the stairs.

"Don't touch the place," Elin said.

Maire's face inclined. The movement was one Elin remembered from childhood, the small tilt with which her mother had invited a better answer. It ended too far to the side. A bead of black water ran out of the Guest's ear.

Moira knocked again. "He must come down before the tide turns. The host brings the dying one to the guest. You know that now."

Elin kept the woman in the chair within sight and moved along the clear side of the table. The lamp's brass base was hot. She wrapped the dishcloth around it, lifted it and returned it to the wall end, where its light fell across the designated chair without opening a path to the stair.

The Guest's eyes followed the flame.

Moira raised her voice. "There's a chair ready for him. Bring him down while he can still speak his consent."

The lower water reached Elin's ankles. Salt from the outer threshold drifted past in thinning clots.

Maire's records had repeated the sequence without explanation: place set, person attended, place cleared. The cassette had supplied what Moira left out. The guest was given terms. The dying were given company. No one was carried downstairs to complete the table.

Elin took hold of the plate.

The Guest held the other side.

The enamel was cold enough to ache in Elin's fingers. For one second neither moved. Then the woman leaned forward. Water poured from her sleeves, striking the table with the steady patter of rain through a roof. Her face came within the lamp's full light.

The left temple was crushed where Ruaridh's hive knife had struck bone. Below it, the skin was as smooth as Maire's had been on the morning she vanished.

Elin did not pull harder. A struggle would bring the plate off the table and break the terms she was trying to preserve. She held it level and waited.

From above came a single blow of metal against the bed rail.

Eamon.

The Guest turned her head toward the sound. Her grip loosened.

Elin moved the plate back to its original place and released it. The peppermint lozenge had dissolved into a red-edged smear.

"I'm here," she called up the open stair. "I'm coming."

Moir's palm struck the window. "Don't leave the lower watch unfinished."

Elin looked directly at her through the rain-streaked pane. "The lower place is hers. His place is upstairs."

"You're dividing what has to be joined."

"He stays where he chose."

"He chose to finish this."

"He did not choose your drug. He did not choose to be carried down."

Moir shifted her lantern, and light found the water pouring over the outer step. "Then ask him now. Bring him where I can hear."

Eamon struck the rail again, weaker.

Elin turned away from the window.

The chair had shifted while she spoke. Its front legs now touched the table, closing the open side of the salt half-circle. The Guest's bare heel rested across the broken rear line. Smoke rose where salt clung to her skin: a pale thread at first, then a dirty curl carrying the smell of wet wool singed too near a fire.

The woman looked down at her foot with Maire's mild, practical interest.

Elin poured fresh salt into the furrow behind the chair.

The Guest's heel jerked clear. The movement struck the chair against the table hard enough to rattle the lamp chimney. Skin darkened along the heel in a narrow band, and smoke continued to lift from it. She was still solid. Still in the chair. Still below.

Water reached the new line and began eating it from both ends.

Elin used the heel of her boot to turn the chair square without touching the Guest. The wood resisted with the weight seated in it, then shifted. She repaired the side nearest the stairs, closed the second packet and weighed what remained in her hand. Less than half. One unopened packet in the bag upstairs. Dry salt had become time, and the tide was spending it.

Moirá pulled at the door ring. The lock held.

"You cannot nurse this away," she called.

Elin checked the lamp, plate, chair and stair line. Each object was where it belonged. "I'm not trying to."

She climbed.

At the first step, Maire's hand slid across the table toward the lamp. The fingers stopped above the fresh salt. Smoke lifted from the damp skin before contact, and the hand withdrew.

Elin continued upward.

Eamon lay lower in the bed than she had left him, the effort of striking the rail having pulled him sideways. His face was grey beneath the lantern, his lips parted around quick, shallow breaths. The snuffer had fallen into the water.

She went straight to him.

"What changed?"

"Couldn't get the breath."

"Pain?"

He shook his head.

Elin put one hand behind his shoulder and raised him while she added another pillow. She waited after each small adjustment. Upright enough to free his diaphragm, not so high that he had to hold himself there. His breathing stayed rapid, then lengthened. She loosened the blanket at his chest and opened the wet collar of his shirt.

"Better?"

"Some."

"Do you want another dose?"

"How long?"

"Too soon for more morphine. I can stay with you and reassess."

His eyes moved past her to the doorway. "You came back quick."

"I said I would."

"Moir?"

"Outside."

"Leave her there."

"I will."

She retrieved the snuffer from the water and set it on the bedside table. The floor had risen from wet boards to a continuous black surface. Each movement sent a low ripple under the bed. Elin checked the inner salt line. The middle remained white, but its seaward end had begun to dissolve where the flood crossed it.

She knelt and opened the last packet.

Eamon watched her mend the line. "How much?"

"Enough for this repair."

"That isn't what I asked."

"One packet. Open now."

"And the night's young."

"Yes."

She folded the top twice and set it on the highest shelf beside the drug pouch. Then she dried her hands before touching him again.

His pulse had slowed. The morphine had relieved the pain without taking his speech or his choice. Elin listened to his chest with the stethoscope, warmed first between her palms. Air entered both sides, diminished at the bases. There was nothing in the finding that required her to abandon him for equipment she did not have.

She sat and placed the mouth sponge against his lips.

"Again?"

He nodded. She wet his mouth, waited while he swallowed, and stopped when he turned away.

Below, the chair scraped once. The sound travelled no farther than the table.

Moira called through the outer door, her words dulled by the floor between them. "It will ask more than you can give."

Elin did not answer. Moira had stated something obvious and mistaken it for authority.

Eamon's hand moved across the blanket until it found hers.

"Still there?" he asked.

"Yes."

"The other one."

Elin looked through the doorway. From the landing she could see the lower lamp burning against the wall and the top of the designated chair. Wet black hair hung over its back. The Guest had turned Maire's face toward the stairs, but chair, plate and lamp remained below the line.

"In her place," Elin said.

Eamon settled his head against the pillow. "And you?"

"Here."

The next bell was hours away. Rain pressed through the shutter seams, and water climbed the bed legs with every slow pulse from below. Elin kept two fingers over Eamon's wrist without counting until his grip eased around her hand.

When the flood touched the lowest rung of her chair, she stayed seated beside him.

Chapter 19: Middle Watch

The pillow had slipped below Eamon's shoulder.

Elin saw the change in his breathing before he asked for help. Each inhalation lifted the right side of his chest first, the left following with a shallow hitch. The position had been useful earlier, after the morphine eased the pain beneath his ribs, but his body had altered around it. His chin had dropped toward his collar. Water moved under the bed in black folds, tapping the frame.

"Do you want to sit higher?" she asked.

"Other way."

"Onto your left?"

He nodded.

"That may hurt while we turn you."

"It hurts here."

His voice remained clear, though effort shortened it. Elin set the mouth-care cup on the bedside table and inspected the route she would need. The bed stood too close to the chamber threshold for her to work from both sides. Its seaward foot had shifted half an inch as the boards swelled. The inner salt line ran from wall to wall beyond it, white in the middle and gray at each flooded end.

Moving the bed risked the line. Turning Eamon without moving it risked dragging his hip and shoulder over wet linen.

"Let me raise you first," she said. "Then I can pull the sheet under you. Is that all right?"

"Aye."

She dried her hands on her trousers and placed one forearm behind his shoulders. "Your arm around me if you can."

His hand caught her sleeve. The grip was weak but purposeful. She counted them into the lift, bearing his weight against her thighs while she drew the folded sheet lower behind him. His breath roughened beside her ear.

"Stop?"

"No. Get on."

She did not mistake endurance for permission to hurry. She held him upright until the worst of the breathlessness passed, then lowered him against the pillow and waited.

The lamp downstairs burned with a yellow steadiness she could see from the landing. Beneath it, the extra chair remained inside its bounded place. Wet hair covered the Guest's face. One hand lay beside the untouched plate, the fingers pale and ridged from water.

Eamon followed her glance. "Still sitting?"

"Yes."

"Then turn me."

Elin shifted the chair out of her way and put the last dry blanket over him before removing the damp upper one. The dry wool had come from the reserve cache. It smelled of lanolin and the cedar chest in which June had stored it. There was no replacement.

She loosened the drawsheet. "I'm going to move the bed a little from the wall."

"Do it."

The frame resisted. Elin braced a shoulder against the headboard and pushed. One leg rose over a warped board, struck down, and sent a wash of floodwater across the room. The current caught the blanket where it trailed from the mattress. Wool darkened in a quick advancing band.

At the same moment, the bed's foot scraped through the salt line.

Below, wood struck wood.

The extra chair hit the table once, hard enough to make the plate jump. The lower lamp narrowed to a blue-edged flame.

Elin snatched the blanket clear of the water, but it had taken up too much. Cold weight dragged from her hands. She threw it across Eamon's legs anyway and went to the threshold.

A gap the width of her palm divided the line. Salt grains turned translucent at its edges and vanished into the moving water.

The Guest remained seated. Its head had lifted. Maire's face showed between ropes of hair, swollen with wet and turned toward the stairs.

"Elin," Eamon said.

"I see it."

She reached for the last packet on the shelf. The folded top had softened in the damp, but the center remained dry. She poured a narrow bridge across the broken place. Water worried at it immediately.

The Guest pushed one bare foot beneath the chair. Salt at the lower boundary smoked where its toes approached. It withdrew, leaving the chair crooked against the table.

Elin added no more. Enough to join the line. Enough had to be a clinical judgment here as it was everywhere else, made under conditions that would not improve because she wanted certainty.

She returned to the bed. The blanket had already lost its heat.

"I soaked it," she said.

Eamon looked down at the dark wool. "You'll put that on my chart?"

"Under avoidable complications."

A small movement crossed his mouth. It did not have strength enough to become a smile.

"Do you still want to turn?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You can change your mind."

"So can you, apparently."

He had earned that. Elin tucked the drawsheet close and explained where she would place her hands. One at his shoulder blade, one at his hip. He chose to bend the upper knee himself. On three, she drew him toward her and settled him onto his left side, supporting his back with the least wet pillow.

Pain tightened his face during the movement. It eased when she adjusted the angle of his shoulder and brought the pillow under his forearm.

"Better?"

"Wait."

She waited.

His breathing remained rapid, but the uneven lift had diminished. Color returned slowly around his mouth. Elin checked his pulse at the wrist, then touched the back of her fingers to his cheek. Cool skin. No sweat. He was exhausted rather than acutely distressed.

"The next morphine dose is available," she said. "Do you want it?"

“Later.”

“You asked me to offer it when it was due.”

“I’m telling you later now.”

“Yes.”

She heard how easily an earlier agreement could have become an order once it entered her plan. She set the syringe case where he could see it and wrote the time on the damp margin of the drug sheet. Dose offered. Declined for now. Reassess.

His lips had dried during the turn. She held up the sponge.

“Water?”

“A little.”

She swabbed the inside of his mouth and paused between passes. He swallowed twice, then turned his face into the pillow.

“That’s enough,” he said.

Elin stopped. She drew the soaked blanket closer around his feet and laid her forearms over it, pressing what warmth she had through the wool. Staying was work. It required questions whose answers expired, and attention to the moment when help became insistence.

The flood climbed another finger’s breadth up the bed legs.

* * *

The reserve cache had been tied above the floor. Elin had checked the knot herself.

When she went to retrieve the absorbent pads, she found the hook pulled half out of the wall and the lower edge of the canvas bag submerged. The repeated lift and drag of the tide had worried the rope loose. Each pulse of water struck the bag against the boards.

She lifted it onto the chair. Water streamed from the seams.

The paper packaging inside had opened into pulp. Gauze packs floated among swollen cardboard cartons. A spare oxygen mask had filled like a cup. The folded transport sling at the bottom was steeped through, its webbing twisted around a broken buckle. One thermal sheet had torn against an exposed rivet and clung to the canvas in silver strips.

Elin sorted by touch. Drug ampoules intact. Syringes sealed. Mouth swabs usable in their plastic sleeve. The orange stretcher straps were wet but sound; their metal

catches closed when tested. A length of tubing had split. The remaining dressings were contaminated by floodwater.

A packet of salt had fallen behind the bag. Its paper collapsed when she picked it up, releasing paste between her fingers.

The last usable salt remained on the upper shelf, less than half a packet.

Eamon watched from the bed. "How bad?"

"The medicines are dry. Some mouth-care supplies. The straps still hold."

"And the rest?"

"Ruined."

He looked toward the shutter. Rain drove through its central seam in a fine spray. "High tide yet?"

"No."

Elin cleared the shelf above him. The intact ampoules went there with the syringe case and mouth-care sleeve. She hung the orange straps from the bed rail, where they would not trail in the flood. The broken sling she left in the canvas bag. Without dry insulation, hauling Eamon into the weather would expose him within minutes. Without the sling, the carrying load would fall directly across his chest and pelvis.

The lamp downstairs fluttered.

Elin took the remaining salt packet and went to the landing. Water crossed the lower floor from the seaward wall to the outer door, carrying wood splinters and a lid from one of June's tins. The Guest sat with its knees together and Maire's hands resting in its lap. The chair had edged closer to the lower boundary. Its rear legs were still inside; the front rail hovered over a thinning wash of salt.

The plate remained at its left hand. The lamp remained at its right. Their places mattered because they had been given places. Elin corrected the chair with the broom handle from beyond the line, pushing it back square to the table. The Guest's face followed the motion without blinking.

"Stay," it said in Eamon's voice.

The word came from below while Eamon coughed in the chamber behind her.

Elin did not answer. She drew salt across the section nearest the stairs, where bodies would have to pass, then repaired the seaward end of the lower boundary with a line thin enough to show boards through it. She kept a final palmful folded in the packet.

Upstairs, Eamon's cough had stopped. He had caught the wet blanket in both fists and pulled it off his chest.

"Too heavy?"

"Cold."

Elin carried it to the chair and wrung one corner over the flood. There was no way to make wet wool warm before dawn. She spread it across the headboard, where air could reach both sides, then covered Eamon with the driest layers that remained: the sheet, a thin cotton cover, and the upper half of the blanket where the water had not fully penetrated.

His feet remained cold beneath her hands.

"You should keep the salt," he said.

"I have kept some."

"For downstairs."

"This is a current need."

She tore open the silver thermal sheet where it remained intact and laid the usable section across his legs. It reached only from knee to ankle. She tucked it loosely enough not to restrict him.

The reserve transport equipment had promised options by existing. Much of it was now wet refuse. Elin felt the old urge to salvage every item, clean it, rank it, make the room ready for a departure that still had no safe route. Instead she disposed of the contaminated dressings into the ruined canvas bag and returned to Eamon before sorting became avoidance.

His eyes were closed.

"Eamon?"

"I'm awake."

"Pain?"

"Four."

"Breathing?"

"Work."

"Do you want the dose now?"

He took two breaths before answering. "Half what you gave."

"The last dose was already small. Half may do very little."

"Then very little."

"All right."

She prepared the reduced dose where he could watch. The ampoule neck snapped cleanly under gauze. She labelled the syringe despite the damp, showed him the amount, and administered it through the subcutaneous line. Nothing in the act guaranteed obedience from his body or peace from the room. It was an offered measure for pain and breathlessness, accepted at the level he chose.

Elin watched his face as the minutes passed. The strain around his eyes loosened. His breathing remained shallow. He did not lose awareness.

A voice called at the shutter.

"Elin."

June's voice, thinned by rain and wood.

Elin looked at the bedroom door. The inner line remained joined. Downstairs, the Guest turned its head toward the seaward wall.

"Elin, don't answer unless you can see me."

The voice knew the rule. A copied voice might know it too.

Elin lifted the lamp from the bedside table and approached the shutter without speaking. The central boards had warped apart enough to admit a blade of rain. She held the flame away from the draft and looked through the split.

An eye appeared on the other side, gray in the lamplight. June stepped back until Elin could see her whole face between the boards. Her hair was plastered to her forehead. One arm was strapped against her ribs beneath her coat, and she held the other hand open where Elin could see it.

June turned sideways, showing Elin the wet yard, then faced the split again.

"It's me," she said.

Elin still did not release the shutter bar.

"What did I ask before touching him in the barn?"

June's expression tightened with the effort of standing in the weather. "Whether he wanted help sitting. He said no, then asked after you'd finished shouting at Tomas."

Eamon spoke from the bed. "That sounds like her."

Elin kept her face at the split. "Who is with you?"

"No one close. Tomas is at the seaward wall. He's got the harbor rope and a pry bar."

"For what?"

"He won't say. High tide will be before Sunday dawn. The water's over the lower road already." June shifted and caught her side. Pain folded her briefly before she straightened. "He told me to say he can reach this shutter from the cliff ledge when the tide lifts the rope."

"Did Moira send him?"

"No."

Below them, something moved through the flooded hall. The sound was too heavy for floating debris.

June glanced toward the lower shutter, then returned her face to the visible gap. "Your outside line is going. I can't mend it from here without crossing in front of the door."

"Don't."

"I wasn't offering heroics. My ribs have resigned." She raised a small roll of cloth. "This is dry. Mostly. For Eamon."

"How?"

"There's a gap under the north edge. Don't lift the bar."

Elin lowered the lamp and checked. At the shutter's north corner, warped wood stood less than two fingers from the stone sill. June fed the end of the cloth through without moving the shutter itself. Elin caught it with the trauma shears and drew it inside.

It was a linen tea towel, folded around a smaller square of flannel. Damp at the outer edge, dry in the center.

"Thank you," Elin said.

June's visible face changed at the answer, relief mixed with pain. "Do you need me to stay?"

"No. Get under cover."

"Can he hear?"

"Yes."

June leaned closer to the split. "Eamon, I'm outside. I'm not coming through."

"Good girl," he said.

"Don't start being sweet now. It's suspicious."

His laugh became a cough, but he raised a hand so she could see its shadow pass across the lamplight.

June touched two fingers to the wood. "I'll send word if Tomas moves."

"Only where I can see you," Elin said.

"Aye."

June withdrew from the split. Elin watched until her coat disappeared beyond the wall. She remained there long enough to confirm that no second figure took June's place, then carried the cloth to the bed.

She used the dry flannel to wipe rain from Eamon's face and warmed it between her hands before laying it around the back of his neck. He accepted another mouth swab, declined water, and asked to be lowered a fraction. Elin adjusted the pillow rather than the whole bed.

Downstairs, the Guest dragged one fingernail along the plate. The lamp bent toward the stairs and righted itself.

Elin checked the repaired salt line. It held, uneven and narrow. She set the remaining packet above the door, returned the chair to the mattress, and covered Eamon's hand with hers.

"How long till dawn?" he asked.

"Hours."

"And high tide before it."

"Yes."

"Tomas has a rope."

"He does."

The shutter gave a low groan as wind pressed against its bar. Eamon turned his face toward the sound and asked whether any road remained.

Chapter 20: No More Roads

Elin tested Eamon's understanding before she touched the straps.

Sunday had begun without any visible change in the sky. The room remained black beyond the lamp's reach, and high tide struck the fever house in slow blows that lifted water through the floorboards. Eamon lay turned toward the shutter, listening for Tomas. The dry square June had passed inside was tucked at his neck. Everything below his waist was damp.

"You asked whether there was a road," Elin said. "Tell me what you mean."

"Out."

"Out of this room?"

"Off this island if there's a boat. Anywhere if there isn't."

His breathing had become more irregular since the last assessment. Two shallow breaths, a pause, then one deeper pull that tightened the tendons in his neck. The reduced morphine dose had eased the pain without making him drowsy. His eyes found Elin and held her.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Fever house."

"What day?"

"Sunday. Near enough."

"What is downstairs?"

His gaze shifted toward the door. "Your mother's face. Something else wearing it."

"What happens if we open a way through the boundary?"

"It might follow."

"Toward the village."

"Aye."

"And moving you would hurt. The transport sling is broken. There's no dry blanket. We may be able to put straps around you, but they'd bear directly on your chest and hips. A rope route down that wall could worsen your breathing before we reached the ground."

"Still a road."

"It may be."

Elin did not add that he could die on it. He knew what his body was doing. She needed to tell him what the route would cost, not recruit death as an argument for the decision she preferred.

His hand moved over the cover until it found the orange webbing hanging from the rail. He dragged one strap onto the bed.

"Get me on it," he said.

The flooded boards reflected the strap's color in a broken line. Elin looked at the working catch, then at the ruined canvas bag on the chair. The sling lay inside it, buckle split and fabric saturated with the same water that moved around the Guest's feet below.

"Do you want to leave because you believe you can reach help," she asked, "or because you're frightened of dying here?"

"Both."

"Are you frightened of it downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Are you frightened of me staying while you die?"

He considered that longer. "For you."

"That isn't the same question."

"No."

The extra chair bumped once against the table below. Eamon flinched toward the sound. The movement cost him; his next inhalation came late and thin.

Elin sat on the mattress edge. "I won't tie you down. I won't give you medicine to stop you asking. If Tomas opens a route, I'll tell you what is possible then. Until that happens, putting straps around you would only restrain you in this bed."

"A good nurse would save what she can."

The words were his. The voice was tired and angry, wholly familiar. They required an answer from her because he had said them, even if the thing downstairs had learned the same shape of accusation.

"A good nurse assesses what saving means," Elin said. "She explains the harm. She treats what can be treated. She doesn't turn a frightened person into cargo because movement feels more useful than staying."

"You've moved plenty frightened."

"Yes."

"Me included."

"Yes."

His fingers tightened in the webbing. "So now you get religion."

"No." She took the strap from him only after he released it. "Now I ask again."

She checked his pain. Five when he breathed deeply, three at rest. He wanted no additional morphine yet. His mouth was dry; he accepted two swabs and a small spoonful of water. He declined oxygen when she explained that the remaining tubing was damaged and that holding the mask in place would not repair the pattern of his breathing. He asked to stay on his left side.

His answers were coherent. They did not settle the question.

The room had lost heat as the tide rose. Elin removed her coat, shook water from the hem, and spread it over him with the lining against his chest. It smelled of rain, lamp smoke, and the hospital hand rub that had leaked into one pocket on Wednesday's crossing.

"What will you wear?" he asked.

"What I'm wearing."

"You're wet."

"So are the blankets."

She tucked the coat around his shoulders. Its weight was lighter than the soaked wool and retained some warmth from her body. Eamon put one hand over the lapel as though testing the material.

"Mainland coat," he said.

"Yes."

"Always prepared."

"Poorly, in this case."

The shutter bar creaked. No one called from outside.

Elin reassessed his pulse. It had grown softer and faster, then slowed while she counted. His hands were cool and mottled across the knuckles. The pauses in his breathing had lengthened. These were changes she had described to families in quiet rooms with sealed windows and dry floors. They meant his body was withdrawing from

work it could no longer sustain. They did not make comfort medicine inappropriate. They did make the rope route more brutal and less likely to deliver him alive to any help.

"Eamon, I think you are very close."

He looked at her. "I know."

"Transport may shorten the time and make it painful."

"It may."

"If the opening pulls the Guest toward the village, we may not be able to close it again before dawn."

"I heard you."

"Do you still want the straps now?"

His thumb rubbed the wet edge of one. "I want the road there."

"That I can do."

She left the straps within reach on the bed rail.

The answer was neither obedience nor refusal. It was the most honest arrangement available: no restraint in anticipation, no hidden removal of the option. Elin could remain beside his unresolved fear without forcing it to become courage.

* * *

The plastic transfer bracelet turned loosely around Eamon's wrist.

It had been fitted for a mainland admission that would not happen. Damp had grayed the band, and the paper under its clear window showed only fragments of his name, date of birth, and the destination ward. Elin had fastened it after he resisted, using the hospital's future tense as leverage. Once you arrive. When they assess you. We can decide after the crossing.

She touched the band. "May I take this off?"

Eamon looked down. "Thought it was staying till the mainland."

"We aren't there."

"No."

"It no longer identifies anything useful."

"Then why ask?"

“Because it’s on you.”

He turned his hand palm upward. “Take it.”

Elin drew the trauma shears from her pocket. She slid the blunt blade beneath the bracelet, protecting his skin with one finger, and cut through the plastic. The sound was slight. The band opened around his wrist.

She lifted it away and set it on the boards beyond the chair, above the highest wash of floodwater. The blurred paper tag stayed inside it.

A pale groove marked Eamon’s skin.

“You paid for that fight,” she said.

“I know.”

She returned the shears to her pocket. Their handle struck the hospital ID hanging beneath her wet shirt. The card had twisted backward during the night, showing the softened blue edge behind it.

Elin pulled the lanyard over her head.

Her current photograph looked severe in the lamplight. Behind the plastic hospital card, the old ferry tag had absorbed damp through every layer. Its corners had frayed to white fibers. Enough ink remained to identify the Wednesday passenger who had left twenty years ago with one bag and a coat pocket cold against her thigh.

She had treated the tag as proof of a successful procedure. Board. Depart. Keep moving while the quay diminished. The crossing had not done what she required of it. It had preserved the distance and carried everything else with her.

Eamon watched her work the tag free.

“Kept that?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I thought it showed I’d left.”

“Didn’t need evidence.”

“I did.”

She laid the ferry tag beside his cut bracelet beyond the chair. Her old departure and his failed transfer touched at one softened corner.

The orange straps remained on the rail.

Elin moved the chair until its front edge met the mattress. Its feet grated over swollen boards, then settled. She sat and took Eamon's hand.

He looked at the two discarded tags. "Bad trade."

"Maybe."

"Your mother asked for my hand."

"I know."

"I gave her talk instead."

"You told me."

"No. I told you I left." His fingers shifted against hers. "I talked first. Weather, bells, what Moira said would happen. Maire kept asking me to sit down. I thought if I found the right thing to say, I wouldn't have to."

Elin could see Maire's empty hand without remembering it. That was worse than memory: a shape built from his confession and the request on the cassette, exact enough to indict everyone who had replaced company with procedure.

"You don't have to repair it now," she said.

"Convenient."

"It isn't repairable."

He turned his face toward her. The statement had hurt him. She let it stand because consolation would make a bargain of his death: this vigil offered as payment for the first, Elin's presence balancing his absence.

After a while he said, "No."

"No."

"But you're here."

"I am."

His hand closed with what strength remained.

Below, the lower chair stayed quiet.

* * *

The first hammer blow came before any light showed at the shutter seam.

Wood split beside the iron hinge. Elin stood, pulling the chair back from the sill while keeping herself between Eamon and the window.

"Inside," Tomas shouted. "Stand clear."

"Tomas, wait."

A second blow drove the shutter inward half an inch against its bar. Cold spray crossed the room.

"We have the tide now," he called. "It drops from here."

The lower hall answered with a violent scrape. Chair legs dragged across the boards; the table struck the wall. Water surged against the stairs as if displaced by a body rising from it.

Eamon's fingers searched the mattress where Elin's hand had been.

She caught them. "He's opening the shutter."

"Road?"

"A rope. I haven't seen the route yet."

"Open it," Eamon said.

Elin lifted the bar.

The decision admitted only the present opening, not what they would do with it. She laid the bar on the floor and stepped back. Tomas drove the pry bar through the split and levered one shutter board away from its lower hinge. It broke with a wet crack.

Gray pre-dawn entered as a narrow blade. Beyond it lay the cliff face, streaming rain, and Tomas braced on a ledge scarcely wider than his boots. A harbor rope crossed his chest and ran upward to an anchor Elin could not see. Another loop hung from his belt.

"No sling?" she asked.

"Lost it getting round the wall."

"Ours is broken."

"Use the straps under his arms and hips. I'll take his weight from the sill."

"There's no blanket."

Tomas glanced past her at Eamon under Elin's coat. Water ran from his beard. "Then your coat goes with him."

The route descended beyond Tomas into darkness and surf. It was materially possible. The rope was thick, the anchor held his weight, and the rising tide had brought a small boat or a lower ledge close enough that men outside believed the attempt worth making. None of that made it transport fit for a dying body.

"How far?" Elin asked.

"Twenty feet to the lower shelf. Boat comes in on the lift. We have minutes before it starts pulling off."

"Who has the boat?"

"Harbor lads."

"Can they keep it against the rock?"

"For one pass."

One pass. No dry insulation. No intact sling. A direct lift through a broken shutter, down wet stone, into a boat working against high tide.

Behind Elin, the chamber doorway darkened.

The Long Guest stood at the repaired salt line.

It wore Maire's face at first. Water streamed from the hair and filled the hollows above her collarbones. Then the features loosened under the poor light. For an instant Elin saw June with blood darkening her mouth. A blink later, a mainland patient's hospital gown hung from its shoulders, dry above the knees and pouring seawater below.

It leaned toward the open shutter.

The lamp flame flattened almost horizontal. Salt grains lifted from the chamber threshold and struck the wet boards in a white scatter. The Guest's front foot came down at the line. Smoke rose from the sole.

It did not step back.

"Move," Tomas said.

Elin went to Eamon. "The route is real. It's a rope descent to a boat. We have no sling and nothing dry. The straps will take your weight directly. It may be extremely painful. You may die during the lift."

"And if we open wider?"

"It is already pulling toward the shutter. Wider may let it cross the line or carry it toward the village."

Eamon looked past her.

The Guest's face had become Maire's again. Its mouth opened, though Tomas's voice came from it.

"Straps. Now."

The real Tomas struck the sill with his palm. "Elin, get him up."

Eamon's chest lifted twice. The second inhalation failed halfway and dissolved into a tremor. His hand pressed against the coat.

Elin leaned close. "Do you still want the road?"

His eyes moved from the shutter to her. Fear remained in them. So did understanding.

"No more roads," he said.

The words were barely voiced, but Tomas heard. His expression changed beyond the rain.

"Elin," he said. "You won't get another shot."

"I know."

Eamon's eyes closed. His fingers moved over the coat, searching.

Elin seized the orange straps from the rail.

For one second their weight organized the room. Catch under shoulder, second strap at hips, protect the neck, lift on count. She could carry out the actions even when their purpose had failed. Competence offered its clean sequence and asked no permission from grief.

The Guest forced its foot against the salt. The line thinned beneath it. Water bulged uphill through the doorway, carrying loose grains toward the broken shutter. The lamp shuddered in its saucer.

"Take him," Tomas said.

Eamon's hand searched the air where Elin's had been.

She opened her fist.

The straps fell into the flood with a flat slap. One catch struck the ferry tag and pushed it against the cut bracelet. The webbing slid beneath the chair, still bright under black water.

"Hold the breach," Elin said.

Tomas stared at her.

"Do not widen it. Keep the hanging board where it is. Hold until daylight."

The rope pulled hard across his chest. He looked once toward the sea, measuring tide, boat, men and the closing interval. Then he freed the pry bar and jammed it across the opening so the broken board could not swing farther inward.

"Line below," he shouted without turning. "Let it go. Get off the shelf."

A distant answer rose from beneath the sill. The harbor rope slackened, jerked, then drew away down the cliff.

Tomas planted his shoulder against the pry bar.

Elin sat. She drew the chair against the mattress and took Eamon's hand again.

The Long Guest leaned into the threshold. Wood groaned around the shutter. The lamp flame sank blue and small, recovered, then flattened toward the opening. Salt lifted in brief white eddies around the Guest's foot. It could not cross, but the line was dissolving.

"Tomas," Elin said.

"I'm holding."

"Keep your weight inward. If the board moves, let the top open before the bottom."

"Aye."

She had given him an instruction because one was needed. Then there were no more instructions that mattered.

Eamon's pulse was difficult to feel. Elin found it at the inside of his wrist, a faint irregular movement that disappeared beneath her fingers and returned. His breathing had changed again: long pauses, small reflexive pulls, no sustained effort. The muscles around his mouth were loose. There was no grimace, no rigid guarding, no sign that pain had broken through.

"Do you want medicine?" she asked.

His eyelids lifted.

"For pain," she said. "Or breathlessness."

He gave the smallest shake of his head.

"All right."

She moistened his lips. He did not swallow, so she stopped after one pass and wiped away the excess. The syringe case remained open within reach. If distress appeared, she would treat it. Dying did not disqualify him from relief, and the closeness of death did not require a final dose merely to give Elin something to administer.

The Guest pressed harder. The chamber line crept sideways grain by grain. Its hand rose beside the doorframe, Maire's filed ring visible on one swollen finger.

"Elin," it said in her mother's voice.

She did not turn.

Eamon's eyes found her face. "Weather's off."

"Yes."

"You're cold."

"I'm all right."

His thumb moved once over her knuckle. "Liar."

"Frequently."

The corner of his mouth shifted.

Outside, Tomas's boots slipped. The pry bar struck stone, and the shutter board opened another inch. The Long Guest surged against the threshold.

Water leapt across the chamber floor. The lamp went almost dark. Salt rose in a sheet no higher than Elin's ankle, hung for a fraction of a second, then dropped. The Guest's shoulder entered the doorway while its foot remained fixed behind the line. Maire's face stretched toward the window, mouth wide, water pouring without sound.

Tomas recovered his footing and drove his shoulder into the board. "Still here."

"Hold it there," Elin said.

"I am."

His answer came through clenched teeth. The open rope route was gone; the boat had drawn off with the tide. Tomas stayed on the ledge to prevent the breach becoming wider, keeping an opening he could no longer use because closing it would require entering the room or releasing the board.

Eamon's next breath came after a pause long enough that Elin felt the old reflex gather in her hands. Reposition. Oxygen. Call for help. Check the line, prepare a dose, identify a reversible cause. She assessed each possibility and found no distress to relieve, no intervention that would return him to a life he could inhabit. Her hand remained around his.

"Stay till light," he whispered.

"I am."

He looked at her rather than the doorway.

His next inhalation was small. The one after it moved only his throat. His pulse faded under Elin's fingers, returned once, and stopped.

She waited.

Rain struck the broken shutter. Tomas held the board. The Long Guest remained bent against the salt line, its arm extended toward the gray opening. Water crawled down the wall beneath its hand.

No breath came.

Elin watched Eamon's chest and throat. She placed two fingers against his neck, though she already knew. There was no carotid pulse. His pupils did not respond when the lamp steadied enough for her to see them.

She kept hold of his hand.

The death had no utility. It did not purchase Maire's return, repay Eamon's abandonment, validate Elin's decision, or make the vigil good. He had died because his body had reached its end. What remained was the plain fact that he had not reached it alone.

His jaw relaxed. Elin supported his chin and closed his mouth, then drew her coat higher over his chest. The movement was habit and tenderness together; she did not need to separate them.

"Is he gone?" Tomas asked.

"Yes."

The word left the room through the breach. Tomas lowered his head for one moment, rain running from his hair onto the sill. Then the wood shifted under his shoulder and he braced again.

"How long?" he asked.

"Until daylight."

"Aye."

The sky beyond him had begun to distinguish sea from rock. Gray gathered along the horizon and entered the chamber by degrees.

The Long Guest's extended hand darkened as the light strengthened. Water withdrew from the upper boards in thin threads. The salt line lay scattered and nearly spent, yet the Guest did not cross it. Its shoulder drew back from the doorway. Maire's face turned toward Elin once, empty of appeal or recognition, then lowered beneath wet hair.

Downstairs, the extra chair scraped backward across the floor in one long movement.

It fell silent.

Tomas kept his shoulder against the broken shutter. Elin sat beside Eamon with her hand around his cooling fingers as gray Sunday light entered the room.

Chapter 21: Finite Turns

June washed Eamon's left hand while Elin worked on the right.

They had carried him from the fever house after full daylight, when the water began to recede from the upper room and Tomas could leave the broken shutter without the board wrenching free. Eamon lay now on June's kitchen table, wrapped in clean sheets. His wet clothes filled a basin by the stove. A kettle steamed beneath the window, misting glass already blind with rain.

June sat because standing pulled at her injured ribs. Each time she reached across the table, her breath stopped until the movement was done. Elin had told her twice to keep her elbow close to her body. On the third occasion, she kept the instruction to herself.

"Too much soap," Elin said instead.

"I know." June looked at the gray water in her bowl. "I can see it."

She rinsed the cloth, wrung it one-handed, and began again.

Eamon's filed ring would not pass over the knuckle. Elin cleaned around it and dried the skin carefully. The hand had already stiffened enough to resist her when she straightened the fingers. She eased them down rather than forcing them flat.

Tomas brought hot water from the stove. His shirt was dry, but a raw stripe crossed one shoulder where the harbor rope had bitten through his coat. He set the jug beside Elin and waited.

"More?" he asked.

"That's enough."

He glanced at Eamon's face. "Shaving things are by the sink."

"He can keep the stubble," June said. "He wore it often enough alive."

Tomas nodded as if she had issued a harbor instruction. He took the empty kettle away.

Elin cleaned the salt from Eamon's hairline. Fine grains had dried behind one ear and in the creases of his neck. Her hands knew how to turn a dead person, support the jaw, keep the shoulder from falling back. At the hospice she could have completed the washing quickly with another nurse. Here, June's cloth left a patch of soap at the base of Eamon's thumb, and Tomas folded the drying towel with its rough seam against the skin.

Elin saw both errors. Neither harmed him. She let June rinse the hand and turned the towel herself without comment.

A knock came at the kitchen door.

June looked toward it but did not rise. "That'll be Catrin with the clothes."

Tomas opened the door only after looking through the window. An older woman stood outside carrying a covered basket. She removed her boots on the step and entered in stocking feet.

"I brought the blue sweater," she said. "The fisherman's one. And trousers that won't fight you."

She set the basket down and stopped beside the table. Her hand hovered over Eamon's shoulder.

"May I?"

Elin stepped back.

Catrin touched him through the sheet, two fingers resting lightly where the shoulder curved beneath it. "He fixed our west gutter in a gale," she said. "Wouldn't take money. Complained about the tea."

"He complained about all tea," June said.

"Not yours."

"He had survival instincts."

The exchange ended there. Catrin unpacked the clothes and helped thread Eamon's arms into the sweater. She handled his right wrist too firmly at first. Elin reached toward it, then stopped when Catrin noticed the resistance and changed her grip.

More people came as the morning bell approached. One carried a comb. Another brought a clean pillowcase and stood in the doorway until Tomas asked whether she meant to keep it there. A man from the lower road arrived with polished shoes, though the chapel was close enough that Eamon would not need them until burial. He left the box under the table and went without entering fully.

The work did not become graceful because it was shared. It slowed. Sleeves caught at the elbows. Somebody misplaced the buttons cut from Eamon's wet shirt, and June found them under a tea towel. Elin's impulse to arrange every hand sharpened whenever another person hesitated.

She gave instructions when the body required them. Support his head. Lift on three. Keep the sheet over his hips. The rest she allowed to remain imperfect.

When they finished, Eamon wore the blue sweater and dark trousers. His filed ring caught the window light. June combed his hair back from his forehead, frowned, and roughed it again with her fingers.

"He'd hate that neat," she said.

Elin looked at him. "Yes."

She had carried Maire's ribbon in the inner pocket of her clinical bag since Moira gave it to her. She took it out now.

The ribbon had once been blue. Salt had faded it almost gray, and one edge was stiff enough to hold the crease where it had been folded. This was Maire's own ribbon, worn and kept through the years after her disappearance. It had never belonged to the annual guest chair.

Elin laid it beside Eamon's left hand.

June touched the end but did not move it. "There?"

"Yes."

They drew the sheet over him for the walk to the chapel.

* * *

The annual red ribbon remained tied around the front leg of the guest chair.

It was brighter than Maire's faded strip and newer by decades, though spray and handling had darkened the knot. Someone had carried the chair from the fever house and placed it beside the trestles at the chapel front. The empty plate and lamp were gone. In daylight it looked like an ordinary ladder-back chair burdened by one deliberate mark.

Eamon lay in front of it, washed and dressed. Maire's ribbon rested beside his hand, visible against the white sheet.

The wake kettle steamed on a side table. Seedcake tins stood open beside cups that did not match. Wet coats dripped along the rear wall. Villagers occupied the chapel edges, leaving the center aisle and the chair clear.

Moira stood beneath the porch shadow.

Her coat was buttoned to the throat. The dark tin whistle hung on its cord against the fabric. She had brought a covered pot and set it on the porch table with the other food, useful even now. No one refused it. No one asked her to come farther in.

Elin stood at Eamon's head with one hand on the trestle. She knew how a wake ought to proceed only in fragments: kettle, food, low voices, the body watched. There was no need to appoint herself its authority.

June carried a mug across the chapel with both hands. Her steps were careful, her right elbow fixed against her side. She set the mug near Elin, then studied the red-ribboned chair.

"Well," she said. "We can't leave that sitting empty again."

Conversation failed around the walls.

A teenage boy beside the hymn boards looked toward his mother. She lowered her eyes. The man who had brought Eamon's shoes turned his cap between his hands.

June put her palm against her ribs. "If you're here, sit a turn. Ten minutes. Twenty. Long enough for your tea to cool. Then somebody else."

No one moved.

Elin felt the room's attention touch her and wait. A word from her could have turned June's invitation into a rule, another procedure carrying the Mora name. She lifted the mug and drank instead.

Tomas entered from the vestry.

He had changed into a clean shirt, but damp marked the collar and the rope burn kept his left shoulder lower than the right. He saw the chair, Eamon, and Moira in the doorway. He crossed the aisle without speaking.

The chair creaked when he sat.

Tomas put his cap in his lap. His large hands covered it completely. For the first minute he looked at the floor. Then he raised his head and studied Eamon's face.

"I had the rope," he said quietly.

The words did not seek an answer.

"I thought a road was the same as help."

Elin looked at Eamon's hands. Maire's ribbon lay beside the left one, its stiff end curled upward.

Tomas stayed until the chapel clock advanced twelve minutes. He rose, touched two fingers to the chair back, and stepped into the aisle.

June pointed at the boy by the hymn boards. "Cal."

His mother caught his sleeve. He looked at her hand until she released him.

"I don't know what to say," he told June.

"You're not hired for a speech."

Cal sat on the front edge of the chair. His knees bounced for the first few minutes. He kept glancing at Eamon, then away toward the windows. When the kettle clicked as it cooled, he flinched and gave a brief embarrassed laugh.

He lasted six minutes. On rising, he whispered something Elin could not hear.

Catrin took the chair next. She brought her tea and stayed until it was cold. She spoke to Eamon about the west gutter, the price of nails, and a sheep that had got its head trapped in wire. The ordinary details gathered without becoming an account of his life.

The man from the lower road sat after her. He lasted less than a minute.

"I can't," he said, already standing.

June nodded. "You sat."

He put the chair square before leaving it.

Others followed unevenly. A woman who had delivered bread to the Mora house sat with both hands clenched in her apron and cried without looking up. Two brothers disputed in whispers over which should go first until the younger one sat and the elder remained behind him. A fisherman stood beside the chair for so long that June asked whether he meant to marry it; he swore at her, sat, and stayed through an entire kettle.

Some villagers remained at the walls. A few left the chapel rather than take a turn. No one closed the door behind them.

Moira stepped one pace across the threshold.

"We should mind what words are said over him," she said.

Her tone was gentle and practical, the voice that had assigned meals, medicines, patrols, and necessary losses. Several heads turned by habit.

June faced her. Pain showed in the care with which she moved. "Then say one from there."

Moira's gaze travelled from June to the chair and finally to Elin. She appeared to be waiting for correction, alliance, or refusal.

Elin gave her none.

The porch light stopped at Moira's shoes. Nobody shifted to open a path. After a moment she put one hand on the doorframe and remained where she was.

The younger of the two brothers finished his turn. His elder brother sat before the chair had fully cooled. Catrin replenished the kettle. Tomas moved cups from the edge of the trestle without being asked. June lowered herself onto a bench, one arm guarding her ribs, and continued calling no names.

The order formed without Elin directing it.

She stood beside Eamon while each person decided how much time could be borne and how much could be given. The red ribbon stayed tied to the chair. Maire's faded ribbon remained beside Eamon's hand. Outside, Sunday rain thinned over the chapel roof, and another villager crossed the aisle to sit.

Chapter 22: Open Chairs

The syringe driver showed twelve minutes remaining before its next scheduled check.

Elin read the screen anyway. Infusion running. Battery adequate. No occlusion. The subcutaneous site beneath Mr. Kerr's collarbone was dry, without redness or swelling. His brow had relaxed after the last proportionate dose, and his hands lay open on the blanket.

His breathing had lost its rhythm during the night.

His daughter stood beside the window in a rain-dark coat. His son occupied the far side of the room, one hand resting on the bed rail. Neither had removed their outdoor clothes. Between them, the folded visitor chair remained latched against the wall.

A weather report murmured from the nurses' station beyond the half-open door. Mainland rain touched the sealed window in fine, ordinary taps. The room smelled of warm plastic, coffee from the corridor, and the peppermint lip balm the daughter had brought.

Elin set a steel dish on the bedside cabinet. She checked Mr. Kerr's mouth, listened to his chest, and adjusted the blanket where it pressed against his toes. His breathing was uneven but unforced. No grimace appeared when she moved his arm. There was nothing in her assessment that called for a change in medication.

The daughter wiped her nose with the heel of her hand. "Are we in your way?"

The question opened an old route through Elin's attention: clear the bedside, complete the check, make space around the equipment. She could picture herself folding family into the corridor with tea and a practical reason, each true statement arranged to conceal the wish for a room she could control.

The impulse passed before she acted on it.

"No," Elin said.

She returned Mr. Kerr's arm to the blanket and made sure the driver line had enough slack. His son watched her hands.

"Is he in pain?" he asked.

"I don't see signs of pain. His face is relaxed, and he isn't guarding or trying to move away when I touch him."

"Is that the morphine?"

"In part. The dose is treating the pain and breathlessness he had earlier. It isn't stopping him from waking."

The son nodded, though his hand tightened around the rail.

"How long?" the daughter asked.

"I can't give you an exact time. His pauses are lengthening, and his circulation is changing. It may be soon."

She waited while they absorbed that. Mr. Kerr drew a shallow breath and released it without opening his eyes.

Elin looked from one child to the other. "What do you want in here?"

They glanced at each other. The daughter answered first.

"I don't know."

"That's all right."

"Can we just stay?"

"Yes."

The folded chair's aluminum frame was cold under Elin's hand. She pressed the release. The hinges opened with the same institutional click she had heard hundreds of times, but she did not carry the chair back to the wall. She placed it beside the bed.

The daughter sat and took her father's wrist. Her thumb began moving over one small patch of skin.

The son came around the foot of the bed. "Should I talk to him?"

"If you want to. Hearing may remain when someone can't answer."

"What do I say?"

"Anything he would know as yours."

He lowered himself against the bed rail and looked at his father. "The gutter's leaking again," he said.

His sister gave a wet, startled laugh. "That's what you've got?"

"He said anything."

"She."

"He knew what I meant."

Mr. Kerr's breathing continued between them. His son spoke about the gutter, a missing ladder, and a neighbor who had returned the wrong drill. The daughter corrected details when she could not resist and went quiet when she had to wipe her face.

Elin completed the driver check at the scheduled time. She recorded the observations without moving the family from their places. When Mr. Kerr's mouth dried, she showed his daughter how to moisten his lips and warned her to stop if he turned away or did not swallow.

The daughter held up the swab. "Like this?"

"Yes. Gently."

Elin could have left then. The corridor held call bells, notes, and a medication round already beginning at the far end. Another nurse passed the half-open door and glanced inside. Nothing required Elin to remain continuously at this bedside.

A second chair stood in the corner beneath a stack of spare pillows. Elin moved the pillows to the windowsill, unfolded the chair, and set it near the foot of the bed where she could see Mr. Kerr's face and the syringe driver.

She sat.

For a while his children continued talking. Their voices thinned into longer silences. Elin watched the spaces between his breaths without counting them aloud. She checked for strain and found none. When the son's hand slipped from the rail onto the blanket, nobody moved it away.

The sky outside lightened behind the rain. Fluorescent glare faded from the window glass, revealing the pale outlines of buildings and a strip of wet pavement below. Mr. Kerr's daughter kept her chair beside him. Elin remained in the second chair, available to assess, explain, treat, or sit quietly as the need changed.

In the dawn light, both chairs stayed open.