

VOLUME TWO

Thornfield

— ◆ —
THE OTHER EMERALD

KAI

ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Thornfield

VOLUME TWO

The Other Emerald



KAI

For adult readers

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THORNFIELD

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Table That Already Made Room



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Breakfast had fewer empty places than supper. The dining hall itself had not changed. Rain-cooled air still entered through the open shutters, carrying the smell of leaves and wet stone beneath the stronger scents of porridge, toasted bread, and something frying in the kitchens. The enchanted lines under the serving bowls glowed the same low orange, and the long tables occupied the same rows beneath beams blackened when the hall still belonged to soldiers. People had changed it by arriving together. Students came through the doors already speaking to one another. They collected trays in pairs, held places with elbows and books, and continued conversations across the serving line without losing their order. Every bench appeared to contain room until Jack approached it with his eyes. Then a satchel, a folded cloak, or the angle of someone's knee explained who the room belonged to.

Jack took porridge because he recognized it from the night before's stew: a plain food in a plain bowl, included in whatever Eomer had paid. Honey stood in an open jar beside the bread. He watched the student ahead of him use a little wooden dipper, copied the amount, and added two slices of yellow fruit that smelled enough like apple to make the risk reasonable.

By the time he turned from the counter, the schedule in his pocket seemed heavier than the tray.

Near the long windows, a table of perhaps twelve had gathered around three different conversations. A pale boy sat sideways on the bench, one leg stretched into the aisle while he listened to a girl standing behind him. The light tan across his exposed skin suggested he spent more time outdoors than his complexion naturally allowed. Reddish hair curled untidily over his forehead, and freckles crossed his nose and continued over the bare shoulders framed by his short vest. He answered something Jack could not hear, and the girl struck the back of his head with a folded napkin before laughing.

The boy caught her wrist on the second swing without spilling the cup in his other hand. Two people farther down called to him at once. He answered both, released the girl, and turned his attention across the hall.

His attention found Jack and stayed there. Jack nearly glanced behind himself. The reaction was stupid; he knew what face he was wearing, and the emeralds ensured the rest of him was difficult to overlook. He held the stranger's gaze long enough to acknowledge it, then turned toward the quieter end of the hall before being stared into choosing the window table.

Two boys occupied the last table near the wall. The dark-haired one had built a fortification of books around his breakfast. Three lay open, one rested across his narrow thighs, and a notebook filled the remaining space beside a bowl going cold. Ink stained his long fingers and the side of one wrist. He wore his uniform chain centered so precisely across his pale chest that the vest edges matched beneath it.

The other boy was quite small, and Jack first mistook his size for youth. The open uniform corrected that impression. His chest, stomach, and bare arms were chiseled into compact, sharply separated muscle, not bulky but complete, like a gymnast built to move his own weight through the air. Silver hair, cut short for work, framed a fine-boned face. His eyes were a startling blue, slightly hooded beneath straight brows. A life spent working outdoors had tanned his olive skin, making the pale burn scars across his calloused forearms stand out. His uniform chain was fastened plainly, and the loose trousers bore old green stains at both knees. Beside his plate, he had arranged six gray-green stems on a folded piece of paper, each with its leaves turned the same direction.

Neither was talking. They were not ignoring each other. The smaller boy pushed the honey toward the dark-haired one without raising his head from the stem he was trimming. The dark-haired boy caught the jar before it touched an open page and moved his book enough to receive it.



One complete place existed between them.

Jack began toward them. The dark-haired boy noticed first. His eyes went from Jack to the approaching tray, then to the books occupying the only open place. Alarm tightened his mouth. For a moment Jack expected another bag to appear on the bench.

Instead, the boy closed two books, stacked the third on top, and gathered all of them against his own bowl. The smaller boy lifted the paper of stems out of danger, moved his cup, and slid the salt dish toward the wall. By the time Jack reached the end of the table, one complete place existed between them.

"May I sit here?"

"Yes," the dark-haired boy said. His voice was quiet but immediate. "I took more room than I meant to."

"Your books realized," the smaller boy said while he placed the stems beyond Jack's elbow. "They objected."

The dark-haired boy glanced at the stack as though it had betrayed him in public. Jack set down his tray before the space could close again.

"Thank you."

The smaller boy moved the salt within easy reach. Jack had not intended to use it, but the gesture was the closest thing to welcome he had received inside the Academy. He added a little to the porridge and returned the dish to the middle rather than to the protected place near the wall.

They ate through several minutes of dining-hall noise. It was easier than conversation. The dark-haired boy read while bringing his spoon to his mouth and missed once, tapping the handle against his lower lip. Color climbed from his throat to his ears. He put the book flat and concentrated on breakfast after that.

The smaller boy used a short knife to scrape the underside of one leaf. Fine silver fibers collected on the paper. He checked each pass against the light from the windows, patient enough that Jack found himself watching the work instead of the room.

"Is that for a class?" Jack asked.

The boy considered the leaf before deciding what part of the question needed answering. "Not exactly. The kitchen buys dusk sage by weight. Most suppliers leave the underside intact because the silver raises the price. It makes the tea bitter and gives some people headaches."

He folded the paper beneath the loose fibers so they would not scatter. The chemical scent Jack had noticed upon sitting came from the boy's hands, sharp beneath soap and breakfast.

"You bring your own?"

"I bring enough to keep them from ruining mine. Sometimes they listen when I explain why. Mostly they hide when they see me coming."

There was no smile to mark the line as a joke, but the dark-haired boy's mouth moved at one corner.

"I'm Jack," Jack said.

The boy with the stems wiped his knife clean before folding it. "Finn Ashwell. That's Edric Vane. He'll introduce himself after deciding whether being named for him was rude."

"It was efficient," Edric said. He put one ink-stained finger between the pages to hold his place and offered Jack a brief, direct look. "Good morning."

"Good morning."

The exchange could have ended there. Jack let it. Finn returned to his sage. Edric returned to his book. Nobody demanded a family, a history, or an explanation for the healing cut on Jack's cheek. Around them, the hall remained loud enough that their silence did not require filling.

Jack finished half the porridge before taking the schedule from his pocket. He unfolded it beside his bowl and kept one hand on the lower edge where a curl of damp air tried to lift the paper.

"I missed induction," he said. "Could one of you tell me which room I need first? Housing gave me the sheet, but nobody explained the order."

Edric's attention crossed the schedule once, stopped at the upper corner, then returned to Jack's hand.

"It hasn't been keyed to the day. May I?"

Jack slid it across.

Edric pressed his thumb over a small circular mark near the Academy seal. Nothing happened. He wet the pad of his thumb against his cup and tried again. Fine lines awakened within the mark, first blue and then green. The color ran down one ruled column. A single block near the top darkened until its letters stood black against pale green.

"They should have done that at Housing," Edric said. "The mark resets at midnight. First class is General History with Professor Voss, west lecture hall two."

Jack followed the green line as if it explained anything. "West lecture hall two."

Finn leaned across far enough to inspect the page. "The route mark is wrong. It sends you by the upper bridge, and they took down half the rail after the ward cracked. It was supposed to reopen yesterday. It didn't."

Edric adjusted the paper and traced the marked route to its end. His mouth tightened at the obsolete instruction.

Jack studied the neat trail of symbols running beneath the highlighted class. The Academy had given him a magical schedule capable of changing color and directions through a bridge nobody could cross.

"Is there another way?"

"Down through the square and around the old chapel," Finn said. "The stair behind the map room reaches the same gallery, but the door sticks after rain. Pull it toward you before you lift the latch."

Jack repeated the route. Square. Old chapel. Map-room stair. Pull, then latch. Repairs gave him landmarks, and a sticking door made more sense than the green marks on the page.



I wanted a closer look.

A tray touched the table beside his own.

The freckled boy from the windows dropped onto the bench at Jack's left, close enough that their knees struck beneath the table. He did not apologize. He shifted until one thigh remained lightly against Jack's and reached across the schedule for the honey.

Edric moved his inkpot out of the path before the boy's forearm could knock it over. Finn gathered his sage paper against his chest.

"Kai," Finn said, with the patience of someone identifying a recurring pest. "There was space at your table."

"There was too much space at my table. People kept filling it."

Kai drew the honey dipper over his bread and turned it three times to catch the last thread. A plain brass chain fastened his vest exactly as the uniform required. The

cloth was another matter. It lay across his shoulders without pulling and followed his ribs without sagging. The short lower edge and the fitted rise of his trousers framed his delicate waist almost perfectly, leaving a narrow strip of tanned skin between them. Every seam met his movement as though someone had fitted it to him alone. Even Jack's new uniform, issued with gold and emeralds, did not sit so well. Kai had brought eggs, fruit, bread, and a glazed pastry from the paid counter. He placed the pastry on Jack's tray to make room for the honey jar.

"That isn't mine," Jack said.

"Then guard it until I have space again."

Kai finally faced him. Up close, his eyes were dark and much steadier than the rest of him. The grin arrived easily, but the attention beneath it did not dart or soften. He took in Jack's cut cheek, the emeralds, and the folded schedule without asking about any of them.

"I'm Kai."

"Jack."

At the window table, someone raised a cup and called Kai's name. Kai lifted the honey dipper in acknowledgment, put it back in the jar, and remained where he was.

Finn lowered the sage paper. "Why are you sitting here?"

Kai tore his bread in half. "I wanted a closer look."

Edric's eyes went to Jack and then immediately to his book. Finn did not look away.

"At what?"

Kai answered by indicating Jack with the piece of bread. "Him."

Jack had expected mockery to wear more camouflage. "You crossed the room because of my face?"

"Not only your face." Kai's attention passed down the open vest, paused at the emeralds, and returned without shame. "I'm being superficial, not inattentive. I don't know you well enough to offer a better reason."

"Even if you weren't pretty, the chain would do all the heavy lifting," Kai said.

"There's only one more emerald chain in the lower years. And two diamond."

He pointed across the hall with the bread. At a crowded table nearer the windows, two whip-thin boys with matching faces wore chains that caught the light at every movement. Students had pressed in on both sides of them, laughing too readily and

leaning close for scraps of attention. The twins seemed scarcely aware of the effort. One spoke low beside the other's ear; the other listened with his whole attention, as though the dining hall ended at his brother's shoulder.

"Why are theirs diamond?" Jack asked.

"They're princelings in their homeland. Gross, right? If only they weren't so damn good-looking."

Heat rose beneath Jack's chain. Kai had, at least, admitted where he stood.

"Any table in here would make room for you," Kai continued. He dipped the torn bread into Jack's porridge before Jack could stop him. "You chose the one place everyone pretends not to see."

Jack took the other half of Kai's bread from his plate. It was still warm. "They moved before I asked."

Edric became very interested in the page beneath his hand. Finn placed the folded sage paper beside his cup and gave Jack a small nod that might have meant the answer was correct or merely that the bread now belonged to him.

Kai chewed what he had stolen. His gaze traveled over Edric's compressed stack of books and the clear place Finn had made around the schedule. He did not argue.

"Fair," he said. "Mine would've moved after you asked, then spent the meal congratulating themselves."

The call came from the windows again, this time joined by someone drumming both hands on the table. Kai turned his head.

"You're being summoned," Edric said.

"They know where I am."

Kai reached past Jack for the salt. His forearm brushed Jack's bare stomach beneath the short vest. The contact was ordinary in its cause and entirely unnecessary in its route; Kai could have asked for the dish. Jack moved it to the other side of his bowl before Kai could reach back a second time.

Finn watched this transaction with the same exact attention he had given the leaf fibers. "You're going to be exhausting."

"I've been told I improve with exposure." Kai smiled toward Edric, who had watched the entire theft over the top edge of his book. "You should sit with us more often."

"This is where I sit."

The answer stopped Kai for half a breath. Then his smile changed, losing some of its performance. He broke his remaining bread into four pieces and placed them in the center of the table where anyone could take one.

Jack ate the piece he had stolen. Kai retrieved the pastry from Jack's tray, split it with his fingers, and returned half without comment. Honey and dark fruit filled the center. Jack had not intended to accept it. He was hungry enough that intention lasted only until the smell reached him.

Conversation gathered without becoming orderly. Edric explained that Voss required source citations even in first-week responses and became briefly fierce when Kai suggested inventing a dead historian with an impressive name. Finn disagreed with the dining hall's definition of tea. Kai stole two slices of Jack's yellow fruit and replaced them with one of his eggs. He talked with his hands, ate from every plate except Edric's, and moved the inkpot twice whenever the traffic behind them threatened the table.

Jack said less than any of them and more than he had expected. He admitted he had never attended a school like Thornfield. That was true. He asked whether professors punished late students, whether the bells meant the same thing in every wing, and which doors locked between classes. Kai answered the questions nobody else considered worth asking. Edric corrected him twice. Finn corrected them both once and supplied the reason.

The first warning bell rolled through the hall.

Benches scraped back. Edric capped his ink and fitted the smallest book into the largest before placing both in his satchel. Finn wrapped the dusk sage in its paper and tied it with a short length of green thread. Kai remained seated until Jack folded the schedule.

"You're with Voss first?" Kai asked.

"West lecture hall two."

"So am I."

Edric lifted his satchel. "The map-room route Finn described is correct."

"It is also where everyone who missed the bridge closure will be trying to force that door at once." Kai stood and took Jack's empty porridge bowl before Jack could stack it. "Come through the lower armory. It smells terrible, but the stair is wider."

Jack gathered his tray. "You don't have to take me."

Kai added his own dishes to the stack in his hands. "I have to take myself. You may walk nearby if it pleases you."

The line was ridiculous enough to conceal the offer from anyone interested in pretending it was not one. Jack accepted the terms.

Finn and Edric left through the north doors for their own classes. Finn raised two fingers in farewell with his herb packet held against his palm. Edric almost walked away with his cup, noticed it at the last moment, and returned it to the tray opening with care.

Kai led Jack through the south side of the hall. People greeted him as they passed. A girl caught his brass chain with one finger, found every link already straight, and smoothed the edge of his vest instead. Kai bowed to her without slowing. Two boys near the service doors tried to draw him toward the square. Kai pointed at the stack of dirty bowls in his hands and kept walking.

He returned the dishes, wiped a streak of porridge from Jack's tray with his thumb, and handed the tray through the opening.

"The lower armory truly does smell terrible," he said. "I don't want you thinking I misrepresented it to secure your company."

The route descended beneath the main square. Old weapon racks lined one wall behind iron grilles. Leather, oil, damp stone, and generations of trapped sweat had settled into a smell dense enough that Jack tasted it. Kai breathed through his mouth and continued talking anyway, naming each turn before they reached it.

At a narrow stair, three late students hurried past toward the map room. A distant wooden bang followed, then several voices objecting to the stuck door.

Kai glanced upward. "Finn is always right in ways that make life less pleasant."

They climbed. The stair emerged behind the west lecture galleries, beyond the closed bridge and the crowd feeding through the other route. Students were still choosing seats when Jack and Kai entered hall two.

Jack took a place near the back where he could watch what everyone else did. Kai set his bag on the seat beside him, then wandered down two rows to speak to someone with a bandaged wrist. Other students entered. One paused at their row, saw Kai's bag, and continued onward.

The second bell began. Kai returned before it ended, dropped into the guarded seat, and drew a piece of graphite from behind one ear.

He did not offer it to Jack or ask why Jack had brought no writing tools. As Professor Voss entered, he nodded toward the front and kept his voice between them. "When she asks a question, wait. She enjoys answering it herself."

Jack set the unreadable schedule beneath his hand. At the end of the hall, Finn and Edric had made space before he asked. Here, Kai's bag had done the same.



THORNFIELD

CHAPTER TWELVE

What the Hand Remembers



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Professor Voss carried no books into the lecture hall. Morning light entered through a row of high fortress windows and crossed benches polished by generations of restless hands. The room smelled of chalk, damp uniforms, and the lamp oil used before sunrise. Voss set a wooden box on the front table, took one stick of white chalk from it, and surveyed the rising tiers until the last conversations ended. The silence reached the back in pieces. A whisper near the windows survived longest. Voss waited for its owner to notice, then turned to the slate without acknowledging the victory and drew one straight line from shoulder height to the bottom of the board.



Half a country opened around her hand.

Light gathered in the chalk mark. Fine green branches spread from it across the slate, dividing and dividing again until the wall held a map of rivers, roads, and borders. Mountain ridges rose in gray relief. Three blue points burned where roads crossed water, and a red line followed the eastern bank before vanishing behind the professor's shoulder.

Jack forgot his schedule for several breaths. Until now, magic had been small, practical, and treated as ordinary. Voss had drawn one line, and half a country had opened around her hand.

She wrote three groups of symbols above it, and the marks meant nothing.

"Event," Voss said, tapping the first. "Account. Significance."

Jack tracked the word from her mouth to the slate. The first group remained a hook crossed by two short strokes. The second curved back through itself. The third was longer, disciplined and impenetrable.

Around him, paper shifted and quills began scratching.

Kai opened his bag. The flap had appeared soft and carelessly folded while it occupied the seat, but the inside had been divided into narrow fitted pockets. He removed a slim packet of cream paper, counted two sheets without seeming to, and placed one in front of Jack. Then he took the graphite from behind his ear, snapped it cleanly against the edge of the desk, and set the longer half on the paper.

Jack turned toward him, but Kai was already writing. His posture had changed by degrees rather than all at once. One forearm rested along the desk. His shoulders remained loose, but his attention had narrowed to Voss and the slate. The hand that stole food and waved through every story formed small, exact characters in even rows. He had not blotted a line, misplaced a mark, or asked whether Jack needed help. Jack took the graphite.

Voss tapped the first heading again. "An event occurs whether anyone understands it or not. An account is made by someone who saw, heard, survived, profited, inherited, or lied. Significance is what later people claim the event changed. Confusing these is how history becomes worship."

The first word shifted.

It did not glow. Nothing passed through the room. The hook remained a hook, the cross-strokes black where the chalk had caught in the slate. But when Voss said event, Jack knew where the word ended. He knew the final mark should open toward the left. The knowledge arrived without translation, closer to recognizing a face seen years before than learning a new alphabet.

His headache tightened behind the healing cut on his cheek.

Jack copied the word. The first stroke leaned too far. He stopped, checked Voss's hand, and tried again beneath it. His fingers wanted to hold the graphite like the

mechanical pencil he had used at school. That part was his. Beneath it, something older objected to the direction of the line.

He changed the angle.

A room flashed behind his eyes: winter light across a polished table, his hand much smaller and holding a quill, a man's square signet striking the margin beside an unfinished character.

Again.

The word carried no voice he could identify, only impatience and the remembered dread of making the same line badly twice.

Jack's graphite stopped. The lecture hall returned with his hand clenched around it.

Kai glanced at the broken point. He slid the second half of the graphite across without looking away from Voss.

Jack loosened his grip before accepting it. He would not let a dead boy's childhood tutor frighten him out of writing one word.

Voss drew a circle around the map's southernmost blue point. New chalk light moved through the roads feeding it. Some brightened. Others faded until a single crossing held the weight of every line around it.

"Pashmena," she said.

The name appeared beneath her hand. Jack heard the first sound and found it waiting in the first two marks. The rest did not become English. They became Pashmena. Once he knew it, he could not force the characters back into nonsense.

Voss faced the room. "What was the significance of the Battle of Pashmena?"

Several hands rose. Kai's did not. He turned the graphite between his fingers and waited, precisely as he had warned Jack to wait.

Voss selected a broad-shouldered student near the center aisle.

"It ended the Eastern Rebellion," the student said.

"The rebellion continued for eleven months."

The student's hand lowered.

Another rose. "It secured the river crossings for the Crown."

"Two crossings were lost again before winter."

Three more hands went down without being called upon. Voss returned to the slate and added a second line beneath the battle's name. She said nothing while the room copied it.

The new words hovered near understanding. Jack caught Crown because she had just spoken it. River emerged a moment later from the marks beside the glowing waterway. Between them lay a word he could almost reach. He stared until the edges of the slate softened.

"Mr. Drake."

His head came up.

Voss had not consulted a roll. The emeralds had named him before he entered, or someone at the front had. Heads turned through the lecture hall with far less restraint than they had used in the dining room.

"What was the significance of Pashmena?" she asked.

Jack could have repeated one of the failed answers in different words. The old school instinct was still alive in him: say something adjacent, keep talking, hope the teacher found enough correctness to stop digging. It had saved him from homework he had not finished and questions he had only half heard. Here, it would announce ignorance with his mouth open.

He studied the map. Roads converged. Borders crossed them. The battle had been one thing to the Crown, another to the rebellion, and something else to the people whose homes sat beneath those glowing lines. Voss had spent the beginning of the lesson separating the event from what later people said it meant.

"To whom?" Jack asked.

Someone near the front breathed out a laugh and swallowed it when Voss turned her head.

She put the chalk into its box. "Better."

The word did not sound like praise. It sounded like permission to continue standing where he had chosen to stand.

"To the Crown," she said, "Pashmena demonstrated that the eastern coalition could be divided. To the coalition, it demonstrated that their lords would sacrifice one another's forces to preserve private roads. To the villages along this river, it began three years of requisitions, displaced courts, and soldiers living in houses whose owners had nowhere else to sleep."

She touched each region as she spoke. The chalk roads answered beneath her fingertip.

"The event was one battle. Its significance depends upon the question being asked and the person forced to live after the answer. Mr. Drake has not told us what Pashmena meant. He has identified the flaw in the question. Those are not the same achievement. Record the distinction."

Quills resumed. The attention left Jack slowly enough that he felt each part of the room release him.

Kai wrote one short line. His mouth had curved at one corner, but he kept the expression aimed at the page.

Jack bent over his own paper. He could read two of the headings now. Event. Significance. Account came when Voss used it again, the spoken sound settling into the looped word as though a catch had finally found its place.

He began taking notes.

Calling the result writing was generous. His lines wandered. Several characters opened in the wrong direction before his hand corrected them. He left spaces where Voss moved faster than he could follow and marked those places with short dashes so he could find them later. The graphite spared him the ink, nib, and pressure that had defeated him at Housing. When a word refused to come, he copied its shape and waited for Voss to say it again.

The method worked, though not evenly. Common words returned first: road, king, winter, army, grain. Longer terms remained crowded thickets until repetition opened a path through them. A few carried memories that were not facts. Treaty came with the smell of sealing wax. Province arrived beside a man's bored voice correcting Jack's posture at a dinner table he had never seen. Duty produced such immediate contempt that he knew the feeling belonged to the dead boy before he knew what had caused it. Jack wrote the word anyway.

The recovered language did not make him the person who had first learned it. Reading was another inherited tool, except a remembered opinion could move inside a sentence before Jack recognized who had supplied it.

He drew a line beneath his notes and kept his attention on Voss rather than the dead boy's handwriting trying to emerge from his hand.

The lecture moved from Pashmena into records. Voss opened the wooden box again and removed three objects: a cracked clay tally, a folded military order under glass,

and a child's shoe gone gray with age. She set them along the table without ceremony.

"Which is a primary source?" Hands rose more cautiously this time. Voss pointed to a girl beside the aisle.

"The order," the girl said. "It was written during the campaign."

Voss rested two fingers on the cracked clay. "And the tally?"

"A trade record."

The professor moved her hand to the little gray shoe. The leather had collapsed inward with age, but one lace remained tied. "And the shoe?"

The girl hesitated long enough for several raised hands to climb higher. "An object."

"Everything on this table is an object. One has merely been trained to flatter scholars by containing sentences."

A few students smiled. Voss did not. She rotated the clay tally so the class could see five deep cuts along one side and two shallower marks on the other.

"The order tells us what an officer wanted done. It does not prove the order was obeyed. The tally records grain measured at a storehouse. It does not tell us whether the grain reached soldiers, villagers, rats, or a merchant's private cellar. The shoe tells us a child was present where the object was recovered. It does not tell us the child's name, survival, allegiance, or opinion of the war. Evidence does not become honest because it cannot speak."

She wrote evidence beneath the three headings.

Jack knew the word before the chalk left the slate. Relief struck so suddenly that he nearly laughed. He lowered his head and copied it instead. The letters came out narrow and uneven, but they were letters. He could read what his own hand had made.

Beside him, Kai turned a page. His notes occupied less than half the paper Jack had used and contained twice as much. The characters were compact without crowding, and small bars in the margin separated claims, examples, and corrections. Kai caught Jack studying them.

He placed one finger against his lips, solemn as a conspirator, then returned to writing.

Jack faced the front before his mouth betrayed him.

Voss let the map fade. Green roads withdrew toward the original chalk line, the mountains flattened, and the rivers darkened until ordinary slate remained. She brushed the three objects back into their fitted places and closed the box.

"Your first written assessment concerns the Witch Purge of 2890," she said.

She wrote the title in a single unbroken line.

The phrase opened inside Jack before he could defend against it.

Witch. Purge. The year followed, familiar numbers shaped a little differently from his own.

A dining table surfaced in memory. Heavy silver beside white plates. A man's hand turning a wineglass by its stem. Necessary unpleasantness, spoken with the mild impatience reserved for weather and taxes. The dead boy had been younger. He had believed the speaker because belief had cost him nothing.

The memory vanished before Jack saw a face.

His hand had tightened around the graphite again. This time he caught it before the point broke.

"Four pages," Voss continued. "Pre-war history. Primary sources where available. Everyone knows the outline, which means repeating the outline will earn you the mark appropriate to work a child could have produced from memory. I want what you can prove."

Jack copied the title. The first word required three attempts. Purge arrived whole. Beneath it he wrote four pages and primary sources. His writing looked like something produced in a moving car, but he could read every line.

The bell rang while Voss was still explaining citation order. Nobody stood. She finished the sentence, capped the chalk box, and dismissed them with a movement of two fingers.

Benches opened into the aisles. Jack remained seated while the first press of students climbed past. He read the assignment again. The words stayed.

Kai packed his paper into the fitted pockets of his bag. He left the graphite in front of Jack.

"Thank you," Jack said. "For this. And the paper."

"Keep the graphite. You press like you're trying to carve your notes into the desk, so I don't expect it to survive the week."

Jack compared the broken point with Kai's immaculate pages. "You hide being insufferable better when you're writing."

"That's why I speak whenever possible."

The answer was ridiculous, but Kai's attention settled briefly on the cut across Jack's cheek. If he had formed a question, he chose not to make Jack answer it in the crowded hall.

Jack slid the assignment beneath his schedule and stood. Voss was returning the wooden box to a cabinet behind the lecture table. He could leave before she addressed him again. The thought held him for one step.

Then he turned toward the front.

Kai caught the strap of his bag and moved out of the aisle. "I'll be by the door."

Jack walked down alone.

Voss closed the cabinet. "Mr. Drake."

"Professor." His voice stayed lighter than he wanted, but it did not climb. "Where would you start if you needed primary material and didn't want to repeat the outline?"

Her gaze moved once to the healing cut and returned to his eyes. "The Athenaeum keeps the pre-war catalog in the east reading room. Begin with the civil inventories, not the trial accounts. Trials are written to justify their outcomes. Inventories are written by people who want every missing spoon blamed on someone else."

Jack nodded. The advice made sense in a way most of the Academy did not. "East reading room. Civil inventories. Thank you."

"Your citations will still be judged."

"I assumed they would be."

Voss's expression did not warm, but something in it stopped pressing. She took another piece of chalk from the box and turned back to the slate. The interview had ended.

Kai waited outside with one shoulder against the wall, his brass chain straight and his bag closed neatly at his feet. Students streamed around him toward the stairs. He pushed away when Jack emerged.

"You voluntarily prolonged a conversation with Voss," he said. "I had been reconsidering my excellent first impression of you. This has helped."

Jack unfolded the schedule instead of answering. The paper no longer presented a field of hooks and loops. Not all of it yielded. Instructor names remained difficult, and one room notation refused to become anything but three cramped marks. The blocks themselves had meaning now.

The first block read General History, West Lecture Two. Midday Meal divided the page, and beneath it waited War Arts in the East Yard. Jack read the last line twice. The words did not disappear.

Kai leaned close enough to follow his finger without taking the page. "East Yard. That's mine as well."

"First, show me where students buy paper and graphite."

Kai considered the sheet Jack had saved and the borrowed graphite in his hand, then returned his attention to Jack. Whatever question waited behind his eyes remained there.

"Supply arcade," he said. "The honest shop is farther away and the dishonest one has better sweets. You should know both before making an ethical decision."

Jack folded the schedule along its old creases. The words remained inside it, waiting where he had put them. He gestured for Kai to lead the way and followed him into the traffic toward the stairs.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Different Grip

ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The honest shop was farther away. Kai admitted this after leading Jack through two covered arcades, down a stair cut through the old fortress wall, and past three separate places selling paper. The town had grown against Thornfield's lower defenses until shop roofs leaned beneath old arrow slits and merchants hung awnings from ironwork made for gates that no longer existed. Rainwater whispered along a channel beside the stair. Students crossed it without breaking conversation, each certain that paper bought ten doors sooner would fail them in some private and expensive fashion.

"The first one watered its ink," he said. "The second stores graphite beside lamp oil. The third is owned by a man who believes students cannot count."

"You said the dishonest one had sweets."

"Several dishonest people have sweets. It is how they remain in business."

Jack followed him into a narrow shop beneath a striped green awning. Shelves climbed from floor to rafters with bound notebooks, paper packets, rulers, inkstones, trimmed quills, chalk, sealing wax, and more kinds of sharpened implement than he had known writing required. A clerk on a rolling ladder fetched a blue ledger for an older student while the shopkeeper measured loose paper against brass marks worn into the counter. Everything smelled of paper dust, wood shavings, and the bitter iron scent of ink.

He chose a cheap stitched notebook, six graphite sticks, and a packet of paper coarse enough that he would not resent ruining it. The shopkeeper laid a ledger on the counter and asked for his account name.

"Jack Drake. Thornfield Academy."

The man found the entry without surprise. Eomer's funding reached even here. Jack signed beneath the purchase in the local script, slowly enough that two customers completed their business beside him before he finished.

The signature leaned downhill and trespassed into the next line, but it was still his name. He could read it.

Kai inspected the display of sugared citrus peels while Jack wrote and kept his opinion to himself. When they left, he had a paper twist in one hand.

"Those weren't on my account," Jack said.

"No. I maintain independent financial interests."

He held out the twist. Jack took one strip. The sugar cracked between his teeth before the peel filled his mouth with a bitterness strong enough to tighten his jaw.

Kai watched him swallow it. "The honest sweets are an acquired taste."

"You knew that."

"I know many things that become funnier when discovered by someone else."

By midday Jack could read enough of the serving signs to choose his food without following the person ahead of him. Heat from the kitchens lingered beneath the great hall's beams despite the air moving through the shutters. He returned to the quiet end with a meat pasty, sliced fruit, and something the sign promised was tea despite Finn's earlier objections.

Finn and Edric had already opened the table around their work. Finn's folded stems were gone; in their place sat a shallow wooden box divided into six soil-filled compartments. Edric had arranged his books beyond the place Jack had used at breakfast. Kai arrived behind him and occupied the remaining bench before anyone could decide whether it had been offered.

Edric's eyes found the notebook beneath Jack's tray. "You bought paper."

"I have an assignment now."

"Everyone in Voss has an assignment now," Kai said. "She believes shared suffering builds civic character."

Jack set the copied title where Edric could see it. "She told me to begin with the civil inventories in the east reading room."

Edric stopped with his cup halfway to his mouth. "Not the trial accounts?"

"She said trials are written to justify their outcomes."

The cup returned to the table without reaching him. Edric pulled his notebook closer and added a line beneath something he had already written. "The inventory catalog is older than the public index. I'll be there after evening meal."

Jack waited through the scratch of Edric's pen. "Can I meet you there?"

Edric looked at the spare place beside his books as though the answer might have been set there in advance. "Yes. Bring the assignment exactly as Voss wrote it. The catalog uses different subject headings."

Finn pressed one finger into the soil in the third compartment, checked what clung to his skin, and pushed Jack's cup an inch away from the box. "Don't drink that. It isn't tea."

Jack smelled it again. The steam carried mint and something smoky. "What is it?"

"A mistake with hot water."

Kai drank from Jack's cup, considered the result, and kept it. Finn replaced it with his own unopened water without interrupting his inspection of the soil.

The second warning bell found them finishing lunch. Edric left for the Athenaeum with three books and no visible food in his hands until Finn caught the back of his vest and put the remaining half of Edric's pasty into the top of his satchel. Edric checked that no grease touched the books, accepted the arrangement, and went. Finn closed the soil box, tied it with a cord, and carried it upstairs before joining Jack and Kai on the eastern walk.

War Arts occupied the East Yard below the oldest curtain wall. Sun lay white across the packed earth. Covered weapon racks ran along two sides, and a line of rain trees shaded a water trough at the far end. The fortress rose behind them in fitted blocks darkened by centuries of wet seasons. Iron rings remained set into the stone at shoulder height, relics of soldiers, horses, prisoners, or all three.

Students left bags beneath the awning and formed rows without being called twice. Jack put his new notebook beside Kai's fitted satchel and copied the spacing around him. Finn set his soil box beneath the bench, removed his uniform vest, and folded it over the lid. Two long knives hung in plain dark sheaths at his hips, their guards close to his scarred hands and their narrow sheaths reaching well down his thighs. On anyone larger they might have passed without notice. Against Finn's small, sharply muscled body, the matched pair announced themselves before he touched them.

A boy in the second row was staring at Jack. His hair was a dirty blond, cut long enough to fall across his forehead when he turned. An emerald chain joined the open sides of his training vest. It was the only other one in the yard, and unlike Jack's new gold it had been worn long enough to lose its shop polish where the links rubbed together. Akira stood beside him, as he had in every class Jack shared with them, their spacing closer than the line required. Jack knew Akira's name from the rolls but little else about him. The emerald-chain boy made no attempt to hide his attention. He looked at Jack with the fixed impatience of someone waiting to be acknowledged.

Jack had spent too much of the day guessing what strangers expected from him. He faced the front and let the boy wait.

Master Draek walked the line.

He wore no chain over his training clothes. A narrow baton rested beneath one arm while he checked wrists, footwear, old injuries, and the distance between bodies. He corrected a student's stance by striking the ground between his heels. The baton passed beneath another student's loose vest edge and lifted it clear of the practice belt without touching skin.

He stopped at Finn first. "Ashwell. Edges."

Finn drew both long knives and offered them flat across his palms. Blue light ran in narrow bands over the cutting edges and around the points, binding steel without disguising its weight. Draek pressed the end of his baton against each ward. Both flashed and held.

"Current," he said. "Nothing above the collar."

Finn returned the knives to their sheaths in the same motion. "Yes, Master."

When he reached Jack, his gaze settled first on the healing cut.

"Drake."

The surname sounded different from Voss's use of it. She had applied it like a label on an argument. Draek used it like a hand closing around the back of Jack's neck.

"Master."

The answer came with a posture Jack had not chosen. His shoulders settled. His chin lifted by a degree. His heels aligned as though the body had been waiting all morning for an authority it understood.

Draek saw the response and moved his attention down Jack's stance. "You were expected before term began."

"I was injured on the road."

"The road will not submit a correction to your training record. If the head turns your vision or drops your balance, you leave the line. If it merely hurts, you learn while it hurts."

"Yes, Master."

Draek continued. Jack's spine remained straight until the instructor had passed two more students. Only then did it feel available to him again.

Kai stood on his left, facing forward. Nothing in his posture acknowledged what had happened, but the joking looseness had gone out of him. His feet were placed exactly beneath his hips. His hands hung open and still.

Draek called the first sequence.

The class moved: guard, step, turn, recover. Jack followed the student ahead of him half a count late. His feet knew the places but not the reasons. On the second pass, he let the body's balance carry farther before interfering. The turn came cleanly. His longer leg put him beyond the mark, and he had to pull the recovery short to avoid striking Kai's heel. Finn moved two places to the right, lower than the rest of the line and precise enough that his short steps ended on the marks without adjustment.

They repeated until sweat ran beneath Jack's chain and gathered at the base of his back. Draek altered the count without warning. Students who relied on rhythm stumbled. Jack nearly did, but the body caught the change in the instructor's shoulders before the baton moved.

That knowledge frightened him more than missing the beat.

Most of the class went to the western rack for narrow practice swords, their wood darkened by oil and use, with rounded points and padded guards. Finn drew his bound long knives instead. The blue edges followed his legs as he walked to a lane opposite a student carrying a short spear. Jack took one of the wooden swords by the grip.

His hand closed correctly.

Not almost correctly. His thumb found the worn flat. Two fingers loosened to preserve movement. The point lowered to an angle no one had demonstrated, and his feet arranged themselves behind it.

A warm room surfaced behind his eyes. Lamplight lay across polished floorboards. Another blade rang against his own, followed by Jack's laughter while a boy held a reddening hand against his chest.

The memory carried pleasure without joy. Someone had been hurt, and the dead boy had enjoyed that the injury was embarrassing.

Jack opened his fingers before he dropped the practice sword.

"Pairs," Draek called.

Kai turned to him. He had selected a sword as well, though his attention went once toward the staff rack before returning.

They saluted.

Kai's motion was simple and perfectly proportioned. Jack's body answered with something more ornate: point raised, wrist turned, one foot drawing back through a courtly line that announced education before a blow had been exchanged. Jack felt the flourish complete and hated it.

"Outside parry," Draek said. "Bind. Step. Touch the shoulder. Nothing below the wrist. Nothing above the collar. Control is the lesson."

Kai attacked first. His blade came straight enough for Jack to see every part of the drill. Jack turned it, found the bind, stepped, and touched Kai's left shoulder.

The exchange was over.

His body continued.

The point dropped from Kai's shoulder toward the exposed fingers around his guard. Jack felt the next movement entire: a short snapping strike across the knuckles, hard enough with wood to split skin and loosen the grip. Not part of the drill. Not necessary. A punishment delivered after victory because pain would make the lesson memorable.

Jack tore his hand sideways.

His feet had already committed. The sword crossed empty air. His weight moved beyond his front knee, and Kai stepped inside before Jack could recover. One hand controlled Jack's wrist. A hip touched his thigh. The yard turned over.

Packed earth struck Jack's back and drove the air from him.

Kai released him at once. He remained over Jack for only the time required to see his eyes focus.

"Don't stop halfway," Draek said from three paces away. "A bad technique completed can be corrected. Half a technique gives your opponent the choice of correction. Again."

Jack rolled to one knee. Dust coated his bare back and had worked beneath the waistband of his trousers. The headache pulsed once with the impact, then settled without dizziness.

Kai offered no hand while Draek watched. His fingers opened and closed around the sword grip. They were unmarked.

Jack stood. "The movement went outside the drill."

Draek's eyes narrowed. "Then you control it before it begins, not after it owns your balance. Take the line again."

Jack saluted without the flourish. In the next lane, Finn caught the spear between his crossed knives, turned both wrists, and stepped inside before the other student recovered the point. One bound blade stopped against the ribs. The second rested across the forearm holding the spear. Finn released both contacts and returned to his mark without looking toward Jack.

The second exchange lasted longer because he no longer trusted the first answer his body supplied. Kai touched his shoulder twice. Jack caught one attack and lost the bind. When the ugly downward opening appeared again, he refused it before his foot moved. Kai's blade struck his ribs hard enough to leave a bruise.

He stayed upright.

On the fourth pass Jack reached Kai's shoulder cleanly and stopped. The point remained exactly where the drill required. Relief weakened his hand more than exertion had.

Draek struck the ground with his baton. "Change weapons. Declared pairs remain. If you have trained in only one arm, today is when that failure becomes public."

The class crossed between racks. Students chose axes with padded heads, short spears, bucklers, curved wooden blades, and staffs in three lengths. Finn stayed where he was and rolled his shoulders while the spear student exchanged his weapon for a longer shaft. Jack returned his sword carefully. The grip left warmth across his palm after it was gone.

Kai was already at the staff rack. He selected one reaching slightly above his head, rolled it once across his open palm to check the balance, and set the butt beside his foot. Nothing about the movement was beginner's luck.

Jack took the longest staff remaining. It stood a little above him. The ash was smooth where hands had polished it, rougher near both ends, and heavier than a broom handle without becoming unwieldy. He put one hand at its middle and felt the length answer on either side.

His right hand slid down the shaft. His left opened near the lower third, loose enough for the wood to turn and firm enough to arrest it. The butt passed behind his hip and stopped without touching cloth. His rear foot had already turned outward to make room for the return.

This knowledge was no shallower than the sword work. It simply arrived without a hurt boy behind it. A rain-dark yard flickered and vanished. A cane struck the earth beside one of his feet. Someone corrected the width of his grip, but no face remained and no remembered cruelty followed. The staff was still the dead boy's inheritance: years of guards, turns, recoveries, and measuring other bodies by reach. Jack could feel all of it waiting in his hands.

Draek demonstrated a forward guard and a descending strike. Jack followed the instructor's lead hand sliding, the rear hand driving, and the hips completing what the arms began. His first attempt cut down the marked line and stopped at the proper height. The return came around his shoulder in a swift, polished circle that turned several heads and accomplished nothing the shorter recovery would not have done.

Kai's eyebrows rose. "You've done this before."

Jack brought the staff level again. "My hands have."

Draek's baton struck the earth behind Jack's heel. "And somebody taught them to perform for balconies. Shorten the recovery, Drake. Again."

Jack repeated the strike. The old turn tried to open through his shoulder. He cut it in half, let the shaft travel through his rear palm, and brought the opposite end forward without tangling his elbows. His reach gave the weapon room to gather speed, but the useful part was not speed. He could feel both ends at once. The staff drew a line through space, and for the first time since waking in the ditch, the new body's length made the world easier to measure.

By the tenth repetition his shoulders burned. By the twentieth, the shortened return no longer required an argument. He was not learning where the staff belonged. He was learning which parts of an old education served him and which had been built to make an audience admire the boy holding it.

They paired once more. Finn faced the longer spear in the neighboring lane, both knives held close to his body rather than extended toward the point. The other student possessed nearly twice his reach. Finn watched the forward hand instead of the blade.

Kai took guard opposite him. The careless smile returned, but it sat on top of feet placed with exact attention. His brass chain remained straight despite the sweat darkening his vest.

"Touch only," Draek called. "Ribs or shoulder. Three exchanges. If you cannot stop the weapon, you do not deserve to start it."

Kai gave Jack the first opening. It was too broad, the forward shoulder abandoned and the ribs waiting behind an idle staff. The sword drill had taught Jack what happened when he obeyed the first answer placed before him. He turned the offered line aside instead, made Kai close it, and sent the lower end beneath the returning guard. Wood touched Kai's ribs.

For one breath, genuine surprise cleared Kai's face. Then his staff moved and the performance vanished.

Kai caught Jack's shaft near the upper third, rolled it under rather than striking it away, and stepped through the space Jack controlled. Jack let his forward hand release before the bind could become a lever against both wrists. The staff turned through his rear palm. He caught it again below Kai's grip, drove the butt between them, and forced enough distance to bring its full length back into play.

Kai was already turning with him. His upper end slipped over Jack's recovery and touched the point of his shoulder.

The third exchange began before the dust from their feet settled. Jack feinted high, shortened his hands when Kai refused the line, and thrust toward the ribs. Kai folded the strike across his body. Their staffs met once, twice, then separated into opposite turns. Jack's lower cap reached Kai's side at the same moment Kai's came to rest against Jack's shoulder.



Both dead if the other end carried steel.

Draek's baton struck the crossed space between them. "Double. Both dead if the other end carried steel." He pointed first at Jack. "Shorten the recovery. That flourish was old when your tutor learned it." The baton moved to Kai. "If you disguise another opening as incompetence, you will demonstrate the next sequence against me."

The yard became interested.

Kai bowed his head. "Yes, Master."

No embarrassment entered his voice. No one laughed. Jack saw several students look at Kai as though Draek had confirmed something they already suspected about the popular brass-chain boy. Then the next count began and attention returned to weapons.

They trained until the sun moved behind the curtain wall. Jack's palms reddened. A blister rose beneath his right forefinger and opened during the last set, leaving a bright smear on the staff. He adjusted his grip around it and finished. Finn spent the same final set being driven backward by the spear. Each retreat curved instead of running straight. When the spear committed too far, he crossed both knives over the

shaft, carried it past his shoulder, and stepped inside before Draek's baton ended the exchange.

When Draek dismissed them, the rows dissolved toward shade and water. Practice weapons returned to their racks. Jack wiped the blood from his staff with the edge of his towel before setting it back. Finn sat beneath the awning with both knives across his bare thighs. He wiped dust from each blue-bound edge, checked the guards and points, then released the practice bindings under Draek's supervision. The light vanished from the steel. He sheathed both blades, put on his vest, and joined the first group heading toward the showers.

Kai stood at the trough with both forearms under the running spout. Water carried yard dust down his skin and darkened the waistband of his trousers. He had removed his vest to keep it dry and folded it over his bag with the brass chain laid straight across the cloth.

Jack rinsed his palm. The broken blister stung. His ribs hurt where Kai's sword had landed, and dirt remained trapped against his back despite several attempts to brush it away.



Kai stayed beside the trough.

"How long have you used a staff?" he asked.

Kai turned one arm beneath the water. "Long enough that Draek has become personally wounded by my attempts at modesty."

That was not an answer, but Jack had spent the day giving people answers built the same way.

Students passed them toward the communal showers. Someone called Kai. He raised a wet hand, promised to catch up, and stayed beside the trough.

Jack watched the water pink briefly around his palm. "Why are you being nice to me?"

Kai reached for his towel. The question stopped him before he touched it.

"I told you why I crossed the room."

"You said I was pretty. That got you to the table. It doesn't explain the paper, the shop, bringing me here, or staying now."

The yard noise continued around them. Staffs knocked into racks. Water struck stone. Kai dried his arms slowly, buying time without pretending otherwise.

"You look at ordinary things before you use them," he said at last. "Doors. Food counters. Your schedule. You watch somebody else, then decide how much of what they did applies to you."

Jack's wet hand closed around the trough edge.

Kai folded the towel once. "You learned to read between breakfast and Voss. Your body knew a sword you didn't want. You wear those emeralds as if someone else chose them and forgot to explain why they matter."

Kai met his eyes. His own were steady now, without the grin that usually made attention easier to bear.

"I don't know what happened to you," he said. "I know you were hurt. I know you are missing pieces, and every time someone helps, you look as though you're waiting to learn the price."

Jack turned toward the water first. It ran over the trough lip and through a channel cut toward the rain trees.

"That still isn't why," Jack said.

"Because somebody should be nice to you." Kai picked up his vest but did not put it on. "Because I like you so far. Because you saw Finn and Edric making room and

chose them while everyone else was waiting to be impressed. The fact that you're beautiful got me across the hall. It isn't why I'm still here."

"The attack damaged my memory," Jack said. The admission came quietly, but the yard was emptying and no one stood close enough to hear. "Some things are coming back. Some aren't. I don't remember what people think I should."

Kai lowered his eyes to the folded vest in his hands, giving Jack somewhere else to place his own. "That explains enough for today."

"You're not going to ask what happened?"

"Not while you're standing there like the answer might make me leave."

Kai put on his vest. The fitted cloth settled into place, and he fastened the brass chain without looking down. Then he picked up both bags and held Jack's out by its strap.

The last of the class was disappearing into the communal showers beneath the eastern gallery. Steam drifted through the open upper vents. Jack could already hear too many voices striking tile, water running, bodies crowding a room whose rules everyone else understood.

He had intended to wait until they were gone.

Jack took his bag. "Stay near me in there."

Kai's expression warmed without becoming a joke. "I can do that."

They crossed the yard together. Jack entered the crowded doorway before the fear could choose his room for him.



THORNFIELD

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Other Emerald



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The communal showers proved less difficult than the doorway had promised. Kai stayed within speaking distance without hovering. He complained about the soap, identified which stone shelf had a habit of dropping anything placed upon it, and carried on an argument with a boy across the room while Jack washed the yard dust from his back. No one asked why Jack watched before using the taps. No one touched the healing wound at his hip or the ring concealed beneath his body. By the time he dressed, the crowd had thinned and steam had softened the hard voices bouncing from the tile.

Kai left him beneath the clock arch. He had promised to settle some matter involving a borrowed practice guard before evening meal, though his account of who had borrowed it changed twice while he told it. Jack watched him cross the square, brass chain bright against his fitted vest, and then returned alone to South Wing.



The galleries had already gone dim.

The sun had sunk behind the forested ridge. Light remained above the western wall, green-gold through the wet leaves, but the galleries had already gone dim. One by one the glass globes were waking inside their bronze cages. Their warmth caught on damp footprints and the brass strips protecting the edges of the stairs. Students

moved through the fortress in groups loosened by the end of lessons, calling through open doors, trading books, making plans for the hour before supper.

Jack's room held the quiet they carried past it. He set the new notebook on the desk and examined his hand. The opened blister had bled through the strip of cloth he wrapped around it after washing. He unwound the cloth, rinsed the palm in the basin, and found the Academy needle kit on the wardrobe shelf. The kit contained no proper bandage, but the spare piece of linen beneath the thread would serve if he cut it along the weave. The work steadied him. Measure twice. Keep the cut straight. Fold the raw edge inward so it would not shed fibers into the wound. He had been good with his hands before this body, and that small inheritance remained entirely his.

Someone knocked while he was threading the linen around his palm.

Jack expected Kai, returning with a third version of the practice guard. He opened the door without asking who stood outside.



The other emerald.

The boy from War Arts leaned against the gallery wall. He had changed out of his training clothes. His vest was black, edged in dark green, and the emerald chain lay between its open halves over his bare chest. The dirty-blond hair had been combed

back while wet and had already begun falling loose again. Up close, his face was handsomer than it had appeared across the yard, narrow through the cheeks and assured around the mouth. The amber globe above him put light into his eyes without warming them.

He looked Jack over from the damp ends of his hair to the unfinished bandage in his hand.

"You could have answered me," he said.

Jack kept one hand on the door. "Did you call my name?"

The boy's mouth altered. Not quite a smile, not quite disbelief. "I didn't think I needed to stand in the yard shouting after you."

Behind him, two students passed carrying a laundry basket between them. He moved aside to let them through, then stepped into Jack's room as if the same movement had brought him there by accident.

Jack closed the door halfway, unwilling to leave his room exposed to the gallery and more unwilling to shut himself inside with a stranger. "What do you want?"

"There. That." The boy gestured toward him with an open hand. A green stone flashed at his breast. "You've looked through me since you arrived. You ignored me in the dining hall. You ignored me in the yard. Then you went into the showers hanging off Kai as though you needed him to hold your cock while you pissed."

The words were ugly, but the anger beneath them had been waiting longer than one afternoon. This boy had expected him. Perhaps he had been expecting him since the term began.

"I wasn't hanging off anyone."

"That is the part you object to?"

Jack pulled the loose end of linen around his palm. "I don't know who you are."

For a moment nothing moved in the room. Voices traveled along the gallery outside, near enough to distinguish as voices and too far away to make out the words.

The boy searched Jack's face. His attention caught on the healing cut and stayed there.

"Dorian," he said. "My name is Dorian."

Pale hair flew loose in a dark street. Bare feet struck wet stone. A hand locked around Jack's wrist while both of them ran naked beneath leaning windows. Then the

memory caught and tore free: a mouth closing warmly around him in the shelter of an arch, a lantern swinging nearer, Dorian looking up from his knees with laughter pressed into the corners of his eyes. He rose and dragged Jack onward before the guard could catch them. A narrow room followed, their cold bodies tangled beneath one blanket, Dorian's breath breaking against the hollow of Jack's throat.

Jack returned to the dormitory with his injured hand clenched hard enough to darken the linen. Dorian had seen the recognition. Some of the anger left his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," Jack said. "I wasn't ignoring you. I truly didn't know who you were until you said your name."

Dorian searched his face again. "But you remember me now."

"A piece of you." Jack loosened his hand before the new bandage became useless. "The arch and the room afterward. I don't know the town, when it happened, or what came before it."

The account took the remaining anger out of Dorian's posture. He crossed the space between them and raised one hand toward Jack's face, slowly enough that Jack could have withdrawn. Jack remained where he was. Dorian's thumb settled below the healing cut without touching it.

"What happened to you?"

Concern made the question harder to answer than anger would have. Jack could not tell whether it was concern for him or for an arrangement Dorian believed had been taken away.

"I was attacked on the road. My head was hurt badly."

"So I've heard." Dorian's thumb moved once against Jack's cheek. "You found Thornfield. You walked through its gates, dressed yourself in emeralds, and made half the lower hall stare. Yet you forgot me."

"I remembered Thornfield, Drake, and Eomer. That was nearly everything." Jack lifted the half-wrapped hand between them. "Sometimes my hands know a skill, or a name pulls loose one moment. I can't reach whatever comes before or after it."

Dorian's attention dropped to the bandage. Jack finished wrapping the linen and tucked the end beneath the fold.

"If I hurt you by walking past, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make a point."

Dorian let his hand fall. "I thought you were still angry."

"I might have been. I don't know why."

For a moment Dorian appeared to accept that there would be no better answer. Then his attention hardened around the part of Jack's new life he could see. "Fine. But sitting with Ashwell and that library corpse? Letting Kai trail after you? He'll tell every boy in the South Wing what you look like without your trousers before he learns which side of you he prefers."

"Kai hasn't done anything to me."

"Of course he hasn't. He wants an audience." Dorian's contempt sharpened because Jack had defended him. "And the other two are freaks. No one sits at that end of the hall unless they have nowhere better to go. You always knew that."

Jack thought of Finn pushing water toward him while keeping soil from his cup. Edric moving three books to clear a place. Kai looking down at his folded vest so Jack could say only as much as he chose.

"Then I had worse judgment before the road."

Dorian stared at him. The last trace of concern vanished.

"When did you become too good for me? You were always down for a quick fuck, Drake."

The surname landed as Master Draek had made it land in the yard, but the command inside it was different. Instructor, rank, family, memory: everyone who used it appeared to know what Jack owed.

Jack's attention dropped to Dorian's mouth. The memory beneath the arch sent heat through his stomach and into his cock with none of the dread the sword had carried. Dorian was handsome, familiar to the body, and standing close enough that Jack could decide for himself whether he wanted to know more.

Dorian answered the pause by catching the open edge of Jack's vest and drawing him forward, slower now, leaving enough room for Jack to stop him. Jack did not. Their mouths met without the violence Dorian had brought into the conversation. His lips were soft, his breath faintly sharp with mint, and when his tongue passed over Jack's lower lip, Jack opened for it.

The kiss carried recognition the rest of Jack could not share. Dorian's hand settled at the back of his neck and knew how firmly to hold. Jack gripped the black vest over Dorian's ribs and pulled him closer. The emerald chains pressed together between their chests, gold links shifting over bare skin, until Dorian turned them and backed Jack toward the bed.

Jack's knees touched the frame. Dorian kissed down the uninjured side of his jaw and worked loose the tie at his waist. He paused with his fingers beneath the overlapping cloth. Jack could have closed his hand over them. Instead, he lifted his hips enough to let Dorian pull the trousers open.

His cock rose hard between them. Dorian gave a low sound against his throat, dropped to his knees, and took the head into his mouth.

Pleasure tightened Jack's hand in Dorian's hair. Dorian knew this body. He knew the place beneath the crown that made Jack's breath catch and how far to take him before easing back. His tongue moved beneath the shaft while one hand closed around the base, and the remembered sensation joined the real one until Jack could no longer tell which part of the response had been learned before he arrived.

He did not care. He wanted Dorian's mouth and chose to keep it there.

Dorian rose before Jack could finish. His lips shone. He kissed Jack once, tasting of skin and salt, then opened his own trousers and freed his cock. It stood hard from a nest of dirty-blond hair, the foreskin drawn back from the wet head. Dorian pressed it against Jack's thigh and put both hands on his hips.

The first pull tried to turn Jack toward the bed.

Jack resisted. "No. Not that."

Dorian held him for a moment, breathing against his cheek. Then his hands loosened. He went down again without arguing and took Jack back into his mouth.

Relief let Jack's shoulders release. He braced one hand on the bedpost while Dorian worked him deeper. The other hand remained in Dorian's hair, guiding without forcing. Dorian's cheeks hollowed around the shaft. His own cock stood between his parted trousers, untouched and darkening at the tip.

While Jack watched his mouth, Dorian pulled the gray trousers lower. The waistband passed Jack's hips and gathered around the tops of his thighs. Dorian rose in the same motion, caught him around the waist, and tried to turn him again.

"I said no."

Jack planted one foot. Dorian pulled harder. His thumb drove into the tender line of the healing wound at Jack's left hip, sending pain through the newly closed flesh. Jack caught his forearm and tried to wrench it away, but Dorian shoved forward, using the bed behind Jack's legs to take away his balance.

"Stop."

Dorian kept fighting him, one hand forcing at his shoulder while the other dragged his hips sideways. Jack's trousers trapped his thighs together. The bedframe struck the backs of his knees, and Dorian bore down as if refusal were only another part of a game they had played before.

"Stop, you're hurting me, Dorian!"

Dorian did not stop.

The room narrowed to the half-open door behind him, Dorian's weight, and the old body's certainty about how to move a boy who expected resistance to go backward. Jack dropped his center, drove one shoulder into Dorian's middle, and wrapped both arms behind his thighs.

He surged forward.

Dorian's back struck the door hard enough to throw it open. Jack kept driving, bare feet finding the stone beyond the threshold while Dorian tried to brace with trousers already slipping down his legs. The cloth caught around his knees. His next step failed, and Jack released him into the gallery.

Dorian hit the floor on his back and one elbow. His black trousers had fallen around his calves. His hard cock remained free in the open air, bobbing once with the impact before lying against his stomach.

Three boys had stopped outside the neighboring room. One still held a folded shirt against his chest. None of them pretended they had not seen.

Jack stood in his own doorway with his gray trousers bunched below his hips and his cock hard against his stomach. Rage reached him before shame. He shoved himself into the trousers with one hand and dragged the waistband up.

"Fuck off, Dorian!"

Dorian fought his way onto one elbow. His face had gone red, but whether from fury, humiliation, or the fall, Jack could not tell. He made no attempt to cover himself.

"Fuck you too, Jack," he yelled.

Jack slammed the door and locked it. He leaned back against the thick wood, both palms flat upon it, while Dorian cursed and gathered his clothes in the gallery.

What the fuck is happening to me?

His breathing remained fast, his erection painful inside the hastily tied trousers, and the healing line at his hip throbbed where Dorian's thumb had driven into it. Jack stayed against the door until the footsteps and voices outside moved away.

The room contained no second bolt. The lock was a simple ward plate and an iron tongue sunk into the old frame, adequate against a stranger who lacked a key and useless against anyone Jack admitted himself. He tested it twice, then dragged the desk several inches from the wall. Its legs rasped over the floor. Wedged beneath the latch, it would at least make noise if someone tried the door during the night.

Only after that did he examine the damage. One eyelet had pulled loose from the vest, and the cord at his waist had stretched where Dorian dragged the trousers down. Blood had worked through the linen around his palm. The hip wound remained closed, though the new skin around it had reddened and begun to swell. Matching bruises had begun to rise behind both knees where the bedframe struck him.

His hands shook while he threaded the needle.

Wanting Dorian at first did not alter the refusal that followed. Dorian had mistaken old access for permission now.

The supper bell sounded while he was closing the last stitch. Doors opened along South Wing, and the corridor filled again. Jack changed into his spare vest. He placed the torn one on the wardrobe shelf beside Caleo's folded cloak, then washed the new blood from his palm and retied the linen.

He considered remaining behind. The room no longer felt safer than the hall, and hunger had already begun its deep pull beneath his ribs.

Jack moved the desk away from the door and went to supper.

The long tables had filled unevenly. Finn and Edric occupied their usual end, books and plates sharing the available space. Kai had not arrived. Jack sat across from Finn, accepted the bowl Edric moved clear of a stack of papers, and began to eat.



He turned back to his supper.

At the table beneath the windows, the other emerald chain flashed when Dorian turned his head.

Jack saw him. This time he knew exactly who was looking.

He turned back to his supper.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Fountain

ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Jack woke with one hand beneath his pillow and his feet braced against the desk.

For several breaths he did not know why the desk stood there. Then the room returned: Dorian refusing to stop, the hard turn through the doorway, and three strangers staring from the gallery.

The memory brought anger before fear. Jack preferred it that way.

He pushed the desk back to the wall and tested the door. The latch held. Pale morning lay across the gallery beyond it, already warm where the sun reached the stone, and somewhere below a bell began calling the first sleepers out of bed. The fortress answered with doors, voices, and the slap of loose Academy trousers against bare ankles as students hurried toward the washing rooms.

His palm had bled through the linen during the night. The blister beneath it felt hot and tight. His hip had gone purple around the old wound, though the skin remained closed. Dorian had not managed to open it. Dark bars crossed the backs of both legs behind his knees where the bedframe had caught him. Jack stood before the basin, touched the bruising at his hip once, and stopped when the pain sharpened beneath his fingers.

He could go to the infirmary. He could report what happened. He could also imagine explaining every part of it to an instructor who knew the dead boy's surname better than Jack did.

I wanted him until I didn't sounded simple inside his own head. He did not trust Thornfield to keep it simple once it left his mouth.

He washed, wrapped his palm again, dressed, and strapped on his Academy sandals.

At breakfast, Finn was separating the raisins from his porridge and arranging them in a dry crescent at the edge of his bowl. Edric had opened a book beside his plate but was eating quickly enough to suggest the book had lost whatever contest he had set between them. The place beside Jack's water cup remained open.

Jack set down his tray.

Kai arrived after Jack had taken his first mouthful. He carried a crowded tray in one hand and threaded through the lower hall with the confidence of someone who expected every shoulder to move before he reached it. His fitted vest sat perfectly along his narrow waist; even his carelessness had been tailored.

Finn lifted his face from the porridge. His bright blue eyes narrowed until they were fine lines beneath his straight brows.

"Slumming with us again, Kai? When will you get tired of your new toy?"

The word caught Jack in a place Finn could not have known was tender. Dorian had treated the dead boy's body as something lent out before Jack arrived, then treated Jack's consent as another piece of property that remained his once given.

Kai stopped at the end of the bench. For once, he did not smile his way around the sharp thing placed before him.

"Jack isn't a toy."

"You said his face and emeralds were why you came over."

"They were." Kai kept his attention on Finn rather than seeking rescue from Jack.

"They aren't why I came back."

Finn considered him over the little wall of raisins. Then he moved his water cup far enough to clear the last of the bench.

Kai sat. Only then did he glance at the fresh linen around Jack's hand. His gaze traveled to the repaired eyelet on Jack's spare vest, then returned to Jack's face. The whole examination took less than a second.

"Did the staff win after all?" he asked.

"The blister did."

"Treacherous little thing. Finn has three salves for that, and I expect at least two of them are illegal."

Jack began unwrapping his spoon from the square of linen beside his bowl. The ordinary clink of breakfast things made Kai's examination easier to bear.

"Four," Finn said. He dropped a raisin back into the porridge because it had touched the table. "Only one is prohibited indoors."

Edric closed his book over one finger. "Because of the smell?"

"Because it eats linen."

Kai inspected Jack's bandage again. "You see? Surrounded by expertise."

Jack smiled despite the ache in his hip.

Dorian was not at the other emerald's customary table. Jack found the empty place at once. He ate with his back toward it after that and listened while Edric complained that Master Bell had assigned thirty pages on containment geometry without first teaching half the notation. Finn offered to lend him an older text with clearer figures.

Kai offered to murder Master Bell. No one asked Jack why he held his cup with his left hand.

The morning passed without Dorian.

That should have felt like a reprieve. Instead, absence followed Jack from room to room. It waited in every gallery turn and on the far side of every opening door. Twice he heard laughter behind him and knew the voice was wrong before his body finished going rigid. In Applied Histories, he copied a full page from the slate and understood almost all of it. When the instructor read a passage aloud, the last stubborn symbols joined sound and meaning in his head as if they had merely been waiting for permission.

It was good work. He could not enjoy it.

By midday the sky had cleared to the fierce, rinsed blue that came after a night of rain. Water shone in the seams between the paving flags, and the forest beyond Thornfield steamed beneath the sun. The fortress walls held yesterday's damp in their black stone. Vines spilled from the older parapets, glossy and green, while small white flowers opened in cracks no mason had intended to leave.

Finn left the dining hall by the north passage with a cloth-wrapped packet of cuttings under one arm. He had an hour in the glasshouses before his next lesson and appeared to regard this as a far better use of time than remaining with people. Edric went to return a book before Field Practical. Kai was waylaid beneath the clock by two laughing students who wanted him to settle an argument about a fencing wager.

"Go ahead," Kai told Jack. "I'll escape them and meet you on the field."

"You began the wager," one of the students said.

"That does sound like something I would do."

Jack left him defending himself with great insincerity and crossed the square alone.



Water broke the reflected sky into restless pieces.

The fountain stood in the center of the old parade ground, broad-bowled and older than the Academy that had grown around it. Some forgotten governor had placed a bronze hart upon its central plinth. Water poured from the hart's lowered antlers and broke the reflected sky into restless pieces. Students gathered on the basin wall when instructors were not watching. Others crossed around it by habit, dividing and joining like foot traffic around a stone in a stream.

Jack saw Dorian in the water before he saw him on the flags.

The reflection gave him one instant: dirty-blond hair, black vest, a green spark where the emerald chain caught the sun. Then a shoulder struck between Jack's shoulder blades.

He stumbled two steps and recovered. The body knew how. His weight dropped, one foot turned, and his bandaged hand came up before thought could choose a target.

Dorian remained beyond reach. Akira and another boy from Dorian's table had closed from either side. Akira caught Jack's right wrist. Jack tore it free and drove an elbow backward hard enough to force a grunt from the boy behind him. The third swept at his leg while Dorian seized the back of his vest.

The bruised hip failed under the turn.

Jack struck one knee on the flags. Hands found him all at once: beneath both arms, around one ankle, twisted into the cloth at his waist. His satchel slid from his shoulder. He caught the strap with his injured hand and threw it toward the dry stones before they lifted him.

"Let go of me."

"You wanted an audience yesterday," Dorian said. The pleasant softness had gone from his voice. "We thought we'd provide another."

Jack kicked. His heel struck someone's thigh. A hand closed harder around his ankle, and then the three of them had his weight between them. The sky wheeled above the fountain. Sun flashed off the bronze antlers.

People were watching.

That fact hurt more than the grip on his arms. A circle had opened without anyone deciding to make one. Students slowed. Someone laughed before anything had happened, because Dorian was laughing and rank often told a room what was funny.

Jack twisted toward the basin wall. If he could get one foot against the stone, he could break their hold. His toes brushed the lip and slipped on moss.

They threw him in.

Water struck his back and closed over his head. The cold seized what the heat had loosened from him. His mouth opened on shock, and fountain water rushed across his tongue before he clamped it shut. For one blind instant there was only green light, white bubbles, and the booming churn of the hart's antlers above him.

The old wound in his head remembered stone.

Jack found the bottom with both feet and drove upward. He broke the surface coughing, hair over his eyes, loose vest dragged open by the water. His emerald chain lay cold and brilliant against his chest. The pale cloth of his trousers had gone nearly transparent. His skin showed flushed red beneath it, and the wet fabric clung so closely around his cock and balls that everyone could see everything the uniform was meant to cover.

Laughter traveled badly through water. It seemed to come from every wall.

"Pretty boy can swim," Dorian said.

Jack wiped his face and found him through the dripping strands of his hair. Dorian stood beyond the reach of the basin with Akira in his usual place beside him and the

third boy on his other side. A bruise darkened one cheek where he had struck the gallery floor. He wore it like evidence against Jack.

"You tried to hurt me," Dorian said, loudly enough for the nearest students.

"Consider us even."

Jack's hands closed against the submerged stone ledge. What Dorian had done in room twelve remained locked behind his teeth. To answer here would be to lay every wanted kiss and every refused touch before a square full of strangers.

"We aren't even," he said.

Dorian's smile faltered. Only for a moment.

"Retard," the boy Jack did not know said.

He did not trouble to lower his voice. Jack had heard the same word on Earth, flung at children who needed longer to answer, and the dead boy's body knew it too. The insult crossed worlds without needing translation.

A young woman near the basin said, "That's enough."

The boys were already stepping back. Dorian spread his hands as though nothing remained but a wet student and a joke whose ending everyone had seen. The crowd made room for him. That was the material part of rank: not jewels, not titles, but the certainty that other bodies would move.

Jack climbed out without accepting the hand someone offered. His sandals had remained strapped to his feet; water ran through the darkened leather and slapped beneath the soles when he stepped onto the flags. His trousers still showed the red flush of his skin and every intimate line beneath them. He did not pull at the cloth or use his satchel as a shield. Everyone had already seen him. He chose to behave as though that knowledge belonged to them rather than him.

His satchel lay where he had thrown it. One corner was splashed, but the books and the newly legible notes inside remained dry.

The bell rang for Field Practical.

He could return to South Wing. He could change, bar his door, and give Dorian the knowledge that three bodies and a fountain were enough to remove him from the day.

Jack picked up his satchel and went to Field Practical.

The practical yard had been built inside the fortress's eastern barbican, where the walls opened toward a long slope of grass and the wet crown of the forest beyond.

Iron frames stood in two rows across the packed earth. Each held a clay target plate at chest height, scored with circles, angles, and a line of local script Jack could now read: *receive, divide, return*. Brass bowls smoked beside the frames. The sharp mineral smell of heated salt hung beneath the greener scent of rain.

Most of the class had already formed ranks.

Kai saw Jack first.

The joke on his face vanished so completely that Jack understood how much of it was chosen. Edric turned a breath later. He left his place without looking toward the instructor and crossed the yard with a folded practice towel in his hands.

"What happened?" Edric asked.

Jack took the towel because refusing it would have required more strength than he possessed. "Dorian, Akira, and another boy threw me into the fountain."

Kai's head came around.

Dorian stood three places down the second rank. Akira had taken his own place in the next line. The other boy had disappeared among gray trousers and dark vests.

"He fell," Dorian said.

"All the way from your hands?" Kai asked.

His voice was light. Nothing else about him was.

Master Draek came between the iron frames carrying a short rod of black wood. He took in Jack's soaked clothing, the towel, Edric out of line, and the direction of Kai's stare.

"You're late, Drake."

The surname tried to push Jack backward into someone else's life, where rank would speak and the truth would remain an inconvenience. He held his ground.

"Dorian, Akira, and another boy from their table lifted me and threw me into the fountain. I don't know the third boy's name."

Conversation died across the yard.

Draek faced Dorian. "Is that true?"

"No, sir. He slipped while we were talking."

"He has a strange way of falling upward first," Edric said.

It was the most Jack had ever heard him volunteer in front of a full class.

Draek's mouth tightened. "Mr. Vane, return to your place."

Edric did not move at first. Draek pointed the black rod toward the line, and Edric obeyed with his jaw set hard enough to show the hinge of it.

"I did not see the fountain," Draek told Jack. "I will not settle a dispute while the line waits. Take your place or accept the absence."

The refusal left Dorian's lie standing beside Jack's account as if the two had equal weight. Jack could argue until the wet cloth dried against him, or he could decide whether Dorian had removed him from the lesson.

"I'll work."

Kai went back with Edric, though he passed close enough to touch two fingers to Jack's uninjured wrist. The contact asked a question without making him answer aloud. Jack could not answer it. His hand remained still until Kai withdrew.

Edric left the towel with him.

The exercise was a receiving ward, the first useful magic Jack had seen taught as something more than words on a slate. Draek placed his left palm near the clay plate without touching it. With the rod in his right hand, he traced the three scored geometries in their proper order. His breath changed halfway through the second figure, drawn slowly through the nose and held behind the breastbone.

"Iron establishes the limit," he said. "Salt gives the limit memory. Breath gives it duration. If your shape is poor, the ward will open where the geometry is weak. If your breath is poor, it will fail when struck. If your intention is poor, you will put force into a piece of clay and wonder why you are tired."

He spoke the final word.

The air before the plate tightened. Pale gold ran along the carved lines, sharp as sunlight on wire. A clear plane unfolded between the iron uprights, nearly invisible except where the humid air pearled against it. Draek struck with the rod. The sound cracked across the yard. The ward bowed, shed the force into both uprights, and vanished with a smell like hot metal after rain.

Jack stared.

No trick of the light could explain it. No concealed machine. The water still running down his spine seemed suddenly less impossible than the world around it.

Students worked one at a time. The spell cost them something. A broad boy in the first rank produced a bright ward that shattered at Draek's tap; he had spent all his

force on the appearance of it. A woman with a silver chain held hers through two blows and finished gray around the mouth. Edric's ward emerged small, exact, and slightly crooked. It endured.

Kai stepped to the next frame. He traced the geometry with studied imperfection and made a modest shield that should have failed along its upper edge. When Draek struck, Kai changed his wrist at the last instant. Force traveled down the ward and buried itself in the ground.

Draek studied him for a long moment.

"Lucky," Kai said.

"Do it properly next time."

Dorian's ward rose clean and bright. He held it with his left hand while looking directly at Jack. The blow rang through the iron, and the shield remained.

"Some bodies remember what they're for," he said as he returned to line.

The student behind him laughed.

Jack's wet fingers tightened around Edric's towel. Kai watched him from across the rank, but Jack had already stepped toward the last empty frame.

He draped the towel across the lower bar where he could reach it and took up the practice rod. The others had held it loosely between finger and thumb. Jack copied them, but the wet handle turned in his grip and the tip wandered when he raised it toward the first figure.

"Begin," Draek said.

Jack drew the opening line too long. By the time he recognized the error, he had already closed the angle that should have remained open.

"No," Draek said. "Reset."

Jack lowered the rod. A few students shifted behind him. He heard a whisper and then a brief laugh pressed into someone's hand.

He began again. The first line stopped where it should. He turned his wrist for the second and lost the curve, flattening it across the center of the plate.

"Reset."

The clay remained dull. Not one scored line answered him.

Jack wiped his palm against his wet trousers and made the cloth cling more tightly. When he raised the rod again, the red skin beneath the pale fabric remained visible at the edge of his sight. He fixed his attention on the plate.

First line. Open angle. Curve. He reached the third figure without Draek stopping him.

"Breath," Draek said.

Jack had forgotten it. He dragged air in too quickly, tried to hold it behind his breastbone as he had watched the others do, and spoke the final word with his chest already collapsing.

Nothing happened.

The iron did not ring. The salt did not stir. The scored clay held the same lifeless brown it had possessed before he touched the rod.

Someone laughed outright.

"Again," Draek said.

Jack's hip throbbed where Dorian had driven his thumb into it. Water ran from his hair, followed the healing cut down his cheek, and dropped from his chin onto the back of his hand. He set his feet wider because Dorian's stance had been wide. Draek struck the inside of his sandal with the black rod.

"Not that wide. You are making a gate of yourself."

More laughter moved through the ranks. Jack brought his foot in. Too far.

"Half of that."

He moved it outward again.

"There. Start."

The first figure went wrong at the turn. Jack heard it in the small exhale behind him before Draek said anything. He stopped, returned the rod to the beginning, and tried once more. This time he reached the word.

He pronounced the middle consonant as the local script appeared to demand. The class answered with a scattered noise of disbelief.

Draek repeated the word, slower.

Jack heard the difference only after the instructor said it a second time. He tried to shape the unfamiliar sound farther back in his mouth.

The word came out wrong again.

"He's reading it," someone said.

"No," another voice answered. "He's guessing at the letters."

Jack set the rod against the starting mark so hard the wood clicked on clay.

"Do not strike it," Draek said. "You cannot batter a ward into existence. Again."

Jack traced. The first angle closed. He corrected it and spoiled the second figure. He reset. His breath escaped too soon. He reset. The wet handle slipped down between his fingers, forcing him to catch it against his palm. Someone behind Dorian began counting the attempts under his breath.

At six, several students laughed with him. Edric spoke without leaving his place.

"Stop it."

The counting ceased, but only because Dorian had found something better.

"He was always better on his back."

The laughter came harder. Jack heard Kai tell Dorian to shut his mouth. Draek struck the iron upright once with his rod, and the ringing note cut through both of them.

"Silence in the ranks. Drake, attend to the plate."

Jack no longer knew whether this was the seventh attempt or the eighth. His fingers had begun to shake, though there had been no magic to exhaust him. The bandage loosened in the water. A thin red line opened through it where the blister had torn again.

He put his feet where Draek had shown him. He checked the rod against his first finger. He breathed before beginning, realized that was also wrong, released it, and waited while someone snickered.

Then he tried once more.

Line. Angle. Curve. Breath. Word.

Nothing.



The clay simply remained clay.

He had not made the lines glow faintly or produced a ward too weak to survive a blow. He had not reached the bottom of the class and found a place there. The clay simply remained clay in front of his outstretched hand.

Draek drew breath to correct him again.

Jack set the practice rod across the iron frame.

"Drake."

He took Edric's towel from the lower bar, folded it once because it belonged to someone else, and held it out without meeting Edric's eyes. Edric accepted it slowly.

"You can come with me," Edric said. "The library will be empty."

Jack picked up his satchel.

Kai stepped out of line. "Jack, wait."

Jack walked between them without answering. Kai caught his upper arm for a moment, not hard enough to hold him. Jack pulled free and kept going.

"Master Draek," Edric said behind him, "he needs a moment."

"Mr. Vane, remain in line. Drake, return to your frame."

Jack crossed the yard. Laughter began again somewhere behind Dorian, uncertain now that an instructor had ordered him back. Drake called his surname a second time. Kai called Jack.

He answered none of them.

The archway took him out of their sight. He crossed the lower court with his wet sandals slapping the stones and came to the passage where South Wing lay to the left and the Academy gates stood ahead.

His room waited behind the left turn. The desk could go against the door again. He could remain there until the wet cloth dried and the evening bell required him to become visible.

Jack continued toward the gates.

He did not announce that he was leaving. When the gate guards glanced at his soaked uniform and open satchel, he passed them before either decided whether to ask a question.

The Briartown road descended through the trees. Thornfield remained visible behind him for the first third of the walk, black walls rising above the wet canopy, until the road bent and the forest took them away.

Caleo had said the walk was forty minutes.

It took Jack longer. The bruise in his hip pulled at each downhill step, the bruises behind his knees tightened whenever the road steepened, his reopened palm beat with his pulse, and the wet sandal straps rubbed the skin above his heels raw. Heat slowly returned to the pale cloth, taking its transparency but leaving it stiff where fountain water dried into it. Lunch sat in his stomach like something swallowed by mistake.

Traffic passed him on the climb toward Thornfield: two produce carts, a rider leading a packhorse, three workers beneath a shared reed hat broad enough to shade them all. Jack did not hide. He had no strength left for crouching in leaves, and he knew where the road went now.

It went to Briartown. To the roofs descending toward the river, the old walls swallowed by newer streets, and a bakery yard whose gate had never needed to be climbed.

It went to Caleo.

Afternoon trade filled Mrs. Gowrie's front room when he reached it. Through the windows he saw employees moving between the long counter and the ovens, brown loaves ranked on cooling shelves, customers gathered beneath the slow-turning fans. Warm spice drifted into the street each time the door opened. It smelled like the first meal he had eaten in this world without having to steal it from a tree.

Jack could not bring the square and the wet uniform through the crowded front room. He went around the building instead.

The yard gate stood open.

He passed beneath it and crossed to the kitchen door. Voices moved on the other side, Mrs. Gowrie's among them, firm and busy. Jack raised his hand to knock and found it shaking again.



He had only chosen a person and kept walking.

Before his knuckles touched the wood, the door opened.

Caleo stood there with flour along one forearm and his pale curls tied badly away from his face. Surprise brightened him for half a heartbeat. Then he saw Jack's soaked clothes, the bruise on his knee, and whatever the walk had left in his expression.

"Jack?"

Jack had rehearsed nothing on the road. He had only chosen a person and kept walking.

"Can I come in?"

Caleo stepped aside at once.

A decorative border of dark green and brown leaves and small white flowers frames the central text area.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Boy Painted Real



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Jack crossed the threshold. Caleo shut the kitchen door and dropped the wooden bar into its brackets before he asked another question.



The bakery worked around them.

The bakery worked around them. Trays rang against the long table in the front room, oven doors opened and closed, and an employee called that the honey loaves were ready to turn. The afternoon heat had settled thickly beneath the rafters. Jack's trousers were no longer transparent, but they had dried against him in hard pale creases. His sandals left damp marks on the kitchen tiles.

Mrs. Gowrie stood at the flour table with both forearms sunk in dough. She studied Jack's wet hair and the reopened bandage around his palm and did not waste time asking whether he was well.

"Caleo, take him upstairs. There's broth left from dinner in the small pot. Mara can mind the back door."

"Mrs. Gowrie, I can still hear you," a woman called from beyond the ovens.

"Then I needn't repeat myself."

Caleo took the pot from the cooler edge of the stove, found a half loaf beneath a cloth, and put both on a tray. He moved quickly without the bright disorder Jack remembered from their first day together. No dramatic sweep of the cloak, no complaint about being made to carry respectable crockery. He handed Jack the bread because it was the lightest thing and led him up the narrow stairs.

Jack followed because Caleo had made following easy.

The room above the bakery had not changed. The wide bed still consumed most of it. Stones, carving tools, and folded scraps of paper crowded the desk. A shirt Caleo seldom wore hung from one bedpost, and the patched shorts Jack had borrowed lay folded at the foot of the bed as if Caleo had expected to find some use for them again.

Caleo set down the tray and pulled the blanket free.

"Those clothes have to come off."

Jack put the loaf beside the broth. His fingers would not manage the wet knot at his waist. The cloth had tightened as it dried, and every tug pulled the fabric across skin already rubbed raw by the walk. Caleo waited until Jack stopped trying.

"May I?"

Jack lifted his hands.

Caleo worked the knot apart and loosened the trousers without touching the skin beneath. Jack pushed them down. The damp cloth resisted at his knees and came free inside out, taking the loosened bandage from his palm with it. His vest followed. He stood naked beside the bed while Caleo gathered the uniform into a heap.

There was no pleasure in being seen this time. The fountain had taken that from him for the afternoon. Red bands marked both heels above the sandal straps. One knee was scraped. Matching bruises lay behind both knees where Dorian had shoved him against the bedframe. The bruise at his hip had darkened until it surrounded the nearly healed wound like spilled ink, and his open palm had left three diluted spots of blood on the trousers.

Caleo inspected each injury and then Jack's face.

"Sit down."

Jack sat. Caleo wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, knelt to unfasten the sandals, and carried everything wet to the wash basin. When he returned, he brought a clean cloth, a cup of water, and the narrow jar that had smelled of crushed leaves when Caleo used it on Jack's head.

He cleaned the palm first. The water stung. Jack watched flour dust along Caleo's forearm turn to paste where the wet cloth touched him.

"What happened?" Caleo asked.

Jack had spent the walk refusing to answer that question. In the room above the bakery, with his clothes soaking in the same basin that had held the road dirt days earlier, he found too many answers.

"A boy named Dorian knew me."

Caleo spread salve over the torn blister. "From before the road?"

"He knew this body. The other Jack."

Caleo's hand paused. Not for long. He folded clean linen over Jack's palm and began wrapping it.

"What did he do?"

Jack told him about the memory beneath the arch and recognizing Dorian as the boy who had been there. He told him that Dorian expected the old relationship to continue and could not understand why Jack sat with Finn, Edric, and Kai now.

"He said we were always having quick fucks. That I was always willing."

Caleo tied the bandage. His eyes remained on the knot. "Were you?"

"I don't know. He says we were. The memory I have makes it seem possible."

"That isn't what I meant. Yesterday."

Jack closed the blanket around his waist. "At first. I kissed him. I let him open my trousers. I wanted his mouth on me, and I liked it."

Caleo sat back on his heels.

"Then he tried to turn me over. I said no. He went back to sucking me, and I thought he had accepted it, but he tried again and put his thumb into this." Jack touched the bruise at his hip. "I told him to stop. He didn't."

The bakery continued below them. Someone laughed in the front room. A peel scraped beneath a row of loaves, and the oven gave a low iron complaint as its door closed.

"I put him through the doorway," Jack said. "He was on the floor with his trousers around his legs. I could stop him, so I did."

Caleo's attention moved from the bruise to Jack's face. "Good."

The word carried no surprise that Jack had managed it and no demand that he turn what happened into something larger.

"Three boys saw us in the hallway," Jack continued. "Today Dorian brought Akira and another boy from their table. They threw me in the fountain, used the same slur he had used for Finn, and called us even. I went to Field Practical in the wet uniform and failed the receiving ward while somebody counted each attempt. Seven times. Maybe eight. I made nothing."

Caleo rose and poured broth into a bowl. He did not say the lesson was unfair or invent a kind of magic Jack might secretly possess. He tore bread into the broth, pushed the bowl into Jack's hands, and sat beside him on the bed.

"Eat before it gets cold."

Jack took one mouthful. The broth tasted of onion, pepper, and the brown crust from the bottom of the pot. His stomach tightened around it before accepting it.

"Dorian said this body remembered what it was for."

Caleo tore a piece from the remaining loaf but did not eat it. Crumbs gathered in his palm while he waited for Jack to decide which part came next.

"The sword knew," Jack said. "When Master Draek put it in my hand, I knew how to use it. I knew how to hurt Kai after the bout was already won. The staff knows too. It knows a hundred things I don't. Then Dorian put his mouth on me and the body knew him. It liked him."

"You liked what he was doing."

"How can you tell the difference?"

Caleo lowered his eyes to the bread between his fingers.

"I can't."

The admission made the room less safe and more honest.

Jack set the bowl on his knee. "Dorian acted as if he had used me that way whenever he wanted. Maybe he had. Maybe this body liked being fucked. Maybe the other Jack got fucked often and was good at it. Dorian certainly thinks so."

His voice had gone bitter. The bitterness was his; Jack knew that much because it had lived in him before the road.

"I don't care if he slept with everyone in Thornfield," he continued. "I care that I don't know whether I did. I don't know whether I want boys because he did. I don't know if

I wanted Dorian, or if his hands found something this body remembered and I followed it."

Caleo's bare foot moved against the floorboards. "He never met me."

Jack turned toward him.

"The other Jack," Caleo said. "He never met me. Whatever happened in this room the morning you left was new to both of us."

That did not answer Dorian. It did not answer the memory under the arch or the desire that had moved through Jack before he understood its source. It gave him one thing the dead boy could not have chosen first.

"No," Jack said. "He never met you."

Caleo ate the piece of bread at last. He waited while Jack managed another spoonful of broth.

"Was he cruel?" Jack asked.

"The Drake boy?"

"Me. Him. Whichever one people mean when they look at my face."

Caleo leaned forward, forearms on his thighs. "People in Briartown know the Drakes. They know there was a young one who came through and made trouble. I never met him."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I heard stories. Drunk. Fights. People paid afterward so the trouble would become a misunderstanding. Auntie told me not to repeat gossip about nobles unless I wanted to spend my life proving which words were mine."

Jack thought of the sword moving past Kai's surrender. Dorian's contempt for the lower table had sounded practiced, as if Jack had once shared it. The Academy gave him emeralds, private lodging, and an allowance large enough to surprise a cashier. Somewhere outside Thornfield, Eomer Drake had arranged all of it for a nephew Jack could not remember being.

"What if he is still in here?" Jack asked.

Caleo did not answer quickly, so Jack continued. "Not talking. Not thinking where I can hear him. Just leaving things behind. The sword. Dorian. People who hate this face. What if the dead boy is using my hands to go on making everyone's life hell?"



I know he isn't the only one.

Caleo turned the uneaten end of the loaf between his hands. He named Mrs. Tern's repaired hinge, the staff Jack had chosen over the sword, and Dorian going through the doorway when he refused to stop. He did not ask who had done those things. Jack had already claimed each one while telling the story.

"I don't know if part of him is in there," Caleo said. "I know he isn't the only one."

The answer left room for the thing Jack feared. Caleo did not promise that the cruel reflexes would vanish or that every desire could be sorted into two separate piles. He only refused to let the dead boy own everything the body did now.

Jack stared into the broth. A skin had begun forming across the surface.

"The cart story wasn't true," he said.

Caleo became still beside him.

"The cart was real. The road wasn't. Not this road."

Jack waited for a question. Caleo made none.

"Where I came from, we called it a car. Metal, glass, an engine inside. No horses. I was walking home from school when one came off the road and killed me. Then I woke naked here, in a body that had already been cut open and thrown away."

Caleo's fingers crushed the soft center of the loaf. He repeated the word *died* under his breath, neither denying it nor pretending to understand.

"There wasn't anything between. No voice. No choice. I woke with his wounds and his cock and that ring locked around it. I had pieces of his language in my head. Thornfield. Eomer. Drake. Even Jack." Jack pressed the bandaged hand against his knee. "His name was Jack Drake. My name was already Jack. I didn't even get a clean name to keep us apart."

The truth changed Caleo's attention. He studied Jack's face as if the familiar arrangement had become difficult to read, but he did not move away.

"Earth," Jack said. "That was the world. Or the planet. I don't know how to explain it without sounding insane. There was no real magic. No Thornfield. No Briartown. I had a phone, electric lights, cars, school. I was eighteen there too."

"Your language in the forest."

"English. You couldn't understand me because this mouth hadn't remembered how to speak yours yet."

Caleo put the crushed bread on the tray. "Why tell me about the cart at all?"

"Because you were a stranger, and if you decided I was mad or dangerous, I had nothing. The lie kept the part you could see."

"And now?"

Beneath the blanket lay the body Caleo had already seen, washed, desired, and touched. The long knees remained Jack's shape beneath the wool. The bandaged hand holding the bowl belonged to the boy from Earth and the boy trained with a sword. Jack had no seam to point at.

"Now you're the first person I trust enough to tell the part nobody can see."

Caleo's shoulder rested against his. "I believe you."

Jack had expected disbelief badly enough that the absence of it left him unsteady.

"Why?"

"Because I watched wounds close that should not have closed, and I heard a language nobody here knew." Caleo drew one knee onto the bed and faced him more fully. "I don't understand it. I don't know what else makes those things fit."

Jack tried to laugh. His throat made the beginning of the sound and closed around it.

"I was almost finished with school," he said.

The sentence had not belonged to this part of the account. It arrived anyway.

"Graduation was weeks away. I had an apprenticeship waiting. I was good with my hands before I had these hands. Not swords or magic. Real things. Hinges. Wiring. Engines, eventually. I was going to learn properly."

His mother had sent a message that afternoon asking what he wanted for dinner. His father had checked the oil in the car on Sunday and made Jack check it again while he watched. His friends had been arguing over where to meet that weekend, filling the group chat faster than Jack could read while he walked.

"They know I'm dead," Jack said.

Caleo said nothing.

"Someone saw the car. There would have been an ambulance. Police. My parents would have had to go somewhere and identify me." The bowl trembled in Jack's hands. Caleo took it before broth spilled across the blanket. "They've probably buried me."

The room blurred. Jack pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and saw the green traffic light again.

"My friends would have kept writing until somebody told them. One of them would make a bad joke because he wouldn't know what else to do. My mother would have to answer people asking what happened. My father would go quiet and start fixing things that weren't broken."

His breath caught. He dragged it in, but the next one caught in the same place.

"My dog sleeps across the doorway. Every night. You have to step over him if you want to leave, and he opens one eye to make sure it's you. He would have waited at the door when school let out. He doesn't know what dead means. He only knows I stopped coming home."

The first sob bent Jack forward. He put one hand over his mouth, but the sound broke around it and brought another behind it. The blanket slipped from one

shoulder. Caleo took the empty bowl from the bed before Jack struck it with his knee, set it on the floor, and closed both arms around him.



I had a whole life. I wasn't finished with it.

Jack folded into the hold. He caught a fistful of Caleo's bare back beneath the cloak and clung hard enough to feel each breath move through him.

"I had a whole life," Jack said against Caleo's shoulder. "I wasn't finished with it."

Caleo held him tighter.

"There are people here." Jack's words broke between breaths. "That doesn't give the other life back. It doesn't make me less dead there."

No one told him to be grateful for what he had found. No one promised that one group of people could replace another. Caleo braced one hand between Jack's shoulder blades and let the grief come without giving it a better purpose.

Jack cried until his throat hurt and the flour on Caleo's skin had turned damp beneath his face. At some point Mrs. Gowrie climbed the stairs. She knocked once, set a covered plate outside the door, and went down again without entering.

When Jack could breathe without choking, he remained bent against Caleo. Neither of them pretended he had finished.

"What if I make your life hell too?" Jack asked.

Caleo's hand moved once along his back. "You probably will sometimes."

Jack lifted his head.

"People do," Caleo said. His eyes were red although Jack had not felt him cry. "You repaired a chair, ate Auntie's food, made a mess of my bed, and went away after promising to come back. Then you came back. That is what you've done to my life so far."

"We made the mess together."

"Most of it."

The correction was small and stupid. Jack laughed into the wet place his face had made on Caleo's shoulder. The laugh hurt, but it belonged entirely to the room.

Evening gathered outside the window. The bakery lamps came on below, gold-white rather than blue, and their light moved across the ceiling whenever someone crossed the yard.

Jack loosened his hand from Caleo's back. His fingers had left pale marks in the sun-browned skin.

"Can I stay tonight?"

Caleo reached down, caught the blanket where it had fallen, and pulled it around both of them.

"Yes," he said. "Stay."

A decorative border of green vines with small white flowers and large green leaves, some with holes, framing the central text area.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Borrowed Gold



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The plate outside Caleo's door held cold chicken, two heel pieces from a seed loaf, and a wedge of pear glazed with honey. Jack ate all of it sitting beneath the blanket while Caleo carried the basin downstairs and returned with hot water, soap, and a squat green jar.

"Auntie says the trousers must be rinsed now or they will dry hard enough to stand by themselves. She also says this is for whatever they rubbed raw. She was exact about not needing to see it."

Jack took the jar. "Please thank her for me."

"She heard you eat the pear. That may be enough."

Caleo knelt over the basin and separated the vest from the trousers. The emerald chain remained hooked across the open front. He worked one end free and laid the chain on a folded cloth, where the green stones caught the lamplight.

"I have held necklaces worth less than one of these links," he said.

"You hold many necklaces?"

"Only the ones people ask me to mend. I possess no secret collection."

Jack set the empty plate aside and joined him on the floor. The movement pulled behind both knees. He lowered himself with one leg extended and took the vest before Caleo could object. They washed the uniform together, Caleo scrubbing fountain grit from the trouser hems while Jack worked soap through the vest with his uninjured hand. The basin water clouded gray. When they poured it away, Caleo stretched both garments over the line crossing one corner of the room, directly above the warmth leaking through the bakery ceiling.

The gold-and-emerald chain remained on the cloth beside the bed.

Jack opened the green jar. The salve smelled of mint, rendered fat, and something bitter enough to clear his head. He rubbed it into the skin above his heels first. The scrape on his knee stung. The matching bruises behind both knees had darkened into narrow bars, and bending either leg drew the battered skin tight.

The wet trousers had done quieter damage. A raw patch followed the crease beneath his balls and reached onto the inside of his left thigh. Another reddened place lay along the underside of his cock where the clinging cloth had shifted against him for most of the walk.

Caleo followed Jack's attention to the reddened skin.

Caleo held out the salve. "That explains the way you climbed the stairs. I can help if you need it."

Jack dipped two fingers into the jar. "Not unless it becomes impossible to reach my own cock while looking directly at it."

The first touch of salve burned cold. Jack hissed and nearly dropped the jar.

Caleo took it from him before it overturned and waited until Jack had recovered before placing it within reach.

Jack spread the salve carefully over the abraded skin. Caleo turned to straighten the washed vest, granting privacy without pretending he had seen nothing. The soreness eased from sharp heat to a cooler throb. Jack left the blanket off when he returned to bed. Even soft wool dragged unpleasantly across the raw place beneath him.

Caleo banked the globe until its white-gold light became no brighter than a low fire. He dropped his shorts beside the washstand and climbed in naked as he always slept. Jack lay on his right side to spare the bruised hip. Caleo settled on his back beside him, one arm bent behind his head.

For a while they listened to the bakery empty beneath them. A peel scraped over stone. The rear door opened, admitting a brief rush of voices from the yard, then shut behind the last employees. Mrs. Gowrie called goodnight from the bottom of the stairs. Caleo answered, and the building grew quiet around the ovens cooling in their brick hollows.

Jack moved closer. He curled against Caleo without drawing his knees up far enough to tighten the bruises behind them and rested his head on Caleo's chest. Caleo's heart struck a steady rhythm beneath his ear.

"Tell me about the apprenticeship," Caleo said.

Jack watched the uniform drip above the warm floorboards. "There isn't much to tell. I hadn't begun it."

"Tell me what you expected, then."

He had expected early mornings, dirty hands, and several years of being told he knew less than he believed. He had expected a badge clipped to his shirt, tools that belonged to somebody else until he earned his own, and an older technician checking every connection he made. The work would have started with houses and shops. Engines might have come later if he proved good enough.

"What kind of engines?" Caleo asked.

"Carts that move without horses. Pumps. Machines in factories. Anything someone had built and then trusted to continue working forever without maintenance."

Caleo considered that. "So people are the same there."

"Very much the same. We only give ourselves faster ways to discover it."

Jack laid his palm flat on Caleo's stomach. The skin was warm and almost hairless, the muscles beneath it moving with each quiet laugh. He had told Caleo about death, another world, and the possibility of a cruel boy living somewhere in his reflexes. Caleo had answered by asking what work Jack had wanted to learn.

His fingers moved down.

Caleo was soft when Jack first closed his hand around him. The foreskin covered the head, smooth and loose beneath Jack's palm. He stroked once without lifting his cheek from Caleo's chest. The cock lengthened slowly through his hand.

"Does that hurt you?" Caleo asked.

"Not where I am."

"That was not quite the question."

Jack angled his head to see along their bodies. His own cock had grown hard despite the salve cooling the raw skin beneath it. Clear fluid welled heavily from the exposed opening, ran over the head, and gathered in a wet line against his stomach. He left it alone. "I don't need you to touch me. I want to touch you."

Caleo's free hand came to rest in Jack's hair. He did not praise the answer or search it for hidden damage. His thumb moved once above Jack's ear while Jack stroked him again.

The chain caught the dim light beside the bed.

Jack reached for it with his bandaged hand, failed to gather the fine links cleanly, and used the other. Caleo lifted his head enough to see. Jack let the gold spill across Caleo's stomach and guided it lower. He wound it once, loosely, around the hardening shaft. The tiny emeralds settled against sun-browned skin, absurdly rich above the pale-gold hair at the base.

"This suits you nicely."

Caleo raised himself far enough to inspect the ornament. "I had hoped sudden wealth would make me taller."

Jack turned the chain until one emerald rested against the underside. "It has improved the important part."

Caleo laughed beneath his cheek. Jack felt the sound travel through the ribs supporting his head.

He kept the chain loose while Caleo grew fully hard within it. The gold shifted over the shaft when Jack stroked, never tightening, the green stones following the movement of his hand. Caleo's cock was slimmer than Jack's, long enough that Jack could watch the foreskin draw back and gather below the head without moving from the warm place on his chest.

"Will you go back tomorrow?" Caleo asked.

Jack drew his thumb across the moist opening. Caleo's stomach tightened. "Yes. I walked out in front of everyone who laughed at me. If I stay here now, Dorian gets to decide what that meant." Jack stroked him slowly, watching clear wetness spread over the glans.

"Did you know where you were going?"

"Not until I reached the road."

Jack loosened the chain and let it pool around the base of Caleo's cock. He trailed one finger upward over the hairless stomach. At the deep line beside the lowest muscle, he stopped and tickled.

Caleo jerked beneath him. His hand closed harmlessly in Jack's hair. "That is treachery."

"You made me climb a wall near an open gate."

Jack tickled the same place until Caleo tried to twist away without dislodging his head. The movement pulled at Jack's bruised knees, and he stopped with a small breath. Caleo went still at once.

"I'm all right," Jack said. "It only reminds me when I bend too far."

He moved his hand higher. One fingertip circled Caleo's nipple until it tightened. Caleo watched the wandering hand with an attention that made Jack's own erection throb against his stomach. It had begun dripping badly, leaving several clear trails across the muscles below his navel. Neither boy did anything about it. Jack followed the smooth centerline down again, passed the twitching muscles, and returned to the cock decorated in borrowed gold.

He swirled one finger gently over the tip.

Caleo breathed in above him. Jack felt the chest rise beneath his cheek and heard the breath leave less steadily.

"I can walk with you," Caleo said after a moment. "Not into Thornfield. I have work here, and I suspect arriving beside a half-dressed herb gatherer would improve none of your difficulties. I can take you to the hill."

"I want you to."

Jack circled the opening again, spreading the clear fluid until the head shone. Then he closed his hand around the shaft and began to stroke in earnest. The chain remained loose at the base, green stones shifting against Caleo with each movement but never bearing pressure.

Conversation became less ambitious. Caleo asked what Jack would tell his friends. Jack said he would begin with where he had gone and discover what came next. Jack asked whether Caleo truly believed an emerald chain made him look taller. Caleo attempted an answer that broke when Jack drew the foreskin back and pressed his thumb beneath the crown.

Jack watched everything from Caleo's chest: the muscles tightening beneath his forearm, the small patch of pale hair stirring at the base, the cock moving through his hand, the emeralds flashing whenever the chain turned. Caleo's hips began to lift. Jack adjusted his grip rather than asking him to be still.

"Jack."

The warning arrived one stroke too late.

Caleo's cock pulsed in his hand. The first spurt crossed the short distance between them and struck Jack along the cheek and nose. He shut one eye. A second landed against Caleo's stomach and the back of Jack's fingers. Caleo made a strangled sound above him while Jack worked him through the remaining release, slower now, until white semen ran over the gold links gathered at the base.

Jack stared down at the result. Warm fluid began sliding toward the corner of his mouth.

He laughed against Caleo's chest.

The movement shook them both. Caleo laughed too, first breathlessly and then without restraint, one arm folding across his eyes while his softening cock remained in Jack's wet hand. Jack tried to wipe his face on Caleo's ribs, which made Caleo twist and laugh harder. The bedframe complained beneath them.

"You could have aimed elsewhere," Jack said.

"You were holding the relevant equipment."

Jack lifted his head. Semen shone across one cheek. "Then I did aim it."

That defeated both of them again.

When they could breathe, Caleo reached for the cloth beside the bed. Jack removed the chain before Caleo softened enough for the loose loop to slip. They cleaned Jack's face first, then Caleo's stomach and Jack's hand. The clear mess from Jack's neglected cock remained streaked across his lower belly. Neither of them reached for it. Caleo rinsed the gold and emeralds in the water left at the bottom of the pitcher, dried them carefully, and laid the chain across the folded vest.

"It still suits you," Jack said.

Caleo returned to bed and drew Jack against his side. "You may lend it to me again when you are less thoroughly injured."

Jack settled his head back onto Caleo's chest. His own erection continued to leak as it eased without being touched.

They slept.

The bakery woke them before sunrise. Heat had dried the uniform but not softened every crease. Mrs. Gowrie fed Jack eggs and yesterday's seed loaf at the end of the long worktable, supplied a smaller tin of salve without discussion, and made him stand while she inspected the trousers from a practical distance.

"They will do for the walk," she said. "Have the Academy launder them properly before you wear them through another day."

"Yes, Mrs. Gowrie. Thank you. For the food too. And for letting me stay."

She turned toward Caleo, who was attempting to steal the browned edge from the egg pan. "I have discovered that refusing entry rarely keeps certain boys away."

Caleo ate the stolen piece before she could reclaim it. Mrs. Gowrie struck his wrist with the folded towel and returned to the ovens.

Jack dressed carefully. The salve kept the cloth from catching the worst abrasion, but the bruises behind his knees announced each stair. He fastened the clean emerald chain across his vest. Caleo watched the stones settle against Jack's chest and smiled without explaining why.

They left through the open yard gate.



Morning mist lay in the lower Briartown streets.

Morning mist lay in the lower Briartown streets. Bakers, porters, and market sellers were already moving beneath it. Caleo knew half of them and was known by more. He returned greetings, promised to examine a leaking cistern after midday, and refused payment for a packet of dried berries an old woman pressed into his hand. At the edge of town he gave half the packet to Jack.

The road climbed beneath trees still dripping from a rain that had never reached the roofs below. Caleo walked beside him until the black walls of Thornfield rose clear above the canopy. The old fortress caught the first direct sun along its towers while Briartown remained in green shadow.

At the beginning of the final hill, Caleo stopped.

Jack did not want to turn the parting into another promise he might fail by accident. He put both arms around Caleo and held him carefully, avoiding the healing hip. Caleo's face pressed beneath his chin.

"I'll come Saturday," Jack said.

"You had better. I have become accustomed to emeralds."

Jack kissed his hair. Then he released him and climbed alone.

He reached the lower hall while breakfast was still being cleared. Finn, Edric, and Kai occupied their usual end of the table. None of them was eating. Edric had three notebooks open before him. Finn was grinding something dark green in a tiny stone bowl. Kai sat facing the doors.

He saw Jack first.

Relief crossed his face nakedly enough that Jack understood the smile replacing it was a moment late.

"You look terrible," Kai said.

"I have been told my chain does most of the work."

Kai stood as if he meant to cross the room, reconsidered, and pulled out the bench instead. Jack sat slowly. Finn's gaze dropped to the careful movement of his knees.

"Those trousers injured you," Finn said.

"Dorian and the bedframe began it. The fountain and the walk improved matters. Mrs. Gowrie gave me salve."

Finn held out his hand. Jack gave him the tin. He opened it, smelled the contents, and scraped the smallest amount beneath one thumbnail.

"Good for friction. Poor for broken skin. I have something better for your heels."

"Thank you."

Finn returned the tin and resumed grinding without asking where the friction burns were.

Edric turned one notebook toward Jack. "I copied the practical sequence. It will not make yesterday less public, and I cannot identify why you produced nothing, but you should have the same notes as everyone who remained."

"Thank you," Jack said again.

Kai leaned both forearms on the table. "Now that everyone has demonstrated unbearable restraint, where did you go?"

"Briartown. The boy who found me in the forest lives above a bakery there. His name is Caleo. I stayed with him."

Kai's attention flicked to the emerald chain and back to Jack's face. "Is he beautiful?"



Yes, very.

Jack caught one of the little emeralds between his fingers. He remembered the chain loose around Caleo's cock and Caleo laughing beneath him. Heat climbed into his face. His cock began to rise inside the trousers, dragging the cloth against skin that remained tender from the previous day. Jack shifted farther beneath the table in an unsuccessful attempt to hide it.

"Yes, very."

Kai's gaze dipped once. His smile widened. "I see."

Finn made a small sound that might have been disapproval of the question or approval of the answer. Edric closed the least useful notebook.

"You walked past us," Kai said. The humor remained, but the hurt beneath it did not disappear merely because Jack had returned.

"I did. I couldn't answer anyone in that yard. I didn't know I was going to Briartown until I reached the passage and chose the gates." Jack placed both hands on the table. "Next time I will leave word."

"Good," Finn said. "We spent an hour deciding which roads an injured idiot might take."

The name did not sting. Finn pushed the little bowl toward him. The paste inside smelled strong enough to numb Jack's nose.

Kai sat back. "I favored kidnapping. Edric favored collapse. Finn favored both but assigned probabilities."

"I did not favor either," Edric said. "I considered them."

"I'm sorry," he said.

The apology was not enough when all three of them had spent an hour trying to calculate where he might have fallen. Jack put one hand over the other on the table so he would stop worrying the edge of the bandage.

"There is something I should have told you before this," he said. "The attack on the lower road hurt my head. I don't remember most of my life here."

Finn stopped the small stone pestle beneath his fingers. Edric's attention moved from Jack to the copied practical sequence. Kai remained still beside him.

"I remembered Thornfield, Drake, and Eomer. Sometimes a face brings back one moment, or my hands know something before I do. I couldn't read when I arrived."

Edric drew Jack's copied page closer. The earliest lines leaned uncertainly across it. By the bottom, the same hand had begun producing recognizable words.

"Master Voss spoke while she wrote," he said. "You began reading during the lesson."

"The sounds joined to the marks. I still don't know why some things return and others don't." Jack glanced toward Kai. "Kai worked out most of this in the practice yard. He didn't tell you because I hadn't given him permission."

Kai took the damaged plum from beside Edric's notebooks and pared away the tooth mark with a small table knife.

"Does the Academy know?" Edric asked.

"The registrar knows about the attack and the stolen papers. He doesn't know about my memory, and I don't want this traveling beyond the table. I can do the work. I need people to tell me when I am missing something everyone else learned at six."

Finn resumed grinding. "Correction or explanation?"

"Both, unless I ask for only one. Don't pretend the question isn't strange. I usually know when it is."

Finn tipped a little more powder from a folded paper into the bowl and resumed grinding.

Edric turned his notebook sideways and began adding words beneath the copied ward sequence. He wrote where the breath belonged, what each line received, and where the force was supposed to leave. The notes he had brought recorded the exercise. The new ones explained it.

"You can repay me by learning the final consonant before Master Draek makes the entire yard listen again," he said without looking up.

The receiving ward remained dead beneath Jack's copied diagrams. Nothing in the careful lines offered him light. He accepted the notebook anyway.

Later, in War Arts, Master Draek stopped him beside the staff rack.

"You left an ordered exercise yesterday, Drake."

"Yes, Master."

"You will complete the missed ward work after instruction."

"They may all fail."

"Then you will have failed the work assigned. Take your staff."

Across the yard, Dorian had arrived with his emerald chain bright against black cloth. Akira stood in his usual place beside him. The boy on Dorian's other side might have been the third fountain attacker or merely someone who wanted the table's favor; Jack still could not name him.

He chose the long ash staff. His palm remained bandaged, his hip ached, and the bruises behind his knees resisted the first lowering of his stance. He adjusted until the pain became information rather than command.

Draek set the class to the shortened recovery. Jack sent one end down the marked line, arrested it before the packed earth, and let the shaft travel through his rear hand. The old flourish opened in his shoulder. He refused it. The opposite end came forward by the shortest useful path and stopped level with an imaginary rib.

"Again," Draek said.

Jack repeated it.



It belonged to an aching body in a sunlit yard, choosing what to keep.

On the fifth pass the movement belonged neither to a remembered balcony nor to the frightened boy who had failed before the clay plate. It belonged to an aching body in a sunlit yard, choosing what to keep.

When Draek called the halt, Jack stopped.

Finn's knives were still. Edric held a practice rod and watched from the next rank. Kai gave Jack one small nod before arranging his face into something less sincere.

Across the yard, Dorian was looking too.

Jack returned the staff to guard and waited for the next count.

A detailed botanical illustration of a flowering vine with large, deeply lobed leaves and small, five-petaled white flowers. The vine is positioned in the bottom corners of the page, framing the central text area. The background is a dark, textured green.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Quiet Little Victories



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

When Master Draek dismissed War Arts, Jack returned his staff to the rack and remained in the yard.

The other boys broke toward water, shade, and whatever freedom existed before the supper bell. Finn sheathed his long knives beneath Draek's supervision and left by the glasshouse passage. Kai started toward Jack, but a senior student intercepted him with a practice guard and an accusation involving three separate borrowers. Edric gathered his books beneath the awning and stayed where he was.

Dorian crossed the yard without coming near Jack.

Akira waited for him beside the open salle doors. Jack knew him from their shared classes and from the hands that had helped throw him into the fountain. He held a folded black vest over one arm and a clean towel over the other. As Dorian approached, Akira took the leather guard from his wrist, checked the fastening where it had pulled loose, and passed him the towel in the same movement.

Dorian accepted both services without interrupting his conversation with another emerald-chain student. He glanced across the yard once. The bruise from the gallery had faded along his cheek, leaving only a yellow shadow beneath the skin.

His stare held all the hostility it had held at breakfast. He said nothing.

At the fountain he had told Jack to consider them even. For the moment, he appeared to mean it.

Akira followed Dorian through the doors with the damaged guard, vest, and towel arranged over one arm. He carried no bag of his own.

Master Draek struck the iron frame with his black rod. "Drake. Your attention belongs here."

Jack faced the clay plate. The marks scored into it remained unchanged from the day before: three linked figures and the words he could now read without guessing. *Receive. Divide. Return.* A fresh bowl of salt smoked beside the frame. The mineral sting settled at the back of his throat.

"Mr. Vane," Draek said, "either leave or become useful. Take the striker."

Edric put down his books and accepted the padded iron bar. "Yes, Master."

Jack flexed his bandaged hand before taking the practice rod. Finn's paste had numbed the torn blister without stiffening his fingers. The bruises behind his knees resisted when he set his stance, and the healing wound at his hip pulled when he turned. He shortened the position until he could hold it without favoring one side.

Master Draek watched the adjustment but did not correct it. "Begin."

Jack placed the rod at the first mark. He knew the length of the line now. Edric's copied notes gave the breath after the first angle and before the second. He traced, breathed, and shaped the final consonant with the back of his tongue.

Nothing happened.

The plate remained dull clay. Salt smoke drifted through the iron frame and escaped into the yard.

"Again," Draek said.

Jack reset. The geometry closed cleanly this time. His breath lasted through the final figure. He spoke the word correctly enough that Edric made no movement behind the striker.

The plate remained clay.

Anger came quickly, but not with the helpless force of the previous afternoon. No one counted. Dorian was gone. Jack had eaten, slept, and returned by choice. He could inspect the failure instead of merely standing inside it.

He lowered the rod. "What am I supposed to be doing with the force?"

Draek's expression altered by very little. "Receiving it."

"The first figure says that. Where does it go afterward?"

Edric's grip shifted on the padded bar.

Master Draek came closer to the frame. "The second figure divides the impact around the protected space. The third returns it beyond the boundary."

"Returns it where?"

"Into the iron, the ground, and the air in the proportion established by your intent. A more advanced ward may return it toward its source. You are not attempting an advanced ward."

Jack studied the linked shapes again. He had treated them as three instructions that made a shield appear. The actual path lay under the names. A blow entered at the long open line. The paired angles split it around the empty center where a body would stand. The last figure joined both branches to the iron frame and the earth beneath it.

It was less like drawing a wall than giving rain somewhere to run. A roof failed when water collected without a gutter. A circuit failed when current had no complete path.

Jack had been closing the marks while imagining resistance, asking the force to arrive and then remain trapped in front of him.

"You assumed I knew what intent meant," he said.

"I assumed a student admitted to this year had raised a household ward before," Draek replied. "Your record says extensive private instruction. Your condition has made that record unreliable, but not unnecessary. Now that you have asked the useful question, try again."

Jack set the rod to clay.

He did not imagine a shining shield. He imagined Edric's blow entering the open line. At the second figure he gave it two routes around the space before his chest. At the third, he carried both routes down through the iron legs planted in the earth. Breath gave him time to hold the path. Salt remembered where it had been.

The final word left his mouth.



The ward held.

A pale film spread across the frame.

It was scarcely brighter than sunlight on clear water. The salt smoke flattened against it instead of passing through. Jack's forearm tightened around the rod as though he were holding a heavy door closed.

"Strike," Draek said.

Edric swung carefully. The padded bar met the film with a flat ringing note. Light traveled from the point of impact in two uneven streams, passed around the empty center, and vanished into the iron uprights. The ward held.

Jack laughed once in surprise.

"Do not celebrate before the standard blow," Draek said. "Again, Mr. Vane."

Edric adjusted both hands and struck harder.

The ward broke. White light tore along the weaker branch and scattered in sharp flecks that smelled of hot salt. The force reached the clay plate with enough strength to knock dust from its back. Jack's rod jumped in his hand.

"Your division favored the left," Draek said. "Adequate for a first successful ward. Poor against anyone who notices. Reset it."

Jack looked at Edric.

"He means it worked," Edric said.

"I know what he means."

"Then reset the plate instead of seeking translation from another student," Draek said.

Jack reset it.

The second ward formed more quickly and broke under the standard blow in almost the same place. On the third, Jack corrected the angle but let his breath escape before the force finished traveling. The light failed under Edric's first strike. By the fifth attempt, the two streams divided evenly and the ward survived one full blow before the next broke it.

Master Draek inspected the last scorched salt line. "You remain behind the class. You are no longer failing the exercise."

Jack set the rod in its rack. "Yes, Master."

"Tomorrow you will work in the ordinary line. If you leave my instruction again, I will mark the absence whether your reasons are excellent, terrible, or both."

"Yes, Master."

Draek walked away with the black rod beneath his arm.

Edric returned the striker to its hooks. Jack helped him gather the books from the awning, putting the loose papers between two heavier covers before the wind could take them.

"Why didn't you ask where the force went yesterday?" Edric asked.

"I thought asking where magic went would sound stupid."

"It does sound stupid. It was still the correct question."

Jack handed him the stack. "Thank you for staying."

Edric shifted the books until the weight settled against his narrow chest. "You needed someone to strike the ward. Do not make it sentimental."

They left the yard together.

Kai had occupied Jack's usual place by the time Jack and Edric reached the lower hall. He moved his plate rather than himself, requiring Jack to fit between his shoulder and the wall. Finn sat across from them beside Edric, a small covered pot waiting near his cup.

Jack had scarcely lowered himself onto the bench before Finn pushed the pot across the table.

"For your heels," Finn said. "It will burn badly anywhere else."

Jack turned the pot beneath his fingers. "Mrs. Gowrie's salve is helping the rest."

"Use this after washing. Leave the skin uncovered until it dries."

No request for an explanation followed the medicine. Jack put the pot carefully into his satchel.

"The ward worked," he said.

Finn glanced up from his bowl. "You didn't understand it yesterday."

Dorian's table was already full.

Akira stood behind Dorian's chair fastening the repaired wrist guard around Dorian's forearm. He checked that two fingers fit beneath the leather, then placed a folded message beside Dorian's cup. Only after Dorian had read the seal did he take the open seat at his right and begin his own meal.

"Why does Akira carry everything for him?" Jack asked.

Kai followed the question. "Because he's Dorian's personal retainer."

"He attends classes."

"He was raised to attend Dorian for the rest of his life. It would be inconvenient if an adult Dorian could read a treaty, ride into battle, or recognize poison while the person beside him could not." Kai tore his bread in half. "The expensive houses educate them together. One inherits. One makes inheritance survivable."

Edric corrected the edge of his assignment sheet. "Akira's marks are better than Dorian's in History."

"And Dorian's are better in formal spellwork," Kai said. "A well-designed pair."

At the other table, Akira reached for Dorian's empty cup before Dorian asked. Dorian continued speaking to the boy on his left. Nothing in the exchange suggested affection. It looked like a service practiced so long that neither participant needed to acknowledge it.

Dorian caught Jack watching.

His expression hardened. Jack waited for the remark that would pull the room toward them.

Dorian turned back to his supper.

Jack ate.

The next several days acquired repetition without becoming identical. His bruises changed from purple to green at the edges. Finn's medicine closed the skin above his heels. The friction burns stopped making every stair an argument. Jack formed the receiving ward in the ordinary line and lost it under the same blows that broke several other first-year attempts. Master Draek corrected his breath, Edric corrected the final consonant, and Kai produced a shield suspiciously weaker than the one Jack had seen before.

Dorian kept his distance. Akira remained near him so consistently that Jack stopped noticing each individual service. He trained in his own place, answered instructors correctly, and returned to Dorian whenever the lesson released them.

The Witch Purge assignment brought Jack and Edric to the Athenaeum after supper.

Edric selected a table beneath one of the white reading globes and arranged four books, two copied hearing records, a sand dish, and three ink bottles in a pattern that left Jack exactly enough room to work. The first source named twelve accused

witches. The Academy primer named four and called the remaining hearings inconclusive.

"That is not the same as innocent," Jack said.

"Nor is it the same as guilty. That is why Voss assigned sources instead of asking us to repeat the primer."

Jack dipped his quill. The point carried too much ink. He touched it to the bottle rim, remembered Edric doing the same above Caleo's copied ward notes, and tried the first citation.

The dead boy's hand wanted long, slanted letters joined by unnecessary strokes. Jack slowed until the inherited flourish could not carry him. His own writing emerged heavier and plainer. The first line wandered upward. The second remained level.

Edric read it without taking the page. "Family name first. The archive follows the title."

Jack corrected the order on the next line instead of scraping away the first.

They worked through the evening. Once, Kai appeared with sugared nuts, ate more than he contributed, and departed after being threatened with the silence table by an assistant librarian. Finn arrived long enough to return a botany index and left a wrapped heel of bread beside Jack's elbow. Neither interrupted the question Edric was answering.

By the final bell, Jack had one usable page, three sources, and a black stain along the side of his hand. His last citation held every part in the proper order. The letters were not elegant. They were readable, level, and his.

Edric sanded his own page and nodded toward Jack's. "That one will survive Voss."

Jack placed it on top of the crooked attempts.

Outside the high windows, Thornfield's lamps burned along the galleries. The books waited to be returned, Finn's bread waited in its paper, and tomorrow's corrections had already begun in Edric's margin.



Readable, level, and his.

Jack cleaned the quill and put it beside the page he intended to keep.

A detailed botanical illustration of a flowering vine with large, deeply lobed leaves and small, five-petaled white flowers with yellow centers. The vine is adorned with small, round, golden-brown berries. It forms a decorative border that curves around the central text area of the page.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lunch Survives Everything



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The morning spent itself on lessons Jack would not remember separately.

An instructor filled two boards with the terms of a trade compact and expected the room to copy them before the chalk dust settled. In Applied Numerics, Jack discovered that the dead boy's hand knew three methods for dividing a quantity and preferred the most ornamental one. Arcane Science supplied a demonstration involving six copper weights, a glass rod, and a resonance that made every loose chain in the room hum. The effect lasted less than a minute. The explanation lasted until the bell.

Jack kept up. That was enough.

At lunch, Kai dropped into the place beside him with his hair still damp at the temples and a folded scrap hidden beneath his bowl.

"For your continued education," he said.

Jack opened it under the edge of the table.

A clock occupied most of the paper. It had long arms, a furious round face, and both hands wrapped around the neck of a stick figure whose feet kicked uselessly above the ground. Beneath it, in Kai's quick, ugly handwriting, were four words.

Lunch survives everything.

Jack laughed.

"What is it?" Finn asked.

Jack turned the scrap around. Finn held out his hand.

He examined Kai's drawing with the same attention he gave a mislabeled jar. Then he took the pen lying beside Edric's assignment and added a small cock and balls between the dangling figure's legs.

"Very mature, Lord Ashwell," Edric said.

"I never claimed to be. That's on you, Edric."

Finn returned the pen. Edric took it instead, drew a little brimmed hat on the figure, and passed the scrap back to Jack.

Kai folded over his bowl, laughing into one hand.

No one explained the hat. Finn resumed eating. Edric pulled his pen away when Kai reached for it, wiped the point clean, and aligned it beside his plate.

Jack studied the drawing again. The hat had been shaded carefully. The cock had not.

He folded the scrap along its original crease and tucked it into the inner pocket of his vest.

"Preserving great art?" Kai asked.

"Evidence."

The rest of lunch survived Kai's attempt to steal Finn's pear, Edric's account of why the third Witch Purge source could not be trusted, and a disagreement at the next table that ended with half a cup of milk across the floor. By the time the bell sounded, Jack had eaten everything on his plate and forgotten to watch Dorian's table more than twice.

War Arts met beneath a white afternoon sky. The earlier rain had lifted from the yard in warm dampness, leaving the packed earth dark and springy beneath their shoes. Practice coats and short vests hung from pegs beneath the arcade. The boys trained bare through the shoulders and chest, sweat already beginning to shine along backs before Master Draek finished assigning pairs.

Jack took his staff from the rack.

Kai chose a blunted practice sword and rolled his wrist until the brass guard settled comfortably against his palm. His Academy trousers fitted his narrow waist too exactly to have come from the same store pattern as everyone else's. Even stripped of his vest and plain brass chain, every line of him appeared carefully made.

"Three touches," Master Draek said. "Clean contact. No flourishes after the mark. Begin."

Kai saluted with too much wrist.

Jack struck at him before the performance was finished.

Kai's sword snapped into line and caught the staff a handspan from his ribs. The correction was so quick that the careless salute vanished from it. Jack turned the blocked end down, slid his rear hand, and sent the other end toward Kai's shoulder.

Kai retreated. His heel dragged deliberately in the dirt.

Jack stopped the strike before it touched him.

"Don't," he said.

Kai's eyebrows lifted. "Hit me? Excellent instruction."

"Lose before I've earned it."

The smile remained, but its easy shape did not. Around them, wood struck wood and Draek called someone back into stance. Kai glanced once toward the instructor and brought his sword up properly.

"All right," he said.

He came inside the reach of the staff before Jack had finished resetting it.

Jack gave ground, caught the descending sword across the middle of the shaft, and felt the shock travel through both palms. Kai did not withdraw along the obvious line. He rolled the blade around the staff, stepped across Jack's lead foot, and put the capped point against the hollow beneath his ribs.

"One," Kai said softly.

The point left him at once.

Jack's pulse had jumped for reasons that had little to do with the touch. Kai stood closer than the drill required, breathing easily, freckles dark against the heat rising into his face. The careless boy from breakfast was gone. This Kai held his balance through the balls of his feet and watched Jack's hips instead of the weapon.

Jack wanted him to do it again.

He attacked first.

The staff drove high, reversed low, and caught only air when Kai slipped around the second end. Kai's practice blade skimmed Jack's shoulder. Jack dropped beneath it, planted the staff behind Kai's ankle, and used the other end against his chest to take his balance.

Kai twisted as he fell. He landed on one hand rather than his back, hooked Jack's staff beneath his arm, and dragged.

Jack went down with him.

They struck the packed earth shoulder to shoulder. Kai's breath left in a startled laugh. Jack kept both hands on the staff, rolled across Kai's hips, and put one end against the center of his bare chest.

"One," Jack said.

Kai raised his face. Sweat had loosened his reddish hair across his forehead. Jack's knee was planted between his legs, his weight braced through the staff, and Kai's sword arm was trapped beneath them both.

For one suspended moment, neither tried to move.

"Continue the courtship after the drill," Master Draek said.

Laughter passed through the nearest pairs. Jack got to his feet. Kai accepted the hand he offered and rose close enough that their chests nearly touched.

"He approves of us," Kai murmured.

Jack shoved him back into measure with the middle of the staff.

The next exchange left no room for talk. Kai stopped pretending to be late. His blade found the openings Jack's inherited flourishes left behind, and Jack shortened each movement until Kai had less ornament to use against him. Staff and sword rang, slid, and separated. Dirt tore beneath their shoes. Sweat ran from Jack's chest into the waistband of his trousers.

Kai touched his side. Jack caught Kai across the upper arm.

Two marks each. They reset breathing hard, and Kai showed his teeth above the plain, economical guard.

Jack drove for the third mark.

Kai stepped through it. The staff passed beside his waist; his sword turned toward Jack's throat. Jack released his rear hand, caught Kai behind the neck, and used the forward half of the staff to pin his sword arm across them both.

The capped blade stopped beneath Jack's jaw while the staff pressed against Kai's ribs. Master Draek's black rod struck the ground once.

"Halt."



A simultaneous mark is not a victory.

They remained locked together for one breath longer than obedience required. Kai's chest rose against Jack's arm. His face was close enough for Jack to see a bead of sweat caught in one pale freckle beside his mouth.

Jack released him.

"A simultaneous mark is not a victory," Master Draek said. "It is two boys explaining to a medic why both of them were right. Again tomorrow."

Master Draek pointed the black rod toward the equipment racks.

Kai went.

Jack followed, trying not to trace the narrow line of Kai's back or the way his trousers held close beneath his waist. He failed before they reached the arcade.

The showers filled quickly after dismissal. Steam softened the tiled room and gathered in drops along the stone arches. Boys claimed cubbies, shook dirt from trousers, argued over soap, and carried towels toward the curtained stalls. The noise was ordinary enough to provide privacy of its own.

Jack stripped beside Kai.

His body had nearly finished putting itself right. The bruises behind his knees had faded to yellow. The line at his hip pulled only when he turned too far, and Finn's medicine had closed his heels beneath clean new skin. He pushed his trousers down, stepped free of them, and felt Kai's attention follow the movement.

Jack straightened naked and faced him.

Kai made no effort to pretend he had been watching something else. His gaze traveled once over Jack's lean chest and stomach, the dark hair below it, and the soft weight hanging between his narrow thighs.

"You're staring," Jack said.

"I have an excellent view."

Jack let his own gaze drop.

Kai's cock hung full and lengthening above his balls. It was long and relatively thin, the shaft lifting toward a broad, mushroomed head that had begun to flush darker than the skin below it. He had not finished undressing; his trousers remained caught below one knee, and the position should have made him ridiculous. It did not. His delicate waist narrowed above his hips, framed even more cleanly without the fitted uniform around it.

Jack took his towel and crossed to the last stall.

He opened the curtain, then glanced back.

"Are you coming?"

Kai freed his foot from the trousers.

The smile he gave Jack was bright, but he carried his towel low in front of himself as they crossed the wet tile. By the time he stepped into the stall, his cock had risen nearly upright.

Jack pulled the curtain closed behind him.

The stall had been built for one boy. With two, Kai's shoulder met the wall and Jack's hip touched the stone bench whenever either of them moved. Hot water struck Jack's chest, broke across his stomach, and ran between his legs. Kai stood just beyond the center of the spray, wet hair darkened against his forehead.

Neither spoke.

Jack put one hand around Kai's cock.

The shaft was hot from his body and hard enough to lift heavily into Jack's grip. Kai's breath caught. He braced one hand against the tile behind Jack instead of touching him at once.

"You hid this under the table very well," Jack said.

"Years of training."

The answer came lightly. The sound underneath it did not.

Jack drew his fist up, pushed the foreskin back from the wet head, and used his thumb through the clear fluid gathered there. Kai's hips followed the next stroke before he could turn it into a joke.

Then Kai reached for him.

His fingers closed around Jack's thickening shaft and drew it forward into the space between them. Jack hardened quickly under the firm turn of Kai's wrist. Their hands worked at different rhythms, knocking together once before Kai shifted closer and made room.

Jack backed toward the bench and sat. His legs opened around Kai. Water struck Kai's shoulder and streamed down his chest as he stepped between Jack's knees.

Jack released him.

Kai did not complain. He bent until one knee met the tile and kept his hand on Jack, working the foreskin over the head and down again in long strokes. His free hand settled on Jack's knee. His face was level with Jack's cock, close enough that each breath moved warmly across the wet skin.

Jack watched him watch it. Kai tightened his grip until Jack's thick shaft filled his fist completely, the head dark and bare each time he drew the skin down. Clear fluid spread beneath his thumb and thinned in the shower water.

"Gods," Kai murmured. He slowed long enough to expose the head fully and turned his wrist as though the angle might reveal some flaw he had missed. "Your cock is fucking perfect."

Jack's hips lifted into his hand. "You can keep admiring it while you work."

Kai's grin flashed and disappeared as he bent closer. He learned Jack's response through pressure: firmer beneath the head, slower on the downward stroke, then a full pull that let the foreskin cover him before Kai's thumb stripped it back again. Jack's thighs began to tense around him.

Kai's free hand left his knee. It traveled along the inside of Jack's thigh, passed beneath his tightening balls, and brushed across his taint. One wet fingertip found his hole and pressed without entering.

Jack caught Kai's wrist and moved the hand away. "No."

"All right."

Kai braced that hand beside Jack's hip. Jack kept hold of the wrist, his fingers closed firmly enough to feel Kai's pulse while the other hand continued working his cock.

The bench pressed cold beneath Jack despite the steam. Everything else had become heat: Kai between his legs, Kai's wrist under his hand, water running over his stomach and down the underside of his cock into Kai's fist. Kai built the rhythm until Jack's breath shortened and his grip tightened without conscious instruction.

Kai felt it and slowed. His fist loosened before Jack could cross the edge, leaving only his thumb moving beneath the head. Jack's hips chased the missing pressure once. Kai remained close, watching his face while the urgency receded.

Jack loosened his hold on Kai's wrist. The full stroke returned.

This time Kai took longer bringing him back. He opened his fist around the wet head, closed again on the downstroke, and let Jack thrust shallowly into his palm. Jack's balls pulled closer. His fingers clamped around Kai, and once again Kai eased the pressure away, stopping with Jack's foreskin drawn back and the swollen head exposed inches from his face.

"You like having the reins," Kai said quietly.

Jack could barely make the answer level. "You like knowing when to pull them."

Kai's mouth curved. He waited until Jack's grip eased, then started a third time. The strokes came firmer now, wet and complete, his thumb dragging the seam and circling under the rim on every pass. Jack held Kai's wrist throughout it, tightening when the pleasure climbed and loosening when Kai slowed, no longer pretending the signals were accidental.

The steam thickened around them. The other showers disappeared beneath the water, Kai's breathing, and the slick movement of his hand. Jack's thighs drew closer around Kai's shoulders. He reached the edge again and held there, cock pulsing in Kai's fist while Kai reduced the stroke to a maddening turn beneath the head.

Jack loosened his grip but did not release the wrist. "Don't stop this time."

Kai nodded once and restored the full rhythm. Jack's hand tightened hard around him. Kai obeyed the words instead of the pressure, keeping the same firm stroke while Jack's hips lifted from the bench and his balls drew tight beneath the shaft.

"Kai."

The first spurt struck Kai across the cheek. His eyes widened as Jack's cock pulsed again, sending a thick white line over his mouth and chin. A third burst crossed his chest. More followed, running through the water in pale ropes that clung briefly to his skin before thinning toward his stomach.

Kai stayed exactly where he was. Jack's hand remained locked around his wrist while the last heavy pulses spilled over Kai's knuckles. His body shook against the tile. Kai kept stroking him, slower now, drawing out what remained until Jack's hips dropped back to the bench.

For a moment there was only water and Jack trying to breathe.

Kai surveyed himself. White streaked one cheek, his lips, the hollow beneath his collarbone, and the hand still wrapped around Jack's softening cock. Surprise held him quiet.

Then delight moved across his face.

"Fuck, Jack," he whispered.

He wiped the line from his lower lip with his thumb and studied it before letting the water take it from his hand. He seemed prepared to remain kneeling there and admire the damage.

Jack stood.

His knees were not ready. He caught Kai by both hips and put his face into the wet curve of Kai's shoulder until the stall stopped shifting beneath him. Kai rose with him and closed an arm across his back.

Jack breathed against his skin.

His hands moved lower. Kai's ass filled both palms, firm beneath the water. Jack kneaded the cheeks slowly at first, recovering his strength against Kai's body. Kai's cock pressed hard between their stomachs, wet at the head and untouched since Jack sat down.

"I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me," Kai murmured near his ear.

Jack tightened both hands.

Kai made a small sound and pushed back into his grip.

Jack turned them. He caught Kai by the hips and put him down on the stone bench with enough force to splash water from its edge. Kai landed sitting, startled laughter breaking into a breath when Jack spread his knees and lowered himself between them.

Kai leaned back against the tile. His cock stood from his lap, flushed and dripping, his balls drawn close beneath it. Fully hard, the long shaft made the head seem even more outrageous: broad, blunt, and mushroomed like the end of a battering ram. Jack wondered what that head would feel like set against his hole, then pushing through the tight rim a little at a time. The thought stayed hot in him while water ran down Kai's stomach and gathered through the hair at the base.

"So," Kai said, breathless, "is this the part where you decide my mouth deserves professional competition?"

"No."

Jack wrapped his hand around Kai's shaft.

Kai's smile caught. "Cruel."

Jack pulled him forward until his ass reached the edge of the bench. Kai opened his legs wider without being asked. Jack's other hand passed beneath his balls, followed the smooth line of his taint, and found the tight opening behind it.

He circled it with one wet fingertip.

Kai's head struck the tile with a quiet knock. His cock jumped in Jack's fist.

Jack did it again.

The muscle tightened beneath his finger, then eased when Kai lifted his hips toward the contact. Jack did not push inside. He traced the rim while his other hand drew the foreskin back and worked the slick head with his palm.

Kai lost the next joke before it reached his mouth.

Jack settled into a steady rhythm. He stroked the full length, thumb turning beneath the head, while the finger behind Kai moved in slow circles that made his thighs shake around Jack's shoulders. Kai tried to brace both feet on the tile. One slipped. Jack caught his knee against his side and kept working.

The shower ran across Jack's back. Kai reached down and buried one hand in his wet hair, not directing him toward his cock, only holding on.

"Harder," Kai said.

Jack tightened his grip.

Kai thrust into his fist. His ass lifted from the bench, pressing the tight ring of muscle firmly against Jack's circling finger. Jack held the pressure there without entering and matched the roughening movement of Kai's hips.

The performance had left him completely. Kai's mouth stayed open. Each breath broke louder than the last, but he kept the sounds inside the stall, one hand white-knuckled against the bench and the other tangled in Jack's hair.

Jack watched his narrow stomach tighten.

"There," Kai said. The word barely formed. "Don't stop."

Jack kept the same tight stroke as Kai came across his own stomach in quick white pulses. The first reached his chest. The next spilled over Jack's moving hand and ran between his fingers. Kai's hips jerked away and the hand in Jack's hair closed hard, but Jack released the circling pressure behind him without letting go of his cock.

Water had already begun thinning the cum across Kai's stomach. Jack caught it with both hands and spread the warm slickness back over him. One hand closed at the base of his cock and dragged upward; the other followed before the first reached the broad head. He milked Kai that way, hand over hand, each pass pushing the last small pulses through the shaft. White and clear fluid welled from the slit, smeared across the mushroomed head, and slipped between Jack's fingers into the rinse.

Kai sagged against the wall and let him do it. His thighs remained open around Jack while the overlapping strokes softened from pressure into cleanup. When nothing more emerged, Jack leaned forward and settled his chin into the wet pubic hair above the root of Kai's cock. His face rested against Kai's lower belly and rose and fell with each heavy breath.

The water had not taken every trace of scent. Cum clung faintly to Kai's skin, salt and musk over the warmer smell of Kai himself beneath it. Jack breathed there while Kai's fingers loosened in his hair and moved once across the back of his head.

"You are a menace," Kai said quietly.

They stayed that way until someone two stalls down complained that the hot water was failing.

Kai washed first. He cleaned Jack's hands without comment, turning each beneath the spray until nothing remained between the fingers. Jack rinsed the last white traces from Kai's cheek and chest, then stepped back enough to let him stand.

Boys were dressing beyond the curtain. A towel snapped. Someone had lost soap and accused three innocent people. Thornfield continued around them.



I can't promise you anything other than friendship.

Kai tied his towel low around his waist. The freckles across his shoulders had darkened with heat.

Jack said his name before he could leave. "Kai."

Kai stopped with one hand on the curtain.

"I can't promise you anything other than friendship," Jack said. "I think I might be falling for someone else."

Kai's hand remained curled around the curtain. "That bakery boy?"

"His name is Caleo."

Kai tightened the towel knot. "That's fine. I don't want anything else."

He glanced back from the opening. "Lunch tomorrow?"

"Obviously."

Kai smiled and left the stall.

Jack remained under the water for another minute before following.

At supper, Finn and Edric had already taken their usual side of the lower table. Kai arrived behind Jack carrying two cups and talking to a boy who wanted the practice sword he had borrowed. Jack moved his plate before Kai reached the bench.

Kai sat beside him.

Neither mentioned the shower. Kai argued with Edric about whether a copied diagram counted as a primary source. Finn removed the bruised part of an apple and put the sound half on Jack's plate. Jack ate it while Kai's knee rested against his beneath the table.

The contact remained through the meal.

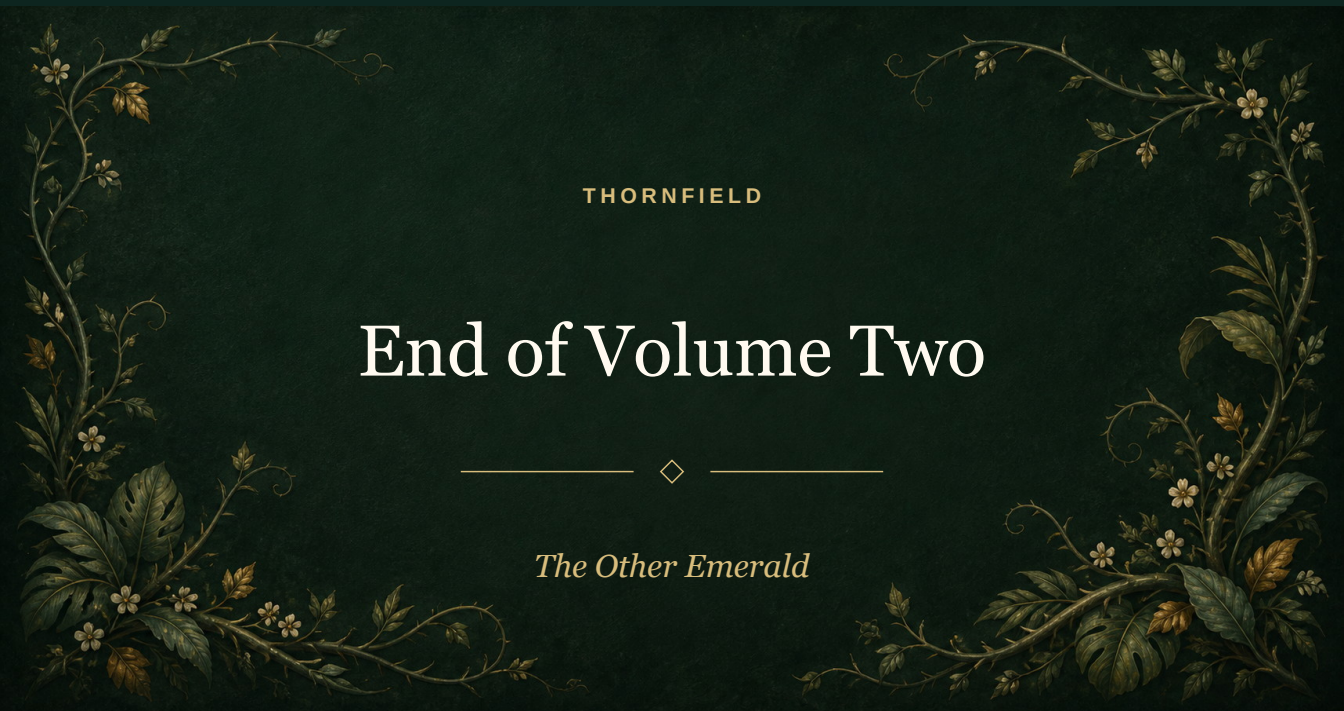
Later, in room twelve, Jack emptied his vest before hanging it over the chair. Kai's folded scrap fell beside the first clean page of his Witch Purge notes.

Jack opened it.



Lunch survives everything.

Jack smoothed the crease with his thumb and placed the drawing beside the page he had kept.

An ornate, symmetrical floral border in a dark, muted green and brown color palette. It features delicate vines, small white flowers, and large, detailed leaves, framing the central text area.

THORNFIELD

End of Volume Two

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The Other Emerald