THE LAST COVENANT

BOOK ONE

THE CITY BENEATH THE SKY

A novel

Expanded edition. Canon preserved; scenes, characters, and mythology deepened.

PROLOGUE

The Night the Gods Ran

The first thing the boy remembered was the sky breaking.

It did not break the way glass breaks, in a bright scatter of pieces. It broke the way ice breaks on a deep lake, with a long groan that began far away and traveled toward him. He felt it in his teeth before he heard it. Then a white seam opened from one edge of the world to the other, and the night peeled back along it like a lid.

Behind the sky was another sky.

It was older, and darker, and so crowded with stars that they seemed to lean down and look. The boy had once been taken to the sea and told the water went on forever. This was the first time he understood what "forever" might mean.

Below the wound, the city was running.

Men and women in bronze armor poured down terraced streets with spears reversed and shields slung. Some carried the wounded. Some carried children, and held them with the grim carefulness of people who had decided the children were the only things worth saving. A woman stopped to press a clay lamp into the hands of a stranger, as though light itself were something that might be lost. Then she ran on.

Every face was turned toward the mountain.

On its summit stood seven figures.

They were not men. At that distance he could not have said exactly how he knew, only that the air around them was wrong. It bent. It thickened, like the air above a fire. One of them wore a

crown of living flame that did not seem to burn him. One had wings folded against his back, black and jointed like the wings of a machine. One held a spear that made the very light curve around it. The largest had a face the color of a storm cloud, and when he lifted his head the boy felt the entire hillside brace.

And behind them, deep under the earth, something enormous moved.

The boy could not see its whole shape. No one could have. He saw only the ground ripple the way skin ripples over a muscle, and then, in the mountain's flank, an eye open. It was slow and heavy-lidded, and it was larger than the house where he had been born.

It looked at him.

Not at the gods, he thought, with the cold clarity of dreams. *At me.*

"Close the Gates."

The voice came from the summit. It was calm, and that was the worst part. It was the voice of someone who had already made a terrible decision and was now only carrying it out.

"There are seven," said another.

"Then seven must sleep."

The ground shook. Somewhere a bell began to ring and was cut off mid-note. On the summit the fire-crowned figure turned his head, and the boy saw the god's face for the first time. It was young. That was what he would remember. Whatever the god was about to do, he was afraid of it.

A third voice spoke. It was quieter than the others, almost lost in the roar. Years later the boy would understand that it had not been meant for the gods at all. It had been a warning, sent forward through time to whoever would one day be able to hear

it.

"The covenant is broken."

The mountain split.

Blue-white light climbed the sky from the wound in its roots. It swallowed the terraces first, then the running people, then the lamps and the bells and the bronze. It was almost gentle. The last thing the boy saw was the woman with the clay lamp, who had reached the bottom of the stair. She turned and looked back, and she was not afraid. She looked like someone who had finally been told the answer to a question she had carried all her life.

Then the light reached him.

And the boy woke.

Fourteen years from that night, Elias Vale would dream of it for the last time.

Except that this time, someone would be waiting for him when he opened his eyes.

CHAPTER ONE

The Boy Who Dreamed of the Dead

Elias Vale had learned not to tell people about his dreams.

He had learned it the way most children learn that fire is hot, through one bad experience and then a long, careful avoidance. When he was eleven, he had described the staircase into the ocean to a school counselor. He told her about the way the steps simply continued below the waterline, green and glowing, and how the water did not seem to mind. She listened with her head tilted, and wrote something on a pad. Two weeks later his father was called in to discuss "a vivid imagination."

His father had listened with the same polite blankness he used for tax forms and weather reports. On the drive home, he said nothing at all until they reached the red light by the petrol station. Then, without turning his head, he said, "You don't have to tell them everything, you know."

It was not the response Elias had expected. For a long time afterward, he turned it over like a stone, hunting for the flaw in it.

People said dreams were borrowed pieces of memory, scraps of the day rearranged. They said the brain made its own cinema out of what it had lying around. Elias had read about it. He had read quite a lot about it, in fact, in the small hours when he lay rigid in bed trying not to go back to sleep. He could recite the theories as well as any textbook.

They were wrong.

He knew it the way he knew his own handwriting. For three years he had been visiting the same places: a desert city buried under a roof of glass, so that the dunes outside pressed their gold faces against it like a crowd at a window. The staircase descending into the ocean. A forest where every tree carried a small bronze nameplate, and some of the plates were polished and some were green with age and some, only a few, were new. And a black river running through a city whose buildings were older than anything in any book.

The strange part was never what he saw. It was how he saw it.

Dreams were supposed to be slippery. You were never sure of the rules. Doors led to rooms they shouldn't, and your teeth fell out, and the people you knew wore the wrong faces. But the dead river city did not slip. Its streets stayed where he had left them. If he turned left at the fountain with the broken basin, he found the bakery with the blue door, and the bakery was always closed, and there was always a handwritten card in its window that he could never quite read. He had begun to feel that if he could only stay long enough, he would learn its hours.

These did not feel like dreams.

They felt like homesickness.

* * *

On the morning everything changed, Elias dreamed of a door.

It stood alone in a field of ash, which was new. The ash lay deep and fine and perfectly still, and when he looked down he saw that he left no footprints in it. The door was tall, taller than a house door, made of some dark wood that had gone silver along

its grain. Seven lines had been carved into its face. They formed a ring, and in the middle of the ring was a symbol he did not recognize.

He knew he was not alone.

There was a presence just behind his left shoulder, warm and close, the way a person stands when she is about to take your hand. Elias did not turn. He was afraid that if he looked, it would stop being possible.

She reached past him toward the seven-lined mark.

He saw her hand, thin, with a small scar across the knuckle of the first finger. He had spent years trying to remember that scar. He had asked his father once whether it was real, and his father had said, in the careful voice he used when walking over something fragile, that yes, she'd cut it on a bread knife, a long time ago. Elias had gone upstairs and cried for no reason he could explain. That small ordinary fact had been so much worse than a mystery.

His mother had disappeared when he was six.

That was the whole of it, the entire official record. She was in the kitchen, and then she was gone, and the world rearranged itself around the absence the way water closes over a dropped stone. What she left behind fit in a shoebox: one photograph, one silver pendant on a thin chain, and a single sentence that his father refused to explain.

Never open a door you cannot close.

In the dream, her fingers hovered an inch from the symbol, and the ash around them began to lift in slow spirals, as if the whole field were holding its breath.

She turned.

He had only fragments of her face. He had the photograph, but a photograph is a single afternoon, and a person is not. Now, in the dream, he saw the rest of her. He saw the way her mouth curved before she spoke, as though each sentence were a decision she was making on purpose. He saw the exhaustion in her eyes, and under the exhaustion something fierce that did not look like it had ever been tired at all.

"Elias," she said. "They found you."

He woke to the sound of knocking.

* * *

Three knocks. Slow, evenly spaced, and unhurried.

Elias lay very still. The ceiling above him was the same ceiling it had always been, with the water stain in the corner shaped like a continent no one had discovered. His clock said 5:41. Gray light pressed at the curtains. In the house below him there was no sound at all, which meant his father had already left for the early shift. The man was out the door before dawn every working day, and had been for as long as Elias could remember.

Three more knocks.

He told himself it was a neighbor, or a delivery, or the pipes. Houses made noises. He went on telling himself this while he put his feet on the cold floor, and while he crossed to the window, and while he drew back the curtain with two fingers like someone peeking at a thing he was not sure he wanted to see.

There was no one on the doorstep.

The street lay empty under the streetlamps. A cat sat on the wall of the house opposite, washing one paw. Elias breathed out, and the breath fogged the glass, and that was when he saw it.

The condensation on the inside of the window had already been disturbed.

Someone had written in it, with a finger or with something that was not a finger, in a thin line of beaded damp that was slowly beginning to run. Seven words, in a hand he did not know and somehow could read perfectly.

THE CITY REMEMBERS YOUR NAME.

Elias stepped backward. His heel struck the bed frame and he barely noticed.

Inside. The writing was on the inside of the glass. Whoever had done this had been standing in his room. Or the room had been written on from some other place entirely, from the far side of the glass, from the wrong side of the world.

He realized he was holding the pendant. He did not remember reaching for it. The silver was warm against his palm, much warmer than skin, and he could feel a faint pulse in it. It was not a heartbeat, but something with the same patience.

Downstairs, a door opened.

He had not heard footsteps. He had not heard a key. There was only the soft, definite sound of the front door swinging inward, and then the quality of the house changed, the way a room changes when someone enters it who does not belong.

A second later, the lights went out.

Not only in his room. Through the wall he could hear the refrigerator downstairs shudder into silence. The streetlamps outside went dark one by one, a long diminishing line like a sentence being erased, until the whole street stood in the gray beginning of day with nothing to hold it up.

Elias stood in the dark, fourteen years old, with his mother's pendant burning in his hand and a word in his mouth that he did

not know he was about to say.

"Mum?"

Below him, a stair creaked, as if someone had begun, very carefully, to climb.

CHAPTER TWO

The Coin

There was no one on the stairs.

That was the part Elias would try to explain to Noah later, over a bag of chips and a great deal of denial. He had stood at the top of the landing, with the flashlight from his father's tool drawer shaking in his fist and a school cricket bat he did not remember picking up held in the other, and listened. The creak had come again. Then a third time, nearer.

And then the lights came back, all at once, and the refrigerator coughed itself awake, and there was nothing in the hallway but the ordinary clutter of a house where two people lived without discussing it. A coat on the hook. A pair of boots. The stain on the wallpaper where the damp had once got in.

The front door was shut. It was locked. The chain was on.

Elias stood in the hall for a full minute, staring at the chain.

Then he went and made toast, because it was the only plan available, and he ate it standing up, and he did not look at the kitchen window. When he finally did, the words on his bedroom glass had dried and vanished, as though they had never been there.

He put the cricket bat back in the cupboard under the stairs.

He took the pendant with him.

* * *

Noah was waiting at the school gate with a bruise under his left eye and a secret in his pocket.

He refused to explain either.

This was in itself so unusual that Elias stopped walking. Noah Varr was a person who had once narrated his own tonsillectomy to the surgeon. He had told Elias, in the first week they'd known each other, that his mother was expecting a baby, that his uncle owed a man money, that he had broken his arm once falling off a roof, and that the roof was not strictly his. He told everyone everything, at volume, with gestures. It was not an act. He simply had no mechanism for holding things in. Secrets, in Noah, were like water in a cracked jug.

Now he stood with his back against the brick wall, arms crossed so tightly he was nearly hugging himself, and when he saw Elias he did not make a joke.

"Elias," he said, lowering his voice. "I need you to see something."

"Your eye."

"Later."

"Did someone hit you?"

"*Later*."

They had been friends since primary school. Elias remembered the day it began. He was seven, a year after his mother, standing alone at the edge of the playground because the other children had learned to read his silences and found them uncomfortable. And then a boy with a gap-toothed grin and a stolen packet of biscuits had walked straight up to him and said, "You look like you need someone to be annoying at you," and sat down.

He had been annoying at Elias ever since. It had been, Elias thought, the single best thing that ever happened to him.

So the fear on Noah's face now landed somewhere under his ribs.

"Not here," Noah said, and pulled him toward the empty room behind the science block.

* * *

Noah put the coin on the desk.

It was bronze, about the size of a large biscuit, thick and old, the edges worn smooth by hands. Someone had drilled a small hole through it long ago for a cord, and then, apparently, thought better of the idea. On one face, a ring of seven lines had been cut deep into the metal. In the middle of the ring was a symbol he did not recognize.

Elias recognized it instantly.

He did not breathe. He did not move. He could feel his pulse go through his throat.

"Noah," he said, very evenly. "Where did you get that?"

"My granddad gave it to me."

"When?"

"Last night." Noah's voice cracked on the second word, and he swallowed. "He doesn't, you know, he doesn't *give* me things. He's not like that. He sat on the end of my bed at one in the morning and he just..." He gestured helplessly. "He put it in my hand and he closed my fingers over it. And his hands were *cold*, Elias. It was June in my room and his hands were cold."

"What did he say?"

"He said if you ever started dreaming about doors, I had to find you."

The room was very quiet.

It was a stupid room, Elias thought, from a long way off. Stacked chairs and a broken Bunsen burner and a faded periodic table. A place that existed to be forgotten. And yet it seemed to him that the whole school had gone silent around them and was leaning in.

"I never told you about the doors," he said.

"I know."

"I never told *anyone*."

"I *know*." Noah laughed once, high and unhappy. "That's what's making me feel sick."

Elias put out his hand.

He would think about this moment often, in the years ahead. He would turn it over and over, the way he turned over his father's remark at the red light. A person never knows, in the instant of choosing, which of their choices are the doors. He only thought: *Noah is afraid, and I am the only one he trusted with it.* That seemed like a good enough reason.

The coin was warm.

Not warm like metal left in the sun. Warm like something alive. It made the skin of his fingertips prickle, and then the prickle traveled up through the bones of his wrist, and he saw the seven-lined circle blaze in the dark behind his eyelids, and the room vanished.

For one heartbeat he stood in a vast underground chamber.

It was so large he could not see its ceiling. The air tasted of cold stone and old rain. Seven doors surrounded him, each carved from dark wood gone silver along the grain. They were the door from his dream, but there were seven of them now, set in a vast ring. Six were closed and sealed.

One stood open.

Beyond it came a sound.

It was slow, and deep, and unhurried. In. Out. In. Out. A sound like breathing, if the thing that breathed was large enough to be mistaken for a tide.

Then the vision ended, and Elias was on his knees on the floor of the science room with his heart going like a trapped bird, and the coin was on the floor beside him where he had dropped it. It rocked once, twice, and was still.

"Elias." Noah was on his knees too. His hand was on Elias's shoulder, gripping hard. "Elias, say something."

"Your grandfather," Elias said. His voice did not sound like his own. "What's his name? His full name."

"You know his name."

"Say it."

Noah hesitated. Something moved behind his eyes that Elias could not read.

"Samuel," he said finally. "Samuel Varr."

He said it the way someone says the name of a place they have been told never to visit.

"He told me something else," Noah added, so quietly that Elias almost missed it. "He said there was a man looking for this. A man who's been looking for a very long time."

Before Elias could ask who, a shadow crossed the window.

It moved across the glass like a hand across a face. It was long, and wrong, and it fell in a direction that made no sense, as if the sun were somewhere impossible. Elias turned his head slowly, and Noah turned with him.

The window overlooked a car park and a brick wall. Beyond it there was nothing: no building, no pylon, no crane. Nothing tall enough in the whole flat grey of the town to throw a shadow

like that.

Down the corridor, a teacher was droning about fractions. Somebody laughed. A bell rang in another wing. The ordinary world went on, loud and oblivious, not a hundred feet away.

Only Elias and Noah saw the shadow stop.

A figure formed on the glass.

It did not walk up to it. It *appeared*, the way a bruise appears, one pale smear at a time. Then a hand pressed itself against the pane from the outside. It was long-fingered, white as paper, with no lines on the palm at all.

Seven lines bloomed in the condensation around it.

The same ring. The same symbol.

On the floor, the coin began to glow. First dull red, then orange, then a white so fierce that Noah snatched his hand away with a hiss. The air in the room went thin and metallic. Elias heard, very clearly, the small sound of a pencil rolling off a desk.

A voice whispered from nowhere. It was not loud. It was not threatening. It was the voice of someone who has watched a very long time and now, at the last moment, cannot stand to watch any more.

"Run."

CHAPTER THREE

The Stranger at the Gate

They ran.

Not because they understood what was happening, but because every instinct either of them owned said *move*, and for once the instincts agreed. Elias snatched the coin off the floor and hissed as it scorched his palm. Noah hauled the rear door open with his shoulder. They burst out behind the science block, past the bins and the bicycle racks, over a low fence that Noah cleared with a grace he would deny ever afterward, and into the back lanes of the town.

Nobody shouted after them. That was the unnerving part. Behind them the school went on with its Tuesday, bells and fractions and the thin sour smell of floor polish, as though two students had not just vanished through a wall of ordinary air. Elias kept expecting a teacher's voice, a siren, anything that belonged to the world he knew.

Instead, the only sound was their own feet and the coin, which hummed against his leg through the fabric of his pocket like a wasp caught in a jar.

They crossed three streets before Noah finally stopped.

He bent double with his hands on his knees. His face had gone the color of old porridge. "Okay," he gasped. "Okay. I'm not a runner. I want that on the record. My whole family is built for sitting."

"Noah."

"I'm just saying, if we're going to be chased by whatever *that* was, I'd like it known I contribute in other ways."

"Noah." Elias looked back along the lane. It was empty. A pigeon walked in a small affronted circle on a wall. "Where are we going?"

"No idea."

"You're lying."

A pause.

"Yes," said Noah miserably.

"Where?"

"My granddad said if it ever got bad, to go to the corner behind the old tannery. I don't know why. I thought it was an old man thing. He says lots of things. He told me once that the moon was a hole in the sky and we were getting a good look at the other side." Noah straightened and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I only half listen to him. Which I'm now pretty sure was a mistake."

The old tannery had been closed since before either of them was born. Its brick chimney still stood over the lane like a blackened finger, and the alley beside it ran narrow and damp between two blank walls, ending in a dead end of soot-stained stone.

Someone was standing at the end of it.

She looked about seventeen. She had dark hair cut bluntly at the jaw and a gray coat buttoned to the throat, too heavy for June. She was thin in the way of people who walk a great deal. And her eyes were wrong. Elias could not have said why at first. They were an ordinary dark brown, but they seemed to catch light that was not there, as if she were looking at them from the inside of a lit room.

She was watching them the way you watch a door that has just opened.

"Elias Vale," she said.

Noah stepped in front of him so fast he nearly tripped over his own feet.

"Who are you?"

"Mara."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the one I'm giving."

"How do you know his name?"

Mara looked past Noah's shoulder. For the first time, something moved in her face. It was not warmth, exactly. It was nearer to the expression of a person confronting a photograph of someone they used to know.

"Because your mother told me," she said.

The lane went silent.

It was a very particular silence. Elias had heard it once before, at six years old, in a kitchen where something large and invisible had just happened and nobody could say what. It was the silence of the world holding still to make room for a sentence.

He stepped around Noah. His legs seemed to be working on their own.

"You knew my mother?"

"I knew the woman she was before she became the woman you remember."

"What does that mean?"

"It means she had a life before you." Mara said it without cruelty, as a plain fact, and it still landed like a slap. "A long one. She would have wanted you to hear that from someone who

loved her, and I'm what's available."

"Where is she?"

Mara's expression changed.

It happened quickly. A door in her face closed, and what was behind it was gone before Elias could see it. "Not here," she said.

"That's *not an answer* either," said Noah.

"No. It's not."

"I've had a bad morning," Noah went on, with the high bright desperation of a person talking so he doesn't scream. "I've been given a haunted coin by my cold granddad, my best friend has had some kind of fit, and a hand came out of a window. I'd like a real answer from someone. Anyone. I'd take a fraudulent one."

Mara regarded him with something that might, in better circumstances, have become amusement.

"You're Samuel's grandson."

Noah's mouth stayed open.

"He said you'd talk," said Mara. "I didn't believe him about how much."

"You know my *granddad*?"

"Everyone who matters knows your granddad." She said it carefully, the way one steps across thin ice, and glanced at the brick wall behind her as though listening. "We don't have time. The thing you saw at the window isn't the only one. It will follow the coin."

She pointed at the dead end.

Elias stared at it. It was a blank brick wall, streaked with soot and old rain, a place where nothing had ever happened.

"There's nothing there."

"No," said Mara. "There isn't."

She stepped up to the wall and laid two fingers against a spot between the bricks, so slight that Elias would have sworn the mortar there was ordinary. She pressed. Something answered under her hand with a tiny, definite *click*, like a key turning in a lock the size of a mountain.

The wall opened.

Not physically. Nothing slid, nothing swung. Reality folded. It was the only word Elias would ever find for it. The air along one edge of the brickwork wrinkled like a page being turned, and the bricks seemed to fall away from one another without moving, and where a wall had been there was now a doorway. It had never been built. It had never been needed, until now. Beyond it stretched a stone corridor lit by cold blue fire that burned without smoke.

Noah whispered, "That is not possible."

Mara looked at him.

"Neither are you, apparently."

She said it lightly. But when Elias glanced at her he saw that her hand, still raised, was trembling very slightly, and that she had set her jaw to hide it. She had done this before. It had never become easy.

Elias looked at the corridor. He looked back at the empty lane, the gray town, the thin ordinary sky.

He thought of his father coming home to a cold house and a single unwashed plate. He thought of the note he had not left. He thought: *I could turn around.* It was an honest thought, and it deserved an honest hearing. He could walk home. He could tell himself it was a strange dream and a cruel prank, and in a week he would almost believe it. That version of his life waited

behind him, warm and small and safe.

And ahead, a woman who had known his mother.

He stepped through.

Behind him the street vanished. There was no sound as it went, no rush of air. One moment the grey light of the town lay across his shoulders; the next there was only cold stone, and the smell of old water, and the blue fire reflected in the damp walls. The doorway sealed itself behind them with a soft inward sigh, like a held breath finally released.

Noah, who had followed him through with his eyes squeezed shut, opened them one at a time.

"Is it too late to say I want to go home?"

"Yes," said Mara.

"Right. Just checking."

She walked a few steps ahead and then turned, the blue flame making her face harder and older than it had been in the alley. She spoke three words, and Elias would remember them all his life, not because they were grand, but because of how quietly she said them. It was how you say them to a guest in a house you are not sure is still safe.

"Welcome to the Gates."

Then, from somewhere deep underground, something answered with a roar.

CHAPTER FOUR

The City Beneath the Sky

The corridor ran for a long time.

Elias counted two hundred paces and then lost count. The blue fire did not flicker in drafts, because there were no drafts. The walls were close and damp and carved all over with tiny seven-lined rings, hundreds and thousands of them, as if some patient hand had been repeating the same prayer for a very long time. Mara walked ahead without looking back. Noah walked behind him and talked.

"I'm just going to say it. I think we should be taking notes. For later. If we survive. 'Item one, the hidden corridor. Item two, the girl who isn't answering questions.'"

"I am answering questions," said Mara, without turning.

"You're answering *different* questions. It's very sophisticated."

"Noah," said Elias.

"What? It's how I cope. You go quiet and I get loud. It's a system."

It was a system, Elias thought, and not a bad one. Walking behind that thin, unbroken stream of nonsense, he found he was less afraid than he had any right to be. Noah's chatter was like a handrail on a dark stair.

The roar did not come again.

Instead, the corridor ended.

It simply opened, without a door, onto a wide stone landing. Elias took one step through it and stopped walking altogether.

Above him was a sky.

A real sky. Not a ceiling painted to look like one, not an illusion cast by the blue fire. It arched overhead enormous and dark and glittering, and the stars in it were silver and far too large. Clouds drifted slowly across it, and, impossibly, drifted *beneath* him as well, so that he seemed to be standing on the rim of a bowl of weather. He felt the particular dizziness of someone who has looked down from a very high place and realized there is no ground.

Then he looked down properly, and understood it was not a drop at all.

It was a city.

It lay spread out below the landing like something spilled from a jeweler's tray. Towers of black stone rose in clusters, their windows glowing amber and rose and the pale blue of the corridor fire. Bridges curved between them, thin as eyelashes. Rivers of blue light flowed through carved channels in the streets, running uphill and downhill with equal calm, so that the whole city seemed to be breathing through them. He could hear it now: voices, wheels, bells, the clatter of metal on stone, the beat of some drum in a far district. Smoke rose from a thousand chimneys and was caught by the wind and carried toward the stars.

People walked everywhere.

Ordinary-looking people, mostly, in coats and cloaks and long dresses of unfamiliar cut, hurrying to errands with baskets and parcels. Merchants called from stalls hung with copper, with dried fruit, with glass vials of colored smoke. Armored guards in bronze stood at the corners of bridges. Children chased each other along a parapet, shrieking, in a game that involved leaping

from one rooftop lamp to the next. And among them moved beings Elias could not name. A woman whose skin shimmered like wet slate. A man twice the height of the others, walking carefully, stooping beneath every arch. Something small and furred that rode on someone's shoulder and seemed to be complaining.

At the center of the city, rising above all the towers, stood a mountain.

It did not look like a natural mountain. It was too symmetrical, its flanks too smoothly cut. Along its face ran terraces and stairways, and halfway up its height, small as a keyhole at this distance, there was a door.

Mara said the name before he asked.

"Asterion."

Elias could not find a reply.

"The City Beneath the Sky," she said, and there was something in her voice, a very small and carefully guarded softness. It was not quite pride. It was the way a person talks about a home they are not sure they are allowed to love. "It's been here a very long time. Longer than most of the places on your maps."

"It's *underground*?" said Noah. He had lifted one hand toward the stars, as if testing whether they were hot. "We went down. I'm sure we went down."

"Mostly."

"Then where is that coming from?"

"That," said Mara, "is one of the questions you will stop asking in about a week."

Noah took the coin from his pocket and stared at it. His face did a complicated thing.

"Elias," he said.

The coin had begun to move.

It was lying flat on his palm, but the seven-lined ring on its face was turning slowly, as a compass needle turns. Then it stopped and a small bright point at the edge of the ring pulled toward the center of the city, firmly and unmistakably, like iron toward a magnet.

It pointed at the mountain.

* * *

They were taken through the city on foot.

Elias would remember the walk later in pieces, the way you remember a dream you've been trying to hold on to. A bridge so high that the wind pulled at his hair and he refused to look at the river of light far below. A market where a woman with silver in her braids pressed a hot pastry into Noah's hand and said something in a language that made the pastry glow faintly. Noah ate it with enormous caution, and then asked for another. A street of clockmakers, each window crowded with brass faces, and every single clock showing a different time. A fountain in whose basin the blue light pooled and rose in slow spirals, forming for an instant the shapes of faces. They looked at Elias as he passed, and he felt, for the second time that day, the weight of being known.

People stared at him.

Not rudely. Carefully. Conversations faltered as he went by, and then resumed behind him in lowered voices. A man selling lanterns put down his tray. A girl about Elias's age, carrying a stack of books, stopped dead on the steps and stared with her mouth slightly open, and then, with great dignity, resumed

climbing.

"They're looking at me," Elias said quietly.

"You look like her," said Mara.

"Like who?"

She did not answer. She walked a little faster.

At the foot of the mountain stood a guard post. The soldiers on duty saluted Mara, which Elias noticed, and looked at Elias and Noah with open curiosity, which he also noticed. Then they were let through a gate in the rock and conducted up a long staircase, cool and echoing, to a circular hall.

It was a plain room. Elias had expected something grander. It had a floor of dark stone worn smooth by centuries of feet, a high round window through which the strange stars looked down, and a ring of plain wooden chairs. Beside the chair farthest from the door, an old man was waiting.

He was tall, though age had bent him a little. His hair was white and thin, and his face was the sort that had once been severe and had been softened by long grief. He wore a plain gray robe with one small bronze pin at the collar, shaped like seven lines in a circle. His hands were folded in front of him, and he stood very still, as old people stand when they have learned that waiting is the only power left to them.

His name was Cael.

He studied Elias for a long time. Long enough that Noah shifted his weight, cleared his throat, and decided against saying anything.

"You look like her," Cael said at last.

His voice was quiet and dry, like pages turning.

"Like my mother?" said Elias.

Cael did not answer the question.

Instead, he asked, "What do you remember?"

It was an odd thing to be asked. Elias had expected a speech, a welcome, a warning, anything but that. He found himself telling it all in a rush, as if to someone who had a right to know: the desert city under glass, the staircase in the sea, the forest of nameplates, the black river and the bakery with the unreadable card in the window. The door in the field of ash. The scar on his mother's hand.

As he spoke, Cael's face hardened, slowly, like water freezing.

When Elias finished, the old man said nothing for several breaths. He looked toward the arched window, toward the mountain's far side, where no window opened.

"The Gates are waking," he said.

"What does that mean?"

Cael lifted his eyes toward the ceiling, as though he could see through the stone, through the stairs and the vaults and the foundations of the city, down to something that slept below.

"It means," he said, "that something imprisoned before the gods is becoming aware of the world again."

A tremor passed through Asterion.

It was not the shaking of an earthquake. It was gentler, a long shiver, like the skin of an animal twitching over a sleeping muscle. The plain wooden chairs rattled against the floor. Dust sifted down from the high window. And every light in the hall, the lanterns, the blue fire, the stars in the round window above them, went dark.

In the blackness, for one second, a voice filled the room.

It was not loud. It did not echo. It simply *was*, the way cold is in a cellar.

"The Titans know."

Cael went pale.

Then the lights returned, one by one, flickering up like candles lit by an unsteady hand, and the room was ordinary again, and Mara was gripping the back of a chair so hard her knuckles were white.

Elias looked at her.

"What are Titans?"

It was Cael who answered.

"Ancient powers," he said slowly. "Powers the gods themselves feared."

He paused. The silence that followed was careful, deliberate, like a man laying a stone he does not want to drop.

"And one of them," said Cael, "has begun searching for you."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Seven Gates

That night, if it was night, Elias did not sleep.

They had been given rooms in a tower on the mountain's lower terrace, small and clean, with narrow beds and a window that looked out over the sky-city. Noah had pronounced it "frankly suspicious how nice this is," then fallen asleep face-down in his boots within a minute of sitting on the mattress. Elias lay on his back, listening to the unfamiliar hum of the city, and held the pendant in his closed hand.

He kept thinking about his father.

It was a thing he had not let himself think about all day. His father would have come home by now. He would have found the house empty. He would have stood in the hallway, not calling out, because he was not a man who called out, and then he would have walked through every room and checked every window, and finally, quietly, sat on the stairs. Elias knew this as clearly as if he were watching it. His father did not panic. He just went very still.

You don't have to tell them everything.

Elias shut his eyes.

He had not left a note. He had not even sent a message. And somewhere inside that thought lay a second, much colder one, one he could not look at straight: *he's done this before. He has sat on those stairs before.*

At dawn, or whatever passed for it, there was a knock at his door.

It was Cael, carrying a lantern, and he did not look as though he had slept either.

"Come with me," he said. "Alone. Your friend should rest. He will need it."

* * *

They went down.

It was a long descent, down staircases cut straight into the rock, past doors that were guarded and doors that were not, through a library where the bookshelves rose out of sight into the dark. Elias tried to remember the turns and failed. Every stair looked like every other. Every wall was ringed with the same small, patient seven-lined mark. The air grew cool, then cold, then strangely dry, like the air of a place that had been sealed for centuries and was just beginning to remember what breathing was.

At last they came to a round chamber.

It was bare. There was no furniture. In the center of the floor, set into the stone, lay a map.

But it was not a map like any Elias had ever seen.

It was made of light. It lay across the floor like a thin skin of water, and it did not show roads or borders or rivers. It showed the *shape of the world*, though a world much larger and stranger than the one he knew. Coastlines folded under one another. Continents hung in layers, as if several worlds had been pressed together and left to dry. And scattered across it, glowing white-gold, were seven points of light.

"Seven Gates," Cael said.

The words rolled gently through the room, and Elias felt them in his chest.

"Seven places where our world touches the older one."

"Older than the gods?" said Elias.

"Yes."

A voice came from the doorway. Noah stood there in yesterday's clothes, hair on end, leaning on the frame. "Sorry. Couldn't sleep. Heard the word 'Gates' through a wall and I'm *very* invested. Don't mind me."

"I told you to rest," said Cael.

"And I told you I'd try." Noah wandered in, hands in his pockets, and squinted at the map. "I thought the gods were the oldest things. That's what everyone says. Zeus, Odin, whoever. They're the big old ones."

Cael gave him a tired smile.

"That," he said, "is what the gods wanted everyone to believe."

He knelt, slowly, one hand on the stone to steady himself, and passed a palm over the nearest point of light. It brightened. Elias saw, under the glow, a tiny ring of seven lines, and under that, a world he could not name: a wide dark shore, a tower, a figure standing on the beach.

"The Gates were sealed," Cael said, "by the Covenant."

"The Covenant," said Elias.

"It is not merely a treaty." The old man's voice dropped. "That is the story told in the upper libraries, the one for schoolchildren. A treaty between old powers. A tidy thing, signed and dated. But it was a promise, and promises made by beings like these are not words on paper. They are *structures.* Walls built of intention. The Covenant was made to keep something outside the world from entering it."

"What?" said Noah.

Cael did not answer. He looked at the second point on the map, and the third, and let his hand fall.

"The promise is broken," he said. "One Gate has opened. Then another."

Elias stared at the glowing points. Two of them pulsed a little differently from the rest, darker at the edges, like bruises beginning to form.

"And your dreams," Cael said, "are somehow connected to all seven."

"Why me?" said Elias. His voice cracked, and he hated it. "I'm *fourteen*. I'm nobody. I can barely pass geography."

Cael looked at him. It was a long, grave look, with no pity in it. Elias was grateful for that, even as it frightened him.

He put his hand to the floor beneath the map, to a place where the stone carried a carving Elias had not noticed, and pressed. Light welled up from the cut lines. A symbol assembled itself in the air above the floor: seven lines forming a ring, and in the center of the ring, the shape Elias had seen on the door, on the coin, on the window, in his dreams.

"Your mother," said Cael, "carried this mark."

Elias's hand closed around the pendant.

Cael's eyes widened.

"That," he whispered. "That belonged to her."

"What is it?"

"A key."

Nobody spoke. Somewhere far above them, a bell was ringing, very faintly, in some other part of the mountain.

"A key to *what*?" said Noah.

"I don't know," said Cael. It seemed to cost him something to say it. "I had hoped she told you."

"She told me nothing," said Elias. "She left. That's all she did. She left."

"I know," said Cael gently. And the old man's face showed a grief so unguarded that Elias wished, suddenly and fiercely, that he had not said it that way.

The floor shook.

It started low, a faint vibration through the soles of his feet, and rose quickly, until the whole chamber rang like a struck bowl. The map flickered. Along one edge, a hairline crack ran across the light, a thin black line spreading through the glow like frost through a window.

One of the seven points went dark.

It went out slowly, a candle starved of air. For one second the black line stood out against the gold, and then the point beside it flickered, as if warned.

From the doorway, a new voice said, hoarsely:

"Another Gate."

It was Mara. She had come in silently, and she stood with her arms wrapped around herself and her gray coat open, as if she had run all the way. She was not looking at the map. She was looking at Elias.

Cael rose, with an effort, and turned to face Elias directly.

"They know where you are now," he said.

Above them, deep in the mountain, the bell stopped ringing. And then, from every tower in Asterion, a hundred others began.

CHAPTER SIX

The Messenger

The bells were not alarms.

Elias understood that within the first thirty seconds, because he had spent his whole life listening for the sound a town makes when it is afraid, and this was not that sound. An alarm is ragged. It rises and falls, it stutters, it begs for attention. These bells were measured. They struck in slow, deliberate sequence from tower to tower, a great spreading ripple of bronze, and the people in the streets below were not running. They were *moving*, in long orderly streams, toward the inner districts, carrying their children and their lamps, like people who had practiced this on a hundred quiet evenings and prayed they would never need it.

They were warnings. They had been rung before.

Armored guards sealed the bridges behind the crowd. Chains rattled up through iron rings, and the thin curved spans over the river-light lifted away from their moorings one by one, like drawbridges, until the city fell apart into islands.

Mara caught Elias by the sleeve and pulled him down a narrow street that ran against the stream of people.

"Where are we going?" he shouted over the bells.

"Away from the mountain!"

"Cael said to stay!"

"Cael says a lot of things when he's frightened." She did not slow. "Whatever is coming has your name. It's going to come to the place where you are. I'd rather it came somewhere that isn't full of children."

Noah, behind them, caught up and said breathlessly, "That's the most terrifying sentence anyone has ever said to me, and I've met my aunt Delphine."

"Who is attacking us?" Elias demanded.

"We don't know."

"You're lying again."

Mara stopped. She turned, and the bells rolled over her, and for a moment she looked very young.

"Yes," she said.

It was the second time she had said it, and this time it did not sound like a trick. It sounded like a confession. Whatever Mara was not saying, she knew exactly what it weighed.

"I have a guess," she said. "I hope it's wrong. Now *run*."

* * *

The observatory stood at the end of a lane that had been forgotten by the city's maps.

It was small and round and crowned with a copper dome gone green with age, and its door hung from a single hinge. Inside, the air smelled of dust and cold metal. A great brass instrument, taller than a man, stood in the center of the room, its lenses cracked, its rings frozen at angles that had once tracked some star. Through the broken slit in the dome overhead, the silver stars of Asterion looked in like patient faces.

A boy was waiting there.

He sat on the lowest rung of a ladder with a bow across his knees. It was made of some pale metal, light and fine, strung with a cord that glimmered when he shifted. He looked about Elias's age, maybe a little older, with a narrow face and a mop of dark hair that he kept pushing out of his eyes. His clothes were

travel-stained. He had the hunted watchfulness of someone who had been alone for a long time and had grown used to it.

He stood when they came in.

"My name's Ilyan," he said. "I was told to find Elias."

Mara's hand went to her sword. "By whom?"

Ilyan hesitated. It was the briefest pause, a hitch in his breath, but Elias saw it.

"Your mother," he said, to Elias.

Elias felt the same coldness he had felt in the dream. It came up from the floor and into his knees.

"She's alive?"

"No."

The answer was too quick. It came out of Ilyan like something he had rehearsed, and as soon as it was out he lowered his eyes, as if the lie, or the truth, had burned his mouth.

Noah noticed too. Elias saw him notice. For all his chatter, Noah missed very little.

"She left a message," Ilyan went on, rushing it. "Not for now. For when the Gates began opening. She said, when they begin, find the boy."

"Why you?"

"I owed her," Ilyan said. Nothing more.

He reached into his coat and drew out a small glass cylinder, no longer than a finger, sealed at both ends with wax. Inside it lay a strip of silver paper, rolled tight. He held it out. His hand, Elias noticed, was perfectly steady, and that was somehow worse than if it had shaken.

Elias took it.

The glass was warm. He cracked the wax with his thumbnail. The paper slid out into his palm and unrolled itself,

and he saw handwriting he had not seen since he was six. It was the loop of the *g*, the slight rightward lean, the way each line ended with a small flick, as though she had been in too much of a hurry to finish the stroke.

The message contained a single sentence.

THE GODS DID NOT BUILD THE GATES.

He read it twice. He read it a third time, because the words were not saying what he wanted them to say.

I was hoping for something else, he thought. *A name. A place. "I love you." Anything.* And what he had was a sentence that could have come out of an encyclopedia.

"What does it mean?" said Noah, reading over his shoulder.

"It means," said Mara slowly, "that the entire history of the world is wrong."

The observatory windows shattered.

Glass burst inward in a single sheet, and the cold night poured through after it. Something black moved across the roof overhead, an enormous slow shape that blotted the stars. Ilyan was already moving. He had the bow raised and an arrow drawn before Elias could finish flinching, and when he spoke, his voice had changed. It was low and flat and professional.

"Stay behind me."

The creature came in through the broken dome.

It had the shape of a man, but only the shape. It had no face. Where a face should have been there was a smooth gray oval, like a stone worn by a river. It moved with a strange swaying fluency, as if its joints had been fitted in the wrong order, and where its heart should have been, a symbol glowed.

Seven lines.

The same ring. The same mark.

It spoke in a voice that was several voices at once, young and old and male and female, layered over one another like a choir tuning.

"Vale."

Ilyan loosed the arrow. It struck the creature squarely in the chest, and the shaft vanished into the glowing mark without a sound, like a stone dropped into a pond.

The creature tilted its head.

Then it smiled without a mouth. It was the worst thing Elias had ever seen, a smile made out of nothing at all, the *idea* of a smile, hung in the air where a face wasn't.

"Found," it said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Library of Names

They escaped through the old library.

Afterward, Elias could never reconstruct how. Mara had thrown something, a vial that burst into a sheet of white fire and filled the observatory with a shriek like tearing metal. Ilyan had hauled Noah out through a window by his collar. Noah had been shouting something that sounded like "I *told* you about the coin!" and then they were all running down a narrow stair, through a door that Mara kicked open, and out into the high dark nave of a building that smelled of paper and leather and the sweetness of very old glue.

The library of Asterion stretched upward until it vanished.

Shelves climbed the walls in galleries, each gallery reached by a spiral stair, and on and on above, until the light of the lanterns dissolved into shadow and the shadow into something that might have been stars. Books filled every inch of space. They were bound in leather, in bark, in scale, in something that glittered like frost. Some were enormous. Some were no bigger than a thumbnail. In the quiet, Elias could hear them. It was a faint, endless, papery whisper, like a crowd of people speaking all at once from a great distance.

"The books are old," said Mara, gasping, slowing to a fast walk as the shriek behind them faded. "Older than most human languages. Don't touch anything."

"Why not?" said Noah.

"Because some books remember who reads them."

Elias laughed nervously. It was the nerves that did it. "That makes no sense."

On the nearest shelf, a book opened by itself.

It was a slim volume in dark blue cloth. Its cover swung back with a soft, deliberate sound, like an eyelid lifting, and the pages riffled and settled. On the first page, in neat black ink that had not been there a second before, a name was written.

ELIAS VALE.

Under it, in the same hand, was a date.

It was a date that had not happened yet.

Elias stared at it. His mind refused the number, as the tongue refuses a bad taste. It was not far away. He could count it on his fingers.

Mara slammed the book shut.

Her hand shook. She pressed it flat against the cover as if she could keep what was inside from getting out.

"We need the archive," she said.

* * *

The Archive of Names lay beneath the library, down a spiral stair that grew steadily colder.

It was a vast, low, circular room like the inside of a drum. There were no books here. Instead, small plaques of bronze covered the walls from floor to ceiling, thousands upon thousands, each the size of a playing card, each engraved with a single name and a few lines of text. They glowed faintly in the dark, the soft gold of old candlelight.

Elias recognized it.

The forest of nameplates. His dream. Every tree had worn a plate like these.

"Every known immortal, king, Gatekeeper, monster, and ancient power has a record here," said Mara. Her voice came back from the curved walls, quiet and stripped of echo. "If you've mattered to the Gates at all, you're in this room. Even the ones who tried to be forgotten."

"Especially those," Ilyan murmured.

Elias walked along the wall in a trance. He passed names he knew from schoolbooks, names he knew from stories, names that stopped his heart for no reason he could say. A long time went by. And then he came to a plate that was dull and blackened, as though a fire had passed over it, and he read it before he knew he was reading.

LYRA VALE.

He did not move.

The record was damaged. Most of it had been scored away, the metal scraped down to bright bare scratches. Someone had gone at it with a blade, deliberately, over and over. Of all the lines of text that must once have stood there, a single sentence remained.

LYRA VALE: KEEPER OF THE LAST COVENANT: BREACH AT GATE SEVEN.

"A breach," he said. His mouth was dry. "She caused this?"

He felt it rising in him, the old anger, the six-year-old's rage that had never found a place to land. It felt strange to have somewhere to put it at last. *She did this. She opened something, and she ran, and she left me with a man who stopped talking.* He felt betrayed, and it was an easy feeling, a clean one. It required nothing of him.

Mara shook her head.

"No."

"The plate says—"

"The plate says what the people who scratched it wanted it to say." She stood close to him. She did not touch him, but he could feel the warmth of her. "No. She stopped something worse."

"How do you know?"

Mara did not answer. Elias saw her jaw tighten, the way it had in the alley when she said *not here.* There was something she wasn't telling him. It was a heavy thing, and it sat in her like a swallowed stone.

Another plate caught his eye.

It had been set higher, near the vaulted ceiling, and it blazed brighter than any other name in the room. He knew, without being told, that it was *alive.* The letters shifted slightly as he watched, as if breathing.

CRONUS. STATUS: BOUND.

Below it, as he stared, a second line burned itself into the bronze:

BINDING: FAILING.

The lights flickered.

For one second, every plate in the archive dimmed together. Then deep beneath their feet, through the floor and the foundations and the rock beneath them, Elias heard chains move.

It was a slow, vast, grinding sound, iron the width of a tree trunk dragging across stone. It rose and fell. It was not frantic. It was the sound of something very large and very patient testing its restraints, just to see what they would do.

Noah, white-faced, said in a whisper, "Please tell me that's plumbing."

A deep voice whispered through the stone.

"Elias."

He knew it.

It was the voice from his dreams. It was the voice that had rolled through the desert city under glass, that had spoken softly across the black river, that had said his name a thousand nights in the dark. It was not frightening. That was the unbearable part.

It sounded like someone who had missed him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The First Titan

They descended into the prison beneath Asterion.

They went down by a stair no one had used for centuries. Cael led them, silent, grim, having appeared in the archive as if he had known where they would be. Mara followed, then Elias, with Noah clinging to his shoulder, and Ilyan at the rear with an arrow loose on the string. Their lanterns made small yellow rooms of light in the dark, and the dark ate each room a few paces on.

The deeper they went, the warmer the air became.

That was wrong. Elias had expected the cold of a dungeon, damp and iron. Instead the warmth came up the stair like breath. It carried the smell of earth after rain, and under it, something huge and animal and sleeping.

"It's the heat of the world," Cael said, without turning. "The heat of what is held down."

"That's a lot of heat," said Noah.

"Yes."

"I'd like it to be less."

"So would I," said Cael, with such dry sincerity that Noah actually laughed.

At the bottom there was a chamber.

Elias stopped on its threshold. He could not make his eyes believe it. It was so large that he could not see the far wall; the lantern light simply ran out and was swallowed, as if the room had no edge. The floor sloped away into dark. And across that

dark, from the ceiling and the walls and the unseen floor, stretched chains.

They were immense. Each link was the size of a cart. They hung in great sagging arcs across the blackness, pale and corroded, covered with the same small rings of seven lines that had followed Elias through the whole city. They ran away into the dark in every direction like the stays of a vast and ghostly tent.

Something enormous moved behind them.

He felt it in his sternum. A slow tide of motion in the dark, the whole chamber seeming to lean toward them. A scrape of stone. A distant sigh.

"You must understand," said Cael. He had moved up beside Elias and spoke very low. "Cronus is not simply a giant, trapped underground. He is a force. Older than the gods' memory of themselves. If his prison opens completely, every Gate in the world will answer."

"Answer how?"

"As a bell answers a bell."

Elias stared into the darkness.

A single eye opened.

It opened slowly, the way the sun comes up over a flat sea. First a line of pale gold in the dark, and then a disk, and then a pupil, black and deep and larger than a house. It was an ancient eye, heavy-lidded, ringed with lines. It was not cruel. It was weary beyond anything Elias had a word for.

It looked at him.

"Elias Vale," the voice said.

It came from everywhere. It came through the floor, up through his shoes and into his bones.

Cael raised a hand, sharp. "Do not answer."

But Elias had heard something beneath the voice. It came a half-second after, quieter, a different voice entirely, threaded through the first like a silver wire. It was a woman's voice, and it was one he had not heard in eight years, and yet he knew it as he knew the sound of his own breath.

Do not trust the first story they tell you.

"Mum?" he whispered.

The eye closed.

The whole chamber shuddered. Dust fell from the vault in a gray rain. One of the great chains twitched, and a link the size of a boulder struck the stone floor with a boom that threw Noah to his knees. From somewhere in the dark came the groan of metal under strain, and Elias heard, very distinctly, a sound like a crack running through ice.

Cael seized him by the arm.

"Back. *Now*."

They fled. They fled up the stair with the chamber roaring behind them, with the warm air gusting up around them like the exhalation of a giant, and Elias ran with his mother's voice ringing in his head, and he did not know if he was crying.

They escaped before the chains could break.

At the top of the stairs, in the first cool room, Cael sank down on a step with one hand pressed against his side. He was breathing as if he had run a mile. For a long moment nobody spoke.

"Your mother knew what was coming," Cael said at last.

"What did she know?"

Cael looked at him. In the lantern light his face seemed to have aged ten years.

"That the Titans were not the only ones imprisoned."

Nobody moved.

Then, slowly, as though he were prying open something that had been sealed for a lifetime, Cael finished the sentence.

"The first prison was built before Cronus was born."

Elias understood.

He felt it settle in his chest like a coin dropped into a well. *Before Cronus.* Before the Titans, before the gods, before any of the stories. Something had been there first. Something had been held in that darkness long before the chains were forged.

And whatever it was had been so terrifying that even the Titans, the monsters of every myth, had been built to guard against it.

CHAPTER NINE

The Broken Museum

The next clue was hidden in the human world.

Elias did not like that. It had felt, for two days, as if the ordinary world had been pulled away like a tablecloth, and he had begun to live on the strange side of the cloth. Now they were going back, and he was surprised by how much it hurt.

Mara led them through a Gate beneath an old museum.

It was not one of the seven. It was smaller, a service Gate, she called it, a hallway between rooms. They came out into a cellar full of crates and straw, climbed a service stair, and emerged, blinking, into a vast dim hall.

It was after midnight. The museum was dark, and silent, and cold. Moonlight came in pale blue slabs through the high windows and lay across the floors.

"Where are we?" Noah whispered.

"A natural history museum. Don't ask which. It wouldn't mean anything to you."

"It would mean something to *me*, I live here."

"Then it's a museum in your city, and you have never once visited it."

"That's a *lie*, I came on a school trip, there was a whale skeleton..." Noah trailed off, looking around. The ceiling was higher than he remembered. The whale was nowhere to be seen. "Oh. That's not nice."

They moved through the dark galleries.

Elias felt the wrongness first as a pressure at the back of his neck. The exhibits were not the exhibits of a museum he knew. There were no dinosaurs, no stuffed birds, no little plastic labels. Instead, the cases held things that should not have existed.

A crown made of glass, so clear that it seemed to be only a shape in the air.

A sword with no blade. Just a hilt, bound in wire, and a faint hum where steel should have been.

A mask of pale wood with seven lines carved around the eyes.

A map on a tablet of clay, showing coastlines Elias had never seen, with the names of places in languages that had no living speakers.

"It's an exhibit that shouldn't exist," Mara said softly. "Artifacts from civilizations that were erased. Not lost. *Erased.* Someone went through history with a knife."

At the far end of the hall, under a high round skylight, stood a stone tablet.

It was larger than a door. It lay propped against a wall in a case of dark glass, lit from below by a single weak lamp. On its face, in shallow relief, seven figures knelt in a circle. They were of different sizes. Some were human. Some were not. All of them bowed toward the center of the ring, where the stone had been left blank.

A blank circle.

Elias recognized it.

"What civilization is this?" he asked.

Mara shook her head. "None that survived."

An alarm began to sound, a thin electronic whine from somewhere in the building. It wasn't magic; it was only the

ordinary human world, ringing its little bell. But it was loud and it was coming closer.

"Noah, the exits," said Mara.

"I don't *know* the exits, I was nine."

"Then *look* for the exits."

Ilyan went to the door and crouched there, listening. Elias hardly noticed. He had gone to the tablet. Seven names had been cut into the stone around the circle, in a script that curled like smoke. He bent close. Six of them had been scoured away, leaving only a clean, pale scar in the rock.

One remained readable.

VALE.

His fingers found it before he decided to touch it.

The museum changed.

It did not fade. It *shifted*, like the picture on a screen flicking to another channel. The dark hall was still there, but now a pale light lay across it, and the cases were fuller, and the floor was cleaner, and a woman was standing a few feet from him with her back turned.

His mother.

She was younger than the photograph. Or she was older; he could not tell. She wore a long dark coat, and her hair was pinned up, and she stood very straight with her hands clasped behind her. She was speaking to someone.

A man stood before her, in white armor.

It was not the armor of a knight or a soldier. It was something more like the shell of a great pale beetle, smooth and seamless, with a line of gold across the breastplate. His face was handsome and tired. He held his helm in the crook of one arm.

"You promised," said the man.

"I promised to protect Elias."

"You promised the Covenant."

Elias's mother lifted her head.

She turned. And for a second she looked straight at the place where Elias stood. He felt it like a hand laid on his chest. He could not have said whether she saw him, whether the years between them had somehow folded in, or whether she was only looking at the tablet behind him.

"I am the Covenant," she said.

The vision ended.

The museum snapped back to cold dark, and the shrill of the alarm, and Noah's voice somewhere shouting about the fire door. Elias stood with his hand still on the carved name, trembling.

Mara was looking at him. She looked shaken.

"Your mother wasn't just a Gatekeeper," she said.

"What was she?"

Mara answered quietly, and the alarm swallowed half of it, and he made her say it again.

"She was the last person who could rewrite the Covenant."

CHAPTER TEN

The City Above the City

The clue led them to another hidden settlement.

It lay far to the north, beneath an ancient mountain whose name Mara refused to say. They went by way of two Gates and a long cold walk over bare scree under a sky the color of iron. Noah complained about his feet, his stomach, and the fundamental injustice of mountains. Ilyan said nothing at all. He walked a little apart from them, always. Elias noticed that he never took the watch with anyone else, and that he looked at the sky a lot.

Unlike Asterion, this city was abandoned.

Its buildings had been carved into the mountain itself, tier on tier of dark windows and empty balconies, the stone worn smooth by wind. No lamps. No smoke. No sound but the wind moving through the empty galleries with a long hollow note like someone blowing across a bottle.

At the center rose a giant staircase.

It climbed the face of the mountain in a single sweep, its steps broad enough for twenty to climb abreast, and it did not end at a summit. It ended in the sky. At the very top, miles above, the steps vanished into cloud.

They climbed it. It took the rest of the day.

At the top stood a second city.

It was upside down.

Elias stopped on the last stair, one hand on the cold stone, and could not breathe. Above him, hanging from the ceiling of

the world, towers of dark rock pointed down toward the ground. Their spires dangled like icicles. Their bridges swayed like fallen bridges. Their windows glimmered, though no lamp was lit, with some reflected light that had no source. It looked like a city that had been dropped, and had stopped, and had decided to stay.

"Stone trees," Noah breathed. Then, with feeling: "I officially hate this place."

Elias almost laughed.

Then they heard footsteps.

They were slow and measured, and they echoed from the empty galleries around them in a way that made it hard to tell where they came from. Ilyan's bow came up. Mara's hand dropped to her sword.

A woman stepped out of a doorway.

She wore a long gray robe and a mask of bronze that covered her whole face. It was a calm, symmetrical face, smooth and expressionless, with two narrow slits for eyes. It was beautiful in a distant and unfriendly way, like a statue in a temple.

"Welcome," she said. Her voice was low, and amused, and tired. "I am Selene."

"Selene," Mara said quietly. She had lowered her hand, but not far. "You're the one who sent word."

"Of course."

"You know the Gatekeepers."

"I know *you*," said Selene, and the mask turned toward Elias, "and I know him. I would know him anywhere. He has her chin."

Elias flushed, annoyed to find that it pleased him.

"The Covenant is failing," Selene said, "because someone is removing the seals."

"Who?"

Selene turned her masked face toward the upside-down city. She stood a long time looking at it. When she spoke again, it was with the heaviness of someone saying a thing she had said to herself many times and still could not believe.

"The gods."

Elias refused to believe her.

It was an instinctive refusal, an immediate and total *no*. He did not know the gods. But all his life he had heard, in half-remembered stories, in school assemblies and picture books, that the gods were what held the world together. That they were the good ones. That the monsters were below and the gods were above.

"Why would they do that?" he said.

"Because the gods are afraid."

"Of the Titans?"

"No."

She reached up with both hands and took hold of the mask.

She lifted it away.

What lay beneath was a woman's face, older than he had expected, perhaps sixty, lined with the long weariness of someone who has been awake for a very long time. But it was her eyes that held him. They were pale, almost silver, and they were wet. She looked at him with an expression he could not name. It was something between grief and pleading.

"Of what the Titans were protecting us from," she said.

Before Elias could ask another question, a horn sounded.

It came from somewhere above, from the roof of the world, from the upside-down towers. It was a long, ragged, terrible note, like the cry of a very large animal in pain. The sound ran across the sky like a crack across glass.

Selene pushed the mask back on, quickly, with a practiced motion. Her fingers were shaking.

"They are here."

A storm rolled through the upside-down city.

It came out of nowhere, a boiling mass of black cloud that spilled from the upside-down towers and fell upward and sideways and every other way, so that the whole inverted city seemed to be sinking into a sea of thunder. The air filled with the smell of ozone. The first fat drops hit the stone with a sound like thrown coins.

Elias felt the hair stand up on his arms.

And above them, one by one, seven lights appeared in the storm.

They were not stars. They did not twinkle. They were steady and pale, set in an uneven ring high in the thunderheads, like the points on the map beneath Asterion. They burned there for a long moment, sullen and silent.

Then, one after another, they flickered.

Far away, under the world, something huge turned over in its sleep. And the Gates began to answer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The God Who Lied

A figure descended from the storm.

He did not fall. He walked down out of the black cloud as a man walks down a staircase, unhurried, one foot after another, and the thunder parted to let him through. A crown of lightning wreathed his brow, crackling and spitting blue-white sparks into the rain. The air around him bent and thickened, and every drop that came near his body hissed and flashed to steam.

He was tall, and handsome in a cold way, like a statue that had learned to move. His hair was dark. His eyes were gray and clear and very old.

Even Mara stepped back.

"Zephar," she whispered.

It was the way she said it that frightened Elias most. She had faced a faceless creature without flinching. She had walked into a prison where a Titan stirred. She had a sword at her hip and a coat that had seen a great many roads. And she said the god's name the way a child says the name of the thing under the bed.

He landed on the stone without a sound. The storm closed over the sky behind him. For a moment the only noise was the rain.

Zephar looked at Elias.

"So," he said. His voice was light, pleasant, with an odd music in it. "Lyra's son survived."

Elias's anger overcame his fear before he had time to feel either. It came up like a wave, hot and clean, and he heard his

own voice ring across the stones.

"You knew my mother."

"I knew many things."

"Did you betray her?"

Zephar smiled.

"Everyone betrays someone eventually."

Elias did not know what he had expected. Denial, perhaps. Rage. A speech. Not that. It was so *casual*, such a small, tossed-off cruelty, that it took the breath out of him. It was not a lie, and that was the point. The god did not need to lie. He simply stood there, in the rain, glowing, and let the truth be a weapon.

He said that the Covenant had been created by the gods to protect humanity. He said it with a calm, rehearsed sweetness, like a man reading an inscription. The Gates were doors that gods had built, and the gods had locked them out of love for the small, fragile world below.

Elias thought of the strip of silver paper.

THE GODS DID NOT BUILD THE GATES.

"Who built them?" he demanded.

For the first time, Zephar's smile disappeared.

It went out like a lamp. His face did not change in any dramatic way, but something behind it closed, and for a moment the light in the lightning crown seemed to waver.

"That question," he said softly, "has destroyed civilizations."

Then he attacked.

It came without warning: a white-blue lance of power thrown from the god's open hand. It crossed the distance in a blink, and Mara was already moving. She flung out her arm and a shield of blue light sprang up in front of them, a great

trembling disk like a sheet of water held vertical. The lance struck it and the world blew apart.

The force threw everyone backward. Elias felt himself lifted off the stone. The sky spun, and he hit the ground with his shoulder and slid, and a wet hot slap of wind tore the breath out of his lungs. Noah cried out somewhere. Ilyan was shouting. Everything was light and thunder.

He landed beside the coin.

It had fallen from Noah's grasp. It lay in a puddle, rocking, and as Elias's fingers closed around it, it began to glow.

It was not the hot red-white of the school. This was softer, a pure gold, steady as a heartbeat. The seven lines on its face stood out as if drawn in light, and from them, from nowhere, a voice whispered in his mind. It was not Cronus. It was not his mother. It did not sound like anyone at all. It sounded like a thought he had been about to have.

Choose.

He touched the coin.

For an instant, the entire city froze.

The rain stopped in the air, each drop a bead of silver hanging motionless. The storm held its breath. The towers above them ceased their swaying. Even the wind died. Elias could hear his own heart in the silence, loud and slow.

Zephar, caught in mid-stride, looked afraid.

It was only a flicker. But Elias saw it, a naked, startled fear on that beautiful face, and the god's eyes were fixed on the coin.

"You should not have that," Zephar said.

The coin cracked.

A line of light ran across it from edge to edge, a splitting seam, and the metal flexed and broke. It did not fall apart. It

opened, like a seed. And out of the break, a single thread of golden fire leapt into Elias's hand and burrowed into his palm.

It did not hurt. That was the strangest part. It felt like being *recognized.*

A mark appeared on his skin.

Seven lines. A ring. And in the center, the shape that had haunted him since the dream. It glowed beneath his skin, then sank into it, leaving a faint warm outline like a brand healed years ago.

Far beneath them, with a sound like a great stone door grinding open, the first Gate opened.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Gate of Ash

The Gate did not open like a door.

It opened like a wound in the world.

There was no frame, no hinge, no threshold. The air in the center of the ruined square simply tore, with a sound like silk being ripped slowly from end to end, and through the gap poured a gray tide of ash. It rolled across the cobbles in a soft, silent avalanche. It piled against the walls of the stone houses and swallowed their doorsteps. It was fine as flour. It was cold. And with it came a smell Elias knew from his dreams: the smell of a place where something enormous has been burned, and everything that burned it has since gone home.

Mara was shouting. "Run! Back up the stair! *Back!*"

The ash reached Elias's ankles. It did not feel like ash. It felt like walking through remembered snow.

And then he saw the shapes.

They were moving inside the ash. At first they were only tall smudges in the drifting gray, like figures seen through fog. But as they came nearer they gained edges and color and faces. They were not monsters.

They were people.

Thousands of them. They were walking through a dead city, a city whose streets Elias could see rising in ghostly layers behind them, towers and arches and long colonnades, all of it gray and silent and slowly dissolving. They walked with the unhurried calm of the dreaming. A woman carried a basket on

her hip. An old man leaned on a stick. A child ran along the edge of the crowd, looking back, laughing at something no one else could hear.

They were not alive. Elias understood that at once. They were memories. A great drowned library of faces, rising from the ash like bubbles from a deep lake.

One of them looked directly at him.

It was a woman in a dark coat. She stopped. The crowd flowed around her, and for a moment she was the only still thing in the whole gray tide.

His mother.

She looked as she had in the museum, and in the dream, and in a thousand fragments from his childhood. She was not smiling. She looked at him with an expression of enormous and exhausted tenderness, the look of someone who has traveled a very long way to say one sentence and fears she will forget it.

She raised a hand.

Seven words appeared in the air before her, hanging in the drifting ash, written in thin lines of silver fire.

FIND THE PLACE BEFORE OLYMPUS.

"Mum," said Elias. "Mum, wait—"

The vision vanished. The ash fell. The crowd dissolved into a flurry of gray flakes that scattered in the wind, and Elias stood alone in a hollow of silence, his hand still outstretched, his mouth open on a word she would never hear.

Behind him, the sky cracked. Thunder rolled. Zephar, still frozen in a gleam of light, snapped free of the stillness, and his crown flared, and he rose into the storm like a spark swept up the flue of a chimney. He did not look back. Elias saw his face as he went, and it was the face of someone fleeing not the boy,

but the thing in the boy's hand.

The Gate closed.

It sealed itself like a healing cut, the torn edges drawing together and fading. The last of the ash settled. The air grew still and, slowly, ordinary.

Cael arrived too late to stop it.

He had come up the stair with half a dozen of the Asterion guard, white-haired and gasping, with a long gray cloak flapping at his heels. He stopped at the edge of the square and took in the scene with a single dreadful glance: the ash drifts, the scorch marks, the boy standing alone with his hand held out.

He crossed the square. He took Elias's wrist, gently, and turned the palm upward to the light.

The mark glowed softly in the dusk.

"The mark chose you," Cael said.

"What does it mean?"

"It means the Covenant recognizes you as its successor."

Elias waited for the pride. It did not come. He searched himself for any trace of the heroic gladness he'd read about in books, the thrill of a destiny announced. There was only cold. A fear so deep and old and total that he felt it settle into the marrow of his bones.

He was fourteen.

He did not want to inherit an ancient war. He wanted to go home. He wanted to sit in the kitchen while his father pretended not to notice that he was home, and to eat toast, and to be nobody at all.

"I didn't ask for it," he said. His voice shook. "Nobody asked me."

"No," said Cael. "They never do."

Noah placed a hand on his shoulder.

It was a light hand, warm and slightly damp, and it gripped with just enough pressure to be felt. Noah looked terrible. He was soaked and gray with ash and there was a long scrape on his jaw that had begun to bead with blood. He had not said a single joke in ten minutes.

"Then we'll figure it out," he said.

Elias looked at him. He looked at him for a long, strange moment, as if seeing him for the first time. It occurred to him that Noah could have turned around at any point since the school gate. He could have refused. He could have run home to his noisy house and his warm kitchen and his worrying mother, and no one would have blamed him.

"Why are you staying?" Elias asked.

Noah shrugged.

"Because someone has to make sure you don't do something stupid."

He said it flatly, without a smile, with his eyes steady on Elias's face. And Elias understood, with a sudden painful clarity, that it was the truest thing Noah had ever said, and that it was not a joke at all.

For the first time since the nightmare began, Elias smiled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Before Olympus

The phrase became their next destination.

Before Olympus. It sounded like a riddle, and for two days they treated it as one. Cael ransacked the library. Mara studied maps. Noah, who did not like riddles, announced that it clearly meant *a place before Olympus*, possibly a car park, and was sat on by Ilyan.

It was Cael who finally found the thread.

"Olympus," he told them, over a table strewn with parchments, "was not the first home of the gods."

"I thought it was where they *lived*," said Noah.

"Where they lived last."

He explained, slowly. Before Olympus there had been another sanctuary, a high white place on a different mountain. And before that sanctuary there had been something else, a civilization whose name no one living could speak. It had not simply fallen. It had been unwritten, scrubbed out of every record like a stain from a cloth.

They traveled through three Gates before they found its ruins.

The first Gate delivered them onto a salt plain under a white noon, where the wind blew grit into their eyes. The second dropped them into a river valley thick with ferns and hung with the screaming of unseen birds. The third was a hole in a cliff face, lined with seven rings of weathered stone, that opened into a long cold tunnel running down.

At its end lay a circular chamber beneath the earth.

It was perfectly round. The domed ceiling was black with age. Light came from nowhere in particular, a pale suffusion in the air, like moonlight in fog. And the walls, every inch of them, were covered with carvings.

"The history of the world," Cael murmured.

Elias walked slowly around the chamber, trailing his fingers along the cool stone.

Humans came first. The carvings showed them in their thousands, small and plain, farming, building, raising children, looking up at the stars. Then came the Keepers, tall robed figures standing at the shoulders of the humans like tutors. Then the gods, rising out of the stone in glory and fire. Then the Titans, vast and heavy-browed, striding across the carved horizon with the world cupped in their hands.

But something appeared before all of them.

He found it at the very beginning of the wall, so worn that it was nearly smooth. A blank figure. It had no face. It had no name. It stood alone in the first panel with its arms at its sides, and around it, in a thin ring, were seven lines.

Elias touched the figure.

A voice filled his mind.

NOT EVERYTHING THAT IS FORGOTTEN IS DEAD.

It was not a whisper. It was a statement, flat and ancient and sure. He felt it in his teeth.

The chamber vanished.

He saw his mother again.

This time she was older. Her hair had gone gray at the temples. She stood in a pale room, and her coat was torn at the shoulder, and she looked as if she had not slept in days. She was

not speaking to Mara or to Cael. She was speaking directly to him.

"If you are seeing this," she said, "I failed to stop the first awakening."

"Who are you talking about?" Elias asked, though he knew she could not hear him.

She answered anyway. Perhaps it was only the recording, only the stored shape of a sentence she had spoken to the empty air. But it sounded like an answer.

"The one who was here before the gods."

The recording ended.

The chamber snapped back into place around him, cold and round and silent. Noah had hold of his sleeve. Mara and Cael were staring at him with expressions of dread. Ilyan stood against the far wall, his face unreadable.

Behind them, stone cracked.

It was a sharp, flat, ringing sound, and it came from the wall they had just examined. A seam opened in the carvings. Dust sifted down, and then, with a long grating moan, a section of the wall slid back to reveal a doorway.

Beyond it was darkness.

Elias stared into it. The dark did not look empty. It looked *attentive.*

And from the darkness came a familiar voice.

"Elias."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Name They Erased

The voice belonged to Cael.

But Cael was standing beside them.

Elias looked from the old man at his shoulder to the shape in the doorway. It stood very still. It was dressed in a long gray robe, and its hair was white, and the bronze pin at its collar caught the light. It wore Cael's face precisely, down to the kind tired eyes.

Only the smile was wrong. It was too wide, and too patient.

Noah raised the coin.

He had picked it up out of the ash, the broken half of it, and he held it out at arm's length like a man warding a dog. The shape in the doorway recoiled. It did not move its feet. It moved the way a reflection moves when the water is disturbed, wavering backward, losing definition.

"Don't let it touch you!" Mara shouted.

They fled.

They scrambled up the tunnel with the false Cael gliding behind them, whispering Elias's name over and over, and the real Cael hobbling beside him with his hand pressed to his ribs and his face hard. The thing did not catch them. It did not seem to want to. It followed the way a cat follows a mouse it intends to keep.

They broke into daylight at last, into the bright wind of the cliff-face, and Mara hauled the stone ring shut behind them with a grinding of old rock. They sat in the dust, breathing, and for a

long minute no one said anything.

Later, in the shelter of a ruined wall, Cael explained.

"The oldest powers can imitate," he said. "They have no faces of their own. So they borrow."

"Then how do we know *you're* real?" said Elias.

He had not meant it as an accusation. He was too tired for accusation. It was simply the question, the only one left, and he asked it plainly.

Cael looked at him. He smiled sadly, a smile that made the lines of his face fall into soft folds.

"You don't," he said.

It was the most honest thing anyone had said to him since the school gate. And it frightened Elias more than the monster, more than the chains, more than the god. Because it was *true.* There was nothing in the world he could point to and say, *this one is real, this one can be trusted.* The only evidence he had was how it felt.

"Then what do we do?" he asked.

"What people have always done," said Cael. "We choose. And we watch whether the choice holds."

They found the inscription before nightfall.

It was beneath the ruins, in a lower chamber they had overlooked, a small dusty vault whose door had been hidden under three centuries of rubble. There was a single wall in it. The wall bore a single word, cut deep, filled with a black resin that had not faded.

AEON.

Elias read it. He read it again. It did not feel like a name. It felt like a *weight.*

"A god?" said Noah.

"No," said Cael.

"A Titan?"

"No." The old man laid his hand against the stone. "A principle."

He spoke slowly, searching for the words. "An ancient intelligence. Associated with time, and memory, and the spaces between worlds. It has no body. It has no throne. It is simply *there*, at the edge of things, the way the horizon is there."

"And the gods erased its name."

"They could not destroy it." Cael's hand tightened. "So they erased its name from every book, every tablet, every tongue. And they built the Covenant *around* it. As you build a wall around a well."

Elias stood in the dark vault, and the pieces moved in his head like the tumblers of a lock.

The Titans were prisoners. They had been chained so that they would keep something shut.

The Gates were locks.

The Covenant was the seal.

And now, someone was deliberately breaking it.

Elias finally understood the true danger. It was not the creature at the school window. It was not even Zephar. It was an idea so old that it did not need a body, so large that it did not need to hurry.

"Who is doing it?" he said. "Who's breaking the seals?"

Nobody answered.

Ilyan was standing in the doorway of the vault. Elias saw him in profile, a narrow shape against the gray light, bow held loose at his side. For a moment he thought the boy looked toward him.

But Ilyan was only watching the sky.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Betrayal

The betrayal came from inside their group.

Ilyan disappeared in the middle of the night. He took the map, the only copy of the route they had traced from the Archive, rolled in its leather case and slid out of Cael's pack so quietly that no one heard.

Mara blamed herself. She sat in the dark with her sword across her knees, her face a mask of anger and shame. "I knew," she said. "I *knew* there was something. I told myself it was only that he was lonely."

Cael blamed everyone.

Noah, who had liked Ilyan, who had once spent an hour teaching him to play a card game with a stolen deck, said nothing at all, which was worse than anything he could have said.

Elias blamed no one.

Not until he found Ilyan at the seventh Gate.

It was the last place on the map, a high terrace on an ice-scoured peak. The wind howled across it. Seven pillars of black stone stood in a ring, and in the center of the ring, shimmering with a weak cold light, was the outline of a door. It was sealed. It had been sealed for longer than recorded time.

Ilyan stood in front of it, small and thin against the sky. He held the map in both hands, and he was crying.

"I had no choice," he said.

"You always have a choice," said Elias.

It came out sounding much harder than he intended. He had meant it kindly. He had meant to say *you can still stop.* But the words had a bitter edge, and they sounded like an accusation, because under them was the memory of every moment that Ilyan had stood quietly at the edge of their circle, listening.

"They have my sister."

"Who?"

"You *know* who."

A figure stood behind him.

It had been there all along, Elias realized, behind the pillar. It was tall, and crowned with a faint halo of blue lightning that flickered against the setting sun.

Zephar.

The god stepped forward. He wore a gentle expression, almost sad. He laid one hand on Ilyan's shoulder with a paternal tenderness that made Elias's skin crawl.

"Open the seventh Gate," Zephar said softly. "And your sister will be returned."

Ilyan accepted.

It was not a loud acceptance. He did not say yes. He only bowed his head and turned back to the door, and Elias saw the tremor run through his shoulders, the whole thin body going slack with defeat. He had been alone too long. He had been offered the one thing he wanted most in the world, and the price had been the only thing left.

Elias ran.

He ran across the frozen terrace with the wind tearing at his coat, shouting Ilyan's name, shouting *don't,* shouting words he could not hear himself say. He felt the mark burn in his palm. He reached for the boy's arm.

The Gate opened.

The world screamed.

It was not a sound. It was the absence of every sound. Elias felt it first in his ears, a sudden, impossible pressure, as though all the noise in the world had been sucked out through a straw. The wind stopped. His own shouting died in his throat. The crash of the ice, the cry of birds, the thud of his heart, all of it dropped away into a silence so total that it had weight.

Then a voice appeared in his mind.

Finally.

Elias saw a vast darkness between stars.

It stretched in every direction, endless and cold, strewn with points of light like a spilled box of beads. And in that darkness something opened its eyes.

They were not eyes as he knew them. They were openings, slow and deep, like the doors of a house that has been shut for ages, now swinging wide. He felt himself being looked at, not as a person is looked at, but as a mountain looks at a pebble, or a sea at a swimmer.

He understood why the gods had been afraid.

It was not evil.

That was the thing that made his skin crawl. It was not hateful, or hungry, or cruel. It was older than the difference between good and evil. It was older than the *idea* of a difference. It was simply vast, and awake, and looking.

Zephar fell to his knees.

"No," he whispered. His crown had gone out. The god's face was wet. "No. Not yet. It's too soon."

The thing looked through the Gate.

And smiled.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The War of the Forgotten

Asterion prepared for war.

The horns rang for three days. Every Gatekeeper in the world was summoned. They came from the high north and the drowned south, from the desert cities and the island forts, in ones and twos and long silent columns. Old enemies stood shoulder to shoulder in the great square before the mountain, nodding stiffly across decades of grudge. Humans from hidden cities arrived with weapons designed centuries ago, black-iron cannon on wheels, bows strung with silver wire, and a strange glass tube that crackled with blue sparks when anyone looked at it too hard.

Even some gods came.

They stood apart. They did not speak to the humans. They watched the preparations with the cool, pained patience of aristocrats who had been dragged to a funeral. Elias saw one of them, a woman with a harvest of gray-gold hair and a face like a ruined coin, stop to help a boy who had dropped a crate of arrows. She did it without looking at him. She set the arrows back in the crate and walked away without a word.

But Elias noticed something strange.

The Titans did not attack.

He had expected them to. All his reading, such as it was, suggested that when the chains slipped, the monsters came out roaring. He had braced for walls to shake, for mountains to split.

Instead the earth beneath Asterion went still.

The Titans were *holding.* He understood it slowly, standing at the edge of the battlements with the cold wind in his face. Beneath the city, in the great dark chamber with the chains, the vast sleeping bodies had turned. They were pushing. Not against the Gates, but against the thing behind them, leaning their immeasurable weight upon the seven doors from the other side and *keeping them shut.*

Cronus spoke through the mountain.

It was not a roar. It was a low, rolling murmur that seemed to rise from the stones underfoot. Every Gatekeeper on the ramparts fell silent.

"We are not your enemy."

Cael, beside him, looked devastated.

The old man's hands gripped the parapet until they trembled. His face had gone gray. When he spoke, it was a whisper, as if he feared that the sound of the words would break something.

"We were wrong."

Elias turned to him.

"We were wrong," Cael said again. "All of us. For a thousand years."

He told it then, haltingly, with his eyes fixed on the mountain.

The ancient war had been based on a lie. The Titans had once fought the gods, yes, but not because they were monsters. They had fought because the gods tried to control the Gates, to use them as thrones, as weapons, as keys to be held by one hand. The Titans had stood in the way. And when the gods won, history was rewritten.

The Titans became monsters.

The gods became guardians.

The Covenant became a story.

"I believed it," Cael said. His voice cracked. "I taught it to children."

Below, in the dark, the chains creaked with the strain of holding.

Elias felt it all settle on him, vast and grim. The weight of a history gone wrong. The fear in the faces of the soldiers below. The sense, a plain animal certainty, that he stood on the edge of something beyond anyone's experience.

He walked to the mountain wall.

He laid his palm against the cold black stone, the mark burning under his skin, and he spoke to a being he could not see.

"What should I do?"

For a long moment there was only the wind.

Then the stone answered.

"Do what your mother did."

"What's that?"

"Choose humanity over the old powers."

The war began.

And Elias entered it without a weapon.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Boy Without a Weapon

Elias discovered that the mark on his hand could open and close Gates.

He discovered it by accident, on the second night of the siege, when a wave of shadow-creatures broke over the eastern wall and he threw up his hand in pure instinct. The mark flared. A seam of light opened in the air between him and the creatures, and the first three of them fell through it and were gone. He stood staring at his palm, his heart pounding, while the Gatekeepers around him cheered.

But he also discovered, within an hour, what it could not do.

It could not defeat armies. It could not strike, or burn, or break. It was not a weapon. Every time he tried to *make* it one, to point it and force it, it guttered and went dull, as if offended. It answered only when he asked it a question, and the question had to be honest.

So he stopped trying.

Instead, he learned to *redirect.*

He closed a Gate beneath a battlefield, and a column of the enemy dropped away into nothing. He opened another above a mountain pass, and a rockslide meant for a convoy of wounded poured harmlessly through it and out into some empty sky. He saved hundreds of people one afternoon by moving the path of a collapsing bridge, stepping the whole span sideways through a doorway of light and setting it down gently on solid ground, with a crowd of terrified refugees still clinging to its rails.

It was exhausting. After each use, he felt as if someone had pulled a thread out of the middle of him. His hands shook. His vision went white at the edges. Mara made him eat and drink and sit, with the stern, impatient care of a nurse who dislikes being one.

Noah helped by carrying messages.

It was not glamorous. He ran between the defenders with scrawled notes and verbal reports, up and down the long stairs of the mountain, in a cloak two sizes too big. He argued with captains, and sometimes won. He learned the names of the guard commanders. He learned which cooks would give him a heel of bread. He talked constantly, to everyone, in a hoarse cheerful babble, and Elias slowly realized that this was a kind of generalship too. Wherever Noah passed, people's faces eased a little.

"They like me," Noah said, astonished, over a cold supper on the ramparts. "I think the whole city has decided I'm the mascot."

"You are the mascot."

"I'd like to be a hero."

"You're the mascot who brings the bread," said Mara. "That's better."

Mara fought beside them. Elias watched her on the walls: a swift, dark, silent figure, her gray coat slashed to ribbons, her sword flickering like a fish in shallow water. She fought as though she were paying a debt. Once, in a lull, he found her sitting alone against a pillar, looking at her own hands.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm tired."

"That's not what I asked."

She gave him a long, strange look. "You're getting better at this."

"At what?"

"Asking the real question."

For the first time, Elias understood what leadership meant.

It did not mean being fearless. He had been so sure that it must, that the people who led were the ones who weren't afraid. But he was afraid, constantly, in his teeth and his hands and the base of his spine. And he led anyway, because the alternative was to stand still while others died.

It meant being afraid, and still choosing what mattered.

Then Zephar appeared.

He came on the fifth night, alone, with no storm to announce him. He stood on the parapet in the starlight, his crown dim, his face composed. The guards on the walls lowered their weapons. No one seemed able to lift them.

He had come to offer Elias a place among the gods.

"You could rule," he said.

Elias shook his head.

"I don't want to rule."

"You could become immortal."

"No."

"You could," said Zephar, very gently, "bring your mother back."

Elias froze.

The wind seemed to stop. The torches stopped guttering. Far below, the moans of the wounded stilled, one by one, until there was nothing in the world but the god's quiet voice and the hammering in Elias's chest.

Zephar smiled.

"That is what you want."

It was. It was *exactly* what he wanted. It was the thing under all other things, the black stone at the bottom of the well. It was the kitchen and the toast and the flick at the end of her handwriting. It was eight years of silence. He stood on the wall of an ancient city, with a god's hand held out, and every part of him strained toward it like a plant toward the sun.

He looked at the god.

Then he remembered the sentence his mother had left him.

Never open a door you cannot close.

"I want the truth," he said.

Zephar's smile vanished.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lyra's Last Message

The truth was hidden inside Elias's pendant.

He had worn it for years without knowing. It had been a keepsake, a cold comfort, a thing to hold at night. It was Mara who first noticed the hairline seam around its rim, a gap so fine it might have been a scratch.

"Give it to me," she said.

"No."

"Elias."

"It's *mine*." His voice broke. "It's the only thing I've got."

She looked at him. "I know. That's why I'm asking you to open it, and not me."

So he did. He sat on the edge of his narrow bed in the tower room, with Mara kneeling beside him and Noah hovering in the doorway, and turned the silver disc between his fingers. He found the seam. He pressed the place where the metal was thinnest. The pendant clicked and opened like a locket.

Inside lay a tiny crystal.

It was no bigger than a grain of rice. It floated in a bed of black fluid, and it began to glow the moment it touched the air. A thin beam of silver light rose from it, widened, and resolved into a small standing figure.

Lyra appeared.

Elias stopped breathing.

She stood in the air above the pendant, no taller than his hand, but real in every line. She wore the same dark coat. Her

hair was loose. She looked into the crystal, and through it, and out into the room, directly into his eyes.

"My son," she said, "if you see this, I am probably gone."

Elias wanted to interrupt. He wanted to say *Mum*, to say *where*, to say *I'm here*. But the recording rolled on, unhearing, and he could not stop it. His hands were locked around the pendant. His throat had closed.

"I need you to know something," Lyra said. "I never abandoned you."

He made a sound.

"I entered the Gates voluntarily. I went because I had to." She drew a breath, steadying herself. "There is a presence beyond the world, Elias. The gods called it Aeon, and they feared it, and they built a wall around it that became a prison for everyone. I went in to stop it from fully crossing. I could not destroy it. I could only delay it."

She paused.

"The Covenant needed a living successor. Someone to hold it after me. Not a god. The gods have a stake. Not a Titan, for the same reason. A *human*."

The word hung in the air.

"I did not want it to be you. I wanted it to be anyone else. I wanted to be the last one, and to come home, and to make toast." Her mouth trembled. "But the mark chose. It always chooses."

Elias made a noise that was half sob.

"You may be tempted to restore the old Covenant," she said. "When you are older, when you are tired. When someone offers you a clean and simple way. Don't."

He stared.

"Why?" he whispered. The word fell out of him, to no one.

"Because," said Lyra, "the old Covenant was built on lies."

She was smiling now. It was a small, sad, steady smile, and it broke his heart.

Her final message was simple.

"Build a better one."

She lifted her hand. For one instant it seemed she would touch the lens, would reach through the years and lay her palm on his cheek. Then the image flickered. The crystal dimmed. The little figure folded into the light and the light went out.

The pendant lay dark in his hands.

Elias cried silently.

It was not the kind of crying he had done as a child, loud and furious and public. It came without sound, tears running steadily down his face onto the silver, shoulders shaking, mouth open on nothing. He had waited eight years for a sentence. He had been given it, and it was more than he could carry.

Mara sat beside him. She did not touch him. She did not say that it would be all right. She only stayed, a warm, still presence at his side, and he knew somehow that she was crying too.

Noah did not say anything.

He had not made a single joke. He simply crossed the room, and sat down on the floor with his back against the bed, and stayed.

He simply stayed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The House of the First People

They found the remains of the first civilization beneath the ocean.

They reached it by a Gate hidden in a sea cave, a ring of wet stone behind a curtain of kelp. Beyond it a stair descended into green dark, and the sea parted before them as they walked. It did not part like a wall of water. It parted like a held breath, the pressure easing, the cold sliding aside, so that they walked down a tunnel of still air between two glittering ceilings of tide.

The city had survived because it existed outside ordinary time.

That was Cael's explanation, and even he looked unsure of it. Its towers still stood, white and slender, with no weed on them and no rot. Fish moved slowly through its streets, as they might through the avenues of a dream. The doors were open. The beds were made. A table in one house was laid for a meal that no one had returned to eat.

Its people were gone.

Their machines still worked.

Elias walked beneath great ribs of brass that hummed with a quiet power, past wheels that turned without hands, along corridors lit by lamps that burned with no flame. He felt the weight of absence press on him. It was not a ruin. It was a place that was waiting. It had the stillness of a house in which someone has just stepped out of the room.

At the center stood a chamber called the House of the First People.

Elias had never seen so plain a room hold so much silence. It was round, domed in pale stone, and quite empty except for seven seats arranged in a ring. They were not chairs, exactly. They were carved hollows in the floor, each shaped to receive a body.

One seat had a human-sized imprint.

The other six were far larger. They were shaped for beings who would have towered over a man, who would have filled the dome. Some were broad. Some were tall and narrow. One was no shape at all, only a deep smooth bowl of shadow.

"The first Covenant was not a treaty between gods," said Cael.

His voice was very quiet.

"It was a treaty between kinds of existence."

"What does that mean?" asked Noah.

"It means," said Cael, "that every seat was a *way of being.* The god. The Titan. The Keeper. The ones who keep memory, and time, and what lies beyond. And the human."

He turned to Elias.

"Humans were once represented. They sat at this table. They had a voice."

"What happened?"

"The gods removed them."

The words fell with a flat finality.

"They struck the human seat from the record. They said humans were too small and too brief to be parties to an ancient pact. They wrote the Covenant afresh, without them, and the world forgot there had been a seventh voice."

Elias looked at the seat.

"The missing human seat," said Cael, "is the reason the Covenant can now be rewritten. A pact with an empty chair is a pact that can be reopened."

He gestured. "It is waiting for someone to sit."

Elias was not sure how long he stood there. He could hear the others breathing. He could hear the soft eternal hum of the machines. He could hear his mother's voice: *Build a better one.*

He walked to the seat.

He stepped into it. The hollow fit him like a hand.

He placed his palm on the arm of stone, over a faint carved ring.

The city awakened.

It began with a hum that rose through the floor, up through his feet and into his spine. Then lamps blossomed along the walls, one after another, blue and white and gold. Gears turned in the ceiling. A great slow wave of light rolled across the dome, and from it, as though the stone were thinking aloud, a voice asked a question.

WHAT DO YOU CHOOSE TO PROTECT?

It was not a human voice. It was not any voice. It was the sound a mountain might make, if the mountain had learned to care.

Elias thought.

He thought of the throne of Olympus, and the crown of lightning. He thought of the ash and the chains and the glass crown in the museum. He thought of a boy with a pale bow, crying at a Gate. He thought of a bedroom window, and a man on the stairs, sitting in the dark.

"People," he said.

The machine accepted the answer.

Light bloomed overhead, and above the dome the seven Gates appeared as seven points of radiance, hanging in the air like constellations. But one point was different.

It was not a Gate.

It was a doorway.

It led somewhere beyond the world.

And through it, with the unhurried terrible patience of the tide, Aeon had begun crossing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Door Between Worlds

Elias and his friends entered the final doorway.

There had been no argument. There had been, instead, a long silence in the House, and then Mara had said quietly, "We can't close it from here," and Cael had nodded, and Noah had said, "I assume that means we go *in*," in a voice so small it did not sound like his.

They went.

There was no floor.

There was no sky. There was only an endless darkness, soft and deep and faintly warm, and in it, drifting like dust in a sunbeam, there were memories. Elias felt them brush his skin. Each was a small bright shred of someone's life: a smell of bread, a snatch of song, a hand lifted in farewell.

He saw civilizations rise and vanish.

They bloomed in the dark like flowers in time-lapse, glittering cities that grew from a single fire and reached up in towers and fell again to ash. He saw peoples he had no names for. He saw their ships, their wars, their libraries, their laughter.

He saw gods being born.

They rose out of the dark like sparks. Each was small at first, a thought, a wish, a desperate hope. Then they grew, fed by prayer and by fear, until they stood taller than mountains and cast shadows across the stars.

He saw Titans imprisoned.

He saw the chains hammered, link by link, by hands that shook. He saw a vast tired face looking up from beneath the weight of the world, not angry, only sad, and he knew that face as one knows a face in a dream.

He saw his mother walking alone.

She moved across a gray plain, small and straight, a thread of dark against nothing. She did not look back. She walked as though she were going somewhere she had decided on a very long time ago and had never once doubted.

Then he saw himself.

Not now.

Older.

The figure stood before the same doorway, taller, thinner, with lines around the eyes and a faint streak of silver in the hair. He wore a long coat. He held something in his hand that Elias could not see. And he turned, and looked straight at the boy he had been.

"Do not close it," said the future Elias.

Elias stared. "Why?"

"Because you cannot close something that was never meant to be closed."

The vision unrolled.

Elias saw Aeon. Not as a monster. Not as a god. He saw it as a long, slow, shifting presence at the edge of everything, wearing no shape, bearing no name. He felt its patience, its loneliness.

Aeon was not invading.

The gods had trapped it. They had caught it, ages ago, at the margins of reality, and shut it outside in the dark. The Gates were not prisons for what was inside the world. They were

bridges between the world and what lay beyond it, bridges the gods had barred.

The Covenant had transformed them into locks.

The world had become afraid of what it did not understand.

The real choice, Elias saw, was there in front of him, clean and merciless. Destroy Aeon, and make the lie permanent. Or let it enter, and risk whatever came.

Neither was acceptable.

Destroy it, and I become what Zephar was. Let it in, and I may break everything.

There had to be another way.

He turned to Mara. His mouth was dry. His voice, when it came, was steadier than he felt.

"We don't need to close the door."

Mara stared at him. Then something dawned in her face, a slow, incredulous understanding, like sunrise on a long-closed window.

"We need to change what the door means," she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Last Covenant

The final battle began in the space between worlds.

It was not a battle of armies. There were no soldiers here, no walls, no banners. There were only five figures in the dark, each holding a different idea of what must be done.

Zephar had come through behind them. His crown was broken and his face was white, but his hand was steady, and in it he held a blade of lightning. He meant to destroy the doorway. He believed, with the desperate faith of a man who has built his whole life on one idea, that the only safe door was a smashed one.

Cronus had come, too. His voice filled the dark. He meant to hold the door open. Whatever lay beyond, he said, it had been shut out for long enough, and the Titans had spent their whole age of chains holding a lie in place.

Cael had come, white-haired and trembling, and stood between Elias and the god. He meant to protect Elias. That was all. It was the only plan he had left.

Everyone had a different answer.

Elias had none.

He stood in the middle of the dark with the mark burning in his palm, and the three of them pulling at him from three sides, and he thought: *I am fourteen. I am fourteen, and I cannot do this.*

Then he remembered the seven seats.

The House of the First People. The ring of hollows. The Covenant had needed seven voices, and it had been broken because it had been given only six.

Human.

Titan.

God.

Keeper.

Memory.

Time.

And the unknown.

Elias stood in the center of the dark, and the others, one by one, fell silent. He took a breath. It shook.

He spoke the first promise.

"No power will own the Gates."

The words rang. They did not echo. They *settled*, like a stone dropped into a still pond, spreading rings outward through the dark.

Mara stepped up beside him.

"No Gate will belong to one people," she said.

The second ring spread.

Cronus, from the dark, in a voice like the turning of the earth, said, "No ancient being will be imprisoned for fear alone."

Zephar resisted.

He stood rigid, the lightning blade shaking in his fist. His eyes went from Elias to the door, to the Titan, to the broken crown at his feet. Elias watched him. He watched a god decide, in a moment that was longer than any minute, whether to be what he had always been.

"No god," said Zephar, hoarse, "will rewrite the truth again."

The fifth voice came from the city.

It was not one voice. It was thousands, faint and far, the voices of every person in Asterion who had stood in the dark and waited. The sixth came from the silence itself, from the dark between the memories, a stillness that spoke.

The seventh came from Aeon.

Elias listened.

It did not demand worship. It did not threaten. It did not ask for anything he had expected. It asked, simply and without words, for recognition. To be seen. To be allowed to exist, without chains, without a wall, without a lie.

It was the oldest and most human request in the world.

So Elias spoke the final words.

"You may exist."

The doorway opened completely.

Light filled the darkness.

It was not blinding. It was a clean, soft, rising light, the color of a morning that has waited a very long time. It flooded the void, and the drifting memories brightened like dust in a sunbeam, and Elias felt the weight of ages go out of the air.

The old Covenant broke.

It broke without a sound, a great web of invisible threads parting one by one, and the dark quivered with the release of it. For one moment the whole universe seemed to hold its breath.

A new one began.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Fall of Asterion

When the Covenant changed, Asterion began to collapse.

It was not an attack. No one had struck the city. It was simply that Asterion had been built around the old system, its foundations set upon the Gates, its mountain carved to hold the prison, its streets laid out like the veins of an organism that could not survive the removal of its heart. When the old promise broke, everything that had rested on it began, slowly and then quickly, to fall.

Bridges snapped.

Elias heard them go from the other end of the city, a series of long groaning cracks like trees in a storm, and then the great curved spans fell into the river-light and the light went wild, flooding the lower streets in a surge of blue that lit the sky from beneath. Towers shook. Windows burst. A tall black spire at the edge of the market leaned, stately and unhurried, and went down across three streets in a roar of stone.

Everyone fled toward the Gates.

They came in thousands, in a terrified, orderly flood, mothers carrying babies, old men carrying clocks. A woman went by with a birdcage. A child dragged a goat. The guards who had stood on the walls for five days with faces like iron were now simply people, crying, helping strangers over the rubble, passing infants hand to hand over the heads of the crowd.

Elias refused to leave until he knew they were safe.

"You can't hold it all," Mara shouted, hauling at his arm. "You're not a wall!"

"I can hold the doors!"

"Then *hold* them, and let us do the rest!"

Noah organized the evacuation.

It was, Elias thought afterward, the finest thing he ever saw him do. Noah stood on an overturned cart at the head of the great stair, with a bell in one hand and a broken lantern in the other, and *directed* them. Mothers and children first. The injured on the left. Old people to the broad stairs. No pushing. He bawled it out in a voice that cracked and gave and kept coming, and people obeyed it, because he sounded exactly as terrified as they were, and was doing it anyway.

Mara opened emergency passages, one after another, ripping doorways in the rock with her blue light. Each cost her. By the fifth she was bleeding from the nose. By the eighth she was on her knees. She kept going.

Cael stayed behind to stabilize the mountain.

He had said so quietly, an hour before, standing in the center of the circular hall with his hands folded. He said it in the tone of someone mentioning an errand. Elias had not believed it. Then the mountain began to groan, and Cael was gone from the hall, and Elias ran.

He found him beneath the central chamber.

It was a low vault, ringed with the old seven-lined marks, and in its center the stone floor had cracked into a star. Light flooded up through the cracks. The old man stood in the middle of it, his white hair lifting in the draft, his two hands pressed flat to a single pale slab. His face was calm.

"You should go," Cael said.

"I'm not leaving you."

"You are."

"You *can't*—"

"I can." Cael smiled. "I have spent a thousand years guarding a mistake, Elias. Let me spend the last hour guarding the people who will not have to."

"Please."

It was the voice of a six-year-old, and he hated it. Cael turned his head, and the grief on his old face was so naked that Elias flinched.

The old man crossed the vault.

He placed a hand on Elias's shoulder. It was light as a leaf. His eyes were bright with tears and with a kind of joy.

"Do not make the same mistake with your future," he said.

The mountain began to fall.

The roof groaned, and the walls shook, and dust and stone came down in a roaring rain. Mara's hands closed on Elias's coat. Noah's voice yelled from the stair. And Elias ran, he ran with his heart tearing, he ran because the old man had asked him to, and Cael remained.

He did not look back. He did not dare.

The city disappeared behind a wall of blue light.

It rose behind them like a tide, the last of Asterion's power spilling skyward in a single column that lit the clouds above the world. For a long moment it hung there, shimmering, a pillar of memory and farewell. Then it thinned, and softened, and was gone.

When the light faded, Asterion was gone.

But the Gates remained.

Not as prisons.

As pathways.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Gods After the War

The gods survived.

But they were no longer rulers.

The new Covenant required them to share knowledge with humans, and it did so without ceremony and without exception. The great libraries of Olympus, which no mortal had entered in ten thousand years, found their doors standing open on a Tuesday morning. The archives were unlocked. The star-charts and the healing songs and the names of things, all the dust-gold hoard of divine learning, spilled out into the world like grain from a split sack.

Some gods refused.

They shut themselves behind their last walls and refused to speak. A few vanished, slipping out of the world by routes only gods knew. Others stayed, awkward and stiff in the new light, learning to sit at tables with the creatures they had once ignored.

Zephar surrendered his crown.

He did it in the open, at the foot of the broken mountain, with a crowd of Gatekeepers silently watching. He carried it in his two hands like something that might spill. It had burned out. It was only a ring of dark metal now, cracked, scorched, no lighter or heavier than any bracelet. He set it down on a flat stone.

"I have worn it long enough," he said.

Nobody cheered. Nobody spoke. Elias, watching from the edge of the crowd, felt a strange tightness in his chest. He had

hated the man. He had feared him. But he had also seen the god on his knees at the seventh Gate, and the memory refused to leave.

Mara became one of the first new Gatekeepers.

She was sworn in on a gray morning, in a small plain ceremony. She stood in her ruined coat with her sword unsheathed on her palms and said the words in a flat clear voice. When it was over, she walked away from the others and stood alone by the river, looking at her hands. Elias started toward her. Then he stopped. Some things you leave a person alone with.

Noah was given a bronze medal.

It was handed to him by a solemn Gatekeeper with a long gray beard, in front of three hundred refugees. He looked at it. He turned it over. He held it up to the light.

"It's ugly," he said.

The crowd laughed.

"I want to complain about that," Noah said, "and I'm going to. But I'm also going to wear it."

Elias kept the broken coin.

It sat in his pocket like a warm stone. He took it out sometimes and turned it over in the firelight. Its seven lines were still visible, cut deep in the bronze. But now there was an eighth mark. A small circle, in the exact center, where the old coin had cracked. A reminder that the old seven were not enough.

The hidden world began changing.

Cities opened. Libraries revealed their secrets. Old languages came home from exile, murmured on tongues that had not spoken them in centuries. Human historians, travelling quietly, discovered that many myths had been distorted memories of real events. A flood. A fire. A war between friends.

Elias returned home.

It took four days. He walked the last mile alone, through a gray dawn, and let himself in at the front door with a key that still fit. The house smelled of cold toast and old rugs. Nothing had moved. Nothing, he realized, had been *touched.*

His father was waiting.

He was sitting at the kitchen table. He was in the clothes he'd worn to work, and he looked as if he had been there for days. A cup of tea steamed at his elbow, untouched. He lifted his head when Elias came in. His face did something complicated and then went carefully still.

He looked at the mark on Elias's hand.

"I knew this day would come," he said.

Elias stared.

"You *knew?*"

His father sighed. It was a long, slow, heavy sigh, as though he were putting down something he'd carried a very long way.

"Your mother asked me to keep you safe."

"You lied to me."

"Yes."

"For *years.*"

"Yes."

"Why?"

The man across the table said nothing for a long time. His hands lay flat on the wood.

"Because I was afraid," he said.

And for the first time, Elias understood that adults could be frightened too. That they had no better view of the dark than he did. That a man could love someone so much that he would lie to her son, and be wrong, and know it, and do it anyway.

He did not forgive him. Not yet.
But he sat down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Room That Wasn't There

Home felt different.

Elias slept badly. The house was the same, the creaking stair, the water stain shaped like a continent, the pillow still holding the faint shape of his head. But it was as though every object in it had been moved a quarter-inch to the left. Nothing sat quite where it had.

On the third night he noticed a door in the hallway.

It had never been there.

It stood between his bedroom and the bathroom, where for fourteen years there had been a plain stretch of wallpaper. It was tall and dark, with a silver grain along its wood. He stood in the dim landing in his pajamas and stared at it. Seven lines were carved into its surface, in a ring, around a mark that was no longer unfamiliar.

He called Noah.

Noah arrived ten minutes later, in a coat over pajamas with a toy dinosaur on them, hair flattened on one side, carrying a biscuit tin for reasons he never explained.

Mara arrived five minutes after that. She did not knock. She appeared on the landing, soundless, in her new Gatekeeper's grey, and looked at the door as one looks at a snake.

"I came as soon as I felt it," she said.

"Felt what?"

"A door opening. In a place a door shouldn't."

None of them opened it.

Instead, Elias listened. He pressed his ear to the dark wood, and the grain was cool and faintly humming, and behind it, very slowly, with enormous patience, someone was breathing.

Not Aeon. He knew the patient dark of Aeon now, the gentle bottomless weight. Not Cronus, either, the vast and weary tide. Not any voice he knew.

A message appeared on the door.

It formed in the grain, in thin lines of silver fire, as if the wood were slowly remembering how to write.

BOOK TWO.

Noah stared.

"That is not ominous at all."

Mara touched the symbol, and her fingers came away glittering. "It is a warning."

Elias shook his head.

"No."

"What?"

He looked down at the coin in his hand. The eighth mark, that small, unfinished circle, shone faintly in the half-light.

"It is an invitation."

The door vanished.

It did not fade. It simply was not there, between one blink and the next, and the wallpaper stretched blank and ordinary where it had stood.

But the mark remained, a faint seven-lined ring pressed into the plaster. And somewhere far away, beneath an unknown city, a second set of seven lines appeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Empty Throne

News arrived from the hidden world.

The throne of Olympus was empty. No god had claimed it. That should have been good news. For ten thousand years, the throne had been a seat of tyranny, and its emptiness might have been a promise.

Instead, every ancient faction wanted it.

Messengers came to Elias's door, then to Mara's, then to Noah's mother's, to Noah's loud and eternal delight. They came with sealed letters and anxious faces. A Titan sent a rumbling plea through a crack in the garden. A god's herald left a gift of silver bees. The Gatekeepers, newly reorganized, called an emergency Council of Gates and asked Elias to attend.

He refused at first.

"I'm fourteen," he said.

"You keep saying that," said Mara.

"It keeps being true."

"It does not make you less necessary."

Then he learned the throne was not a chair.

It was a mechanism.

Cael's old records, rescued from the ruin of Asterion, were unambiguous. Whoever sat upon the seat could command every Gate in the world. They could open them, close them, set them to any destination. They could turn the whole delicate network into a single weapon, wielded by a single will.

The old Covenant had prevented that power from being used.

The new Covenant had removed the lock.

Now someone could try.

So Elias, Mara, and Noah returned to the hidden world. It was strange to see it again, brighter, noisier, the streets of a lesser city crowded with strangers from half a dozen races. The Council hall was a vast circular chamber, hung with tapestries, jammed with representatives. They filled the benches and the aisles. They turned to look at Elias as he entered, in a long silent wave.

A masked stranger stood at the center.

He wore a plain white mask and a gray robe. He stood with his hands folded. When he spoke, the room went still.

"You cannot stop what is coming."

Elias recognized the voice.

It was gentle. It was kind. It belonged to an old man in a gray robe, who had once led him down a stair into the dark, and had wept at the foot of a collapsing mountain.

The false Cael.

The creature smiled behind its mask.

"You changed the Covenant."

"Yes," said Elias.

"You freed the thing outside."

"Yes."

"You think that makes you brave."

"No."

Elias raised the coin.

It glowed in his hand, small and warm and steady, with the eight marks bright on its face. The room was silent. A hundred

faces watched him.

"I think it makes us responsible."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Second Awakening

The false Cael revealed the truth.

Aeon had not been the only thing outside the world.

There were others.

The words moved through the Council hall like cold air. Delegates shifted. One of the old gods, near the front, lowered her face into her hands.

"The old gods had known," said the creature. It spoke slowly, like a man reading a verdict. "The Titans had known. Lyra had known. The first civilization had known."

"Known what?" said Mara.

"That the Covenant had been built not only to protect the world from what was outside."

It paused.

"It had also protected the outside from what was inside."

Silence.

Elias understood, slowly, with a terrible swelling dread. The wall had been a wall in both directions. It had kept something out. And it had kept something *in.* Something in the human world, something in the roots of human thought, which had needed to be restrained as surely as any Titan.

"The human world," said the false Cael, "has become dangerous. Because memory itself has begun changing."

It was true. Elias had noticed it. They all had. People forgot cities they had visited. Books lost chapters between readings. A photograph at the back of a drawer showed a different face.

Names disappeared, as if a hand were quietly rubbing them off the world.

If memory failed, the new Covenant would fail with it.

Elias felt it like a cold hand on the back of his neck.

The false Cael opened a Gate.

It was small and simple, a seam in the air at the center of the hall, no wider than a door. The delegates scrambled back. Light spilled out of it, soft and golden.

Beyond it stood a city.

Elias recognized it.

He recognized it from his oldest dreams. The glass roof. The golden dunes pressed against it like a crowd at a window. The black river. The bakery with the blue door. All of it, every stone, laid out in the yellow light.

The city was not dead.

It was waiting.

A voice spoke from beyond the Gate. It was warm, and quiet, and it said two words.

"Come home."

Elias looked at Mara.

"That isn't possible."

Mara shook her head slowly.

"Apparently it is."

They stepped through.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The City of the First Dream

The city from Elias's dreams was real.

Every street matched. Every tower. Every river. Every broken statue lay where he had always seen it, with the same chipped nose, the same missing hand. He walked down the avenue of cracked fountains, with Mara at his shoulder and Noah muttering behind, and felt something rise in him that was not fear. It was homesickness, so sharp and sweet that he had to stop.

There were no people.

It was the first thing he noticed, and the thing that frightened him most. Every window was dark. Every doorway stood open. A loaf of bread sat on a bakery sill, perfectly fresh. A child's shoe lay in a gutter. It was a city in which everyone had just stepped out.

At the center stood a house.

He knew it. It was a small house, narrow, with a blue door and a rain-stained roof, nestled between two much grander buildings. In his dreams, it had been the bakery. Now it was something else.

Elias entered.

Inside, the walls were covered with photographs.

Hundreds of them. Thousands. They hung in long ragged rows, from floor to ceiling, each in a plain black frame. They showed his life. His childhood. A small boy on a tricycle. A birthday cake with five candles. His mother, young, laughing,

holding him up to the camera.

But some of the photographs showed events that had never happened.

In one, Elias stood beside a girl he had never met. She had red hair, and a gap in her teeth, and her arm slung around his shoulder as though she had done it a hundred times. In another, Noah was wearing a crown, grinning, enormous and absurd. In a third, Mara was old.

Very old. Her face a map of lines, her hair white, her eyes the same bright impossible dark. She sat in a wicker chair, looking at something beyond the frame, and she was smiling.

A final photograph hung at the far end of the room, in a frame of dark wood.

It showed Elias standing before seven doors. He was older, taller, his face grave. Behind him stood eight shadows, long and dark, cast by no one.

He took it from the wall.

He turned it over.

A date was written on the back, in his own handwriting.

Tomorrow.

Elias looked at his friends.

"We need to leave."

The house doors slammed shut.

All of them. The front. The back. The cellar. The windows. Every opening in the little house sealed itself with a sound like a closing book. The photographs trembled on the walls. A wind rose from nowhere, and it carried the smell of ash.

A voice spoke from the ceiling.

"Too late."

In the photograph in Elias's hands, the eighth shadow moved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Eighth Shadow

The eighth shadow was not a person.

It was a possibility.

It rose from the floor of the little house like smoke from a snuffed candle, gathering shape, taller than a man and darker than the dark. It had no face. It had no voice of its own. It was a future that had not yet chosen to exist, and it came to him in the only way such a thing could: as a showing.

It showed Elias what would happen if the new Covenant failed.

The Gates would merge. They would run together like wet paint, and the world would become a single swollen threshold. The hidden world would spill into the human world. Myths would become physical, and walk the streets, and no one would remember how to stop them. Memories would become places, to be lost in, to be trapped in. Time would stop obeying ordinary rules.

Elias saw cities folding. He saw faces slipping off. He saw his father at the kitchen table, looking at him with a stranger's eyes.

He saw himself.

Becoming something else.

Not a god. Not a Titan. A Keeper without a human life. A thing that sat in a seat of stone and watched the doors, and had no one to go home to, and no home to go to. It was calm, and patient, and endlessly lonely. It had forgotten the taste of toast.

He rejected the vision.

"I choose my own future."

The shadow answered. Its voice was a whisper in the walls.

"Then choose."

Elias understood.

The Covenant had been designed around seven fixed roles. Seven seats. Seven voices. It had never had room for a person who wanted something no role could give. It had been a machine built to hold things in their places.

But the eighth mark was not a role.

It was a question.

It represented choice. Human freedom. The ability to change the system rather than obey it.

Elias touched the eighth mark.

The city began to dissolve.

It came apart gently, like sugar in tea. The photographs lost their edges. The walls blurred. The dunes outside the glass collapsed into a haze of gold, and the black river ran backward into the air and was gone. The false Cael screamed. It was a high, thin, helpless sound, and it twisted as it went, its shape coming loose, the mask falling away to show only emptiness.

The Gates snapped shut.

All of them. One by one, like a row of doors closing in a corridor, each with its own small sound. The world exhaled. The pressure in the air eased, as after a storm.

But one remained.

Alone in the dark where the little house had been, it stood open. It was a Gate leading somewhere beyond even Aeon's realm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Gate That Remained

The final Gate stood alone.

Elias knew that closing it would be easy.

Too easy. It was a small ring of pale light, hanging in the dark like a held note. He had only to lift his hand, and press the mark, and it would be gone. He could do it in a breath. His friends would sigh. The gods would nod. The world would be safe, for a while.

He could feel something behind it.

Not an enemy.

A question.

It pulsed against the edge of the Gate like a heartbeat against skin. It was patient and enormous and it was not asking him for anything he could give. It was only *there,* waiting to be asked in return.

He remembered his mother's final message.

Build a better one.

So he did not close the Gate.

He took the broken coin from his pocket, and walked forward, and placed it into the center of the ring.

It fit exactly.

The seven lines formed a circle. The eighth mark, the small empty ring at the center, completed it. The coin glowed, white and gold, and the glow spread outward through the Gate in a shimmering wave.

The Gate became transparent.

Beyond it was not darkness.

It was a sunrise.

A real one, golden and rose, rising over a wide green plain. Birds flew across it. A river caught the light. The air that drifted through the Gate smelled of cut grass and rain.

Mara stepped beside him.

"What do you see?"

Elias smiled.

"Another world."

Noah groaned.

"Of course it is."

They returned home before dawn.

They came out into the ordinary night through a seam in the old tannery wall, damp and shivering, and walked the three streets back to Elias's house without speaking. The town was asleep. A cat watched them from a wall.

The hidden world remained hidden for the moment. The gods watched from their half-open doors. The Titans waited in their dark, breathing in time with the stones. The new Covenant held.

But Elias knew the truth.

Their story had not ended.

It had only crossed its first threshold.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The City Beneath the Sky

Months later, Elias returned to the place where Asterion had stood.

The city was gone.

There was only a wide bowl of broken stone, rimmed with the stumps of towers, still faintly warm. Weeds grew in the cracks. A river of pale light, thin as a thread, still trickled along a ruined channel. It looked like the beginning of a sentence.

But beneath the ruins, something new was growing.

Human architects worked beside Gatekeepers. They were laying out streets with string and chalk, arguing in three languages about the placement of a well. Former enemies traded knowledge across a trestle table. A god in a plain cloak was teaching a boy to read a star chart. A Titan's hand, vast and gentle, held a scaffolding steady while a mason set the keystone of an arch.

Children learned the true history of the world.

They sat in a ring on the grass with their legs crossed, and a woman with silver in her braids told them about the Covenant. She told them the real version, the one with the human seat in it. They listened, wide-eyed. One of them raised a hand and asked what happened to the old man who stayed behind.

The mountain still stood.

Its prison was empty.

Elias walked up the long stair alone. At the top, the black door gaped open. There were no chains in the chamber beyond.

There was only a great hollow room, ringed with the faint scars of old rings, and the smell of warm stone.

He carried the broken coin.

Seven lines. One center.

He thought about the night he first dreamed of the sky breaking. He thought of a woman with a clay lamp, standing at the foot of a stair, not afraid. He finally understood what he had seen.

It had not been the end of the world.

It had been the end of the old story.

Mara approached.

She came up the stair in her gray Gatekeeper's coat, and stopped beside him, and looked out over the new city.

"Ready?"

Elias looked toward the horizon.

"For what?"

She pointed upward.

A new Gate had appeared in the sky.

Not seven.

Not eight.

One.

A door made of sunlight.

Noah arrived carrying three bags.

He came puffing up the last steps with a canvas satchel on each shoulder and a third clutched to his chest. He set them down with a thump.

"I brought food."

Elias laughed.

"You brought enough for a week."

"I have learned," said Noah, with great dignity, "that ancient supernatural adventures are terrible for meal planning."

They stood together.

Then a message appeared across the sky, in letters of pale gold, written in no hand at all.

THE COVENANT REMEMBERS.

Elias looked at the mark on his palm.

For the first time, it did not frighten him.

He stepped toward the light.

The story of the gods was over.

The story of humanity had just begun.

EPILOGUE

The Name Beyond the Stars

Far beyond the world, something watched.

It had no face, and it had no throne. It watched as the stars watch, not with eyes, but with presence. It had seen the new Covenant change the shape of reality. It had seen the Gates cease to be locks. It had seen the gods surrender their crowns, and the Titans step out of their chains, and human beings, small and brief and astonishing, given a voice at last.

But there were still places beyond the known worlds.

Places where old civilizations waited in the dark, their lamps trimmed, their doors ajar. Places where forgotten names remained, folded away like letters in a drawer.

And in one of those places, a child opened a book.

It was an enormous old book, bound in gray cloth, its pages the color of bone. The child sat cross-legged on a cold stone floor beneath a window with no glass. A wind turned the leaves.

The first page was blank.

The second page contained seven lines.

The third contained eight.

The child turned to the final page.

A name appeared.

ELIAS VALE.

Then another name appeared beneath it. It was written in a hand no one had ever seen, in letters no one could read. It was a name that had never belonged to a god. It had never belonged to a Titan. It belonged to something older.

The child smiled.
"The Covenant has begun again."
Outside, the stars moved.
And somewhere between them, a door opened.