



FRIENDS AROUND THE TABLE

Six longtime friends gather for game night, where shared imagination unfolds into a world of mystery, danger, and unexpected laughter. Follow their adventurers beyond a silent city gate—and discover how friendship shapes the stories they tell, both around the table and within the adventure.

STRANGEWOVEN

Friends Around the Table

The Bell Beyond the Gate

BOOK ONE

The complete novella
All five parts · Eleven chapters

STRANGEWOVEN

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FRIENDS AROUND THE TABLE

The Bell Beyond the Gate



PART 1 OF 5

STRANGEWOVEN

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, Eventually

By the time Maya arrived, somebody had already lost a shoe.

"Not mine," Julian said from the kitchen, before she could ask.

"Nobody accused you."

"I'm establishing that early."

Maya stepped over a small purple sock and hung her coat beside Rachel's. From the living room came the unmistakable sound of Finn explaining something at tremendous speed. June interrupted with a correction. Lucy, who had arrived with Rachel half an hour earlier, shouted that the dragon needed a hospital.

"We have a hospital," Finn said.

"A bigger hospital."

Maya followed the voices. A cardboard castle occupied most of the rug. Her daughter knelt beside it, trying to put a stuffed dragon through an opening intended for something considerably smaller.

"Good afternoon, architect."

Lucy looked up. "It got stepped on."

"The dragon?"

"The hospital."

Rachel, sitting on the sofa beside Elena, lifted a foot. "That would be me."

Maya kissed Lucy's hair, then bent to examine the damage. One wall had folded inward. She braced it with a picture book, widened the doorway, and helped ease the dragon through.

"There," she said. "Emergency department."

Lucy inspected the repair. "You can go now."

"Always nice to feel needed."

Rachel caught Maya's hand as she passed. "How was your mother's sink?"

"Fixed. She sent enough oranges to provision a ship."

"Put some in the kitchen. We're leaving the rest here."

Elena nodded. "Fair payment for the hospital."

Saturday had taken a little arranging this week. Elena's shift had changed, Maya's mother had developed a leak beneath her kitchen sink, and Caleb hadn't been certain he could finish his delivery route in time. Three weeks earlier, the game had been canceled altogether so Tessa could help her father move home after a brief hospital stay. Nobody had suggested squeezing it in anyway.

They had been doing this long enough to know that there would be another Saturday.

The dining table stood beyond the kitchen, extended with a leaf that no longer quite matched. Maya remembered its predecessor, a folding table in Dani's parents' garage. Back then they had played under a fluorescent tube that buzzed whenever anyone said anything dramatic. They had been sixteen, mostly, and convinced that adults had complete control over their own schedules.

Now they owned better chairs.

The schedules remained a work in progress.

Nora was dividing rice between two serving bowls. Tessa stood beside her, carefully lifting foil from a tray of roasted vegetables. Julian leaned against the counter, holding a stack of plates and telling Adrian about a customer who had brought five photographs of five entirely different haircuts.

"Apparently they were all the same haircut," he said. "I simply lacked vision."

"Did you tell them that?" Maya asked.

"I enjoy being employed."

Dani emerged from the hallway carrying a dice tray, a notebook, and one small shoe.

"Recovered from beneath the bathroom cabinet."

Maya accepted the shoe. "Why?"

"That's outside my jurisdiction."

He placed his game materials on the sideboard, safely away from dinner. Maya noticed three narrow strips of paper tucked into the notebook.

"Those look prepared."

"They are."

"Sorry in advance."

"I appreciate the notice."

Caleb arrived at five twenty with cold cheeks and an apology nobody let him finish. June ran across the room to show him the dragon hospital, and he crouched beside the rug while Dani took his coat.

"Beth said she'll collect her around nine," Caleb told him.

"She's getting dinner with her sister nearby."

"Fine by us."

"And I'm taking June to the science museum next weekend, so count me out."

"Tell her to inspect their emergency department," Maya said.

Caleb glanced at the stuffed dragon. "I imagine she'll have notes."

They ate before playing. Marcus arrived halfway through dinner, bringing a bag of bread and a story about an exhibit panel that had been printed upside down. Tessa listened with the satisfied expression of someone whose own mistakes would briefly receive less attention.

"My father's walking to the corner shop again," she told Dani when he asked. "He wanted me to tell you he doesn't need another casserole."

"What does he need?"

"Another casserole. He just wants to complain about it first."

Afterward, Caleb and Julian cleared plates while Maya washed and Dani dried. Nora packed leftovers into containers. Elena and Rachel helped the children spread a blanket across two chairs beside the cardboard castle. Adrian and Marcus negotiated movie choices with people whose opinions grew more passionate as the options narrowed.

At six twelve, the game table was finally clear.

Nora settled into her chair and opened a binder. Julian unrolled a cloth pouch. Tessa placed her pencil precisely beside her character sheet. Caleb set a mug well back from the edge, an improvement learned through experience. Maya fished a handful of dice from her bag.

Dani unfolded his screen.

They weren't the people they had been in the garage. There were wedding rings, a reading prescription somebody was avoiding, work messages left unanswered until morning. Yet Maya still recognized the small hush that came when Dani opened his notebook.

"Everybody comfortable finishing around ten?" he asked.

There were nods.

"Good. We left off outside Dunmere. You walked up from the south road after finding the bridge washed out."

"Because somebody said we didn't need horses," Julian said.

"Horses also dislike missing bridges," Tessa replied.

"Brannik could carry a horse," Maya said.

Nora looked up. "Across what?"

"A difficulty I'm choosing not to recognize."

Dani waited through the laughter, then laid a hand on one of the paper strips.

"You have a letter for the keeper of the north bell. Delivery earns you twelve silver, a hot meal, and beds at the Heron House. The letter is still sealed."

"Orris held it near a lamp," Nora said.

"And discovered that the envelope was exceptionally opaque."

"Important research."

Dani glanced around the table.

"It's almost dusk. You've been knocking at the northern gate for several minutes. There's snow in the hinges, no answer from the guardroom. Then the latch lifts."

Maya leaned forward.

"Brannik goes first."

* * *

Brannik Holt pressed his shoulder against the gate. Iron scraped stone. Frost broke from the lower hinge and scattered across his boot.

He entered with his shield raised, which would have looked more impressive if the edge hadn't caught on a loose strap.

Behind him, Sivren Wren pulled her gray coat close.

"Perhaps let the gate finish opening."

"It's finished enough."

Beyond the arch stood a street of narrow houses, their upper stories leaning over a road paved in pale stone. Snow rested along every windowsill. A sign creaked above a shuttered baker's shop. Somewhere, a loose awning tapped against a wall.

No guards challenged them.

Brannik lowered his shield a little.

"Well. Polite city."

Edran Moss crouched near the threshold. His gloved fingers hovered over impressions in the snow.

"Six people. Maybe seven. Walking quickly."

"Toward us?" Vessa Reed asked.

"Toward the gate." He looked beneath the arch. "But they didn't come through."

Orris Fen stepped aside to let the others enter, keeping the sealed letter inside his coat. The wizard's breath clouded before him. On the wall above the empty guardroom, a brass plate bore the image of a bell.

Below it, someone had scratched four words into the stone.

WAIT FOR THE SILENCE.

Orris brushed frost from the last letter.

"That's an unusually unhelpful instruction."

From somewhere within Dunmere came a deep, clear note.

It passed through the gate and settled against Brannik's breastbone.

The gate slammed behind them.

He turned at once. His sword came halfway out of its scabbard before he saw that nobody stood there.

Sivren caught the iron handle and pulled. Nothing moved.

“Edran.”

The ranger had risen. He was looking at the ground.

Where seven sets of footprints had approached the gate, there were now five.

Theirs.

CHAPTER TWO

The Heron House

Brannik gripped the gate handle beside Sivren and hauled until the muscles in his neck stood out.

The gate remained shut.

"Well made," he conceded.

Sivren examined the latch through the gap between the leaves. "No bolt. The handle moves. Something's holding it from outside."

"There was nothing outside," Vessa said.

"There was also a road."

Orris took a piece of chalk from his pocket and drew a small circle on the left gatepost. He held two fingers inside it, murmured a phrase, and waited.

The chalk blackened.

"A ward," he said. "Not new. Something old has been woken."

"Can you open it?" Brannik asked.

"Not with a useful amount of confidence."

Vessa turned toward the town. "Then we find someone who knows the gate. Preferably beside a fire."

Nobody argued.

They moved down the street together. Edran studied the snow while Sivren watched the windows. Brannik took the lead, his sword sheathed again. Orris kept touching the envelope through his coat, checking its shape as if the message might have changed along with the footprints.

Vessa paused beside the baker's shop. Two fresh loaves stood behind the window, cooling on a rack.

"People were here recently."

"People can leave quickly," Sivren said.

"They usually take the bread."

At the first crossroads stood a wooden fingerpost. MARKET, read one arm. RIVER STEPS, read another. The third pointed toward the NORTH BELL.

They followed that one.

The street narrowed between a tailor's shop and a building with green tiles beneath its windows. Halfway along, Edran stopped.

"We've passed this."

Brannik looked back. "We haven't turned."

Edran pointed to the snow. Five sets of footprints approached them. A sixth mark ran beside the smallest pair, where Vessa's staff had touched the ground.

On the green-tiled building, a broken shutter hung by one hinge.

They had passed it less than a minute earlier.

Orris looked from the shutter to the uninterrupted street behind them.

"Nobody take another step."

An upper window opened with a sudden wooden clack.

"Not that way!" a woman called.

She leaned out beneath a shawl, pointing down at them with a kitchen spoon.

"Back to the post. Follow the herons."

Vessa looked up. "We're looking for somewhere called the Heron House."

"I should hope so. Hurry."

"Which herons?"

The woman gave the street an exasperated glance.

"Oh, for - look down."

Edran swept snow aside with his boot. A small brass bird lay inset between the paving stones, its long beak pointing toward the crossroads.

They retraced their tracks. At the fingerpost, another bird pointed down a lane none of them had noticed. Following the brass markers took them beneath an arch hung with frozen ivy and brought them to a low doorway.

Above it, a carved heron stood in a painted reed bed.

The woman opened the door before they knocked.

"All five? Inside."

They entered a warm common room smelling of onions and woodsmoke. The woman shut the door, slid an ordinary bolt into place, and rested her forehead briefly against the wood.

At the hearth, a man with a bandaged hand rose from a chair. Behind the counter, a girl of perhaps nineteen clutched a folded towel. Three other guests sat at a long table beneath a window whose curtains had been drawn tight.

The woman straightened.

"Marta Quill. My house. If you're going to faint, use a chair."

"Vessa Reed." Vessa pushed back her hood. "Nobody's fainting yet. Thank you."

"Yet is the right word."

Brannik unfastened his cloak. "What happened to your streets?"

Marta looked at his shield, then at the bow across Edran's back.

"You came through after the bell?"

"Just before," Orris said. "The gate shut when it rang."

The young woman behind the counter let the towel drop.

"Then he didn't get out."

Marta's expression softened. "We don't know that."

"Who?" Vessa asked.

"My brother," the young woman said. "Elian. He's apprenticed at the north bell."

Orris drew out the envelope.

"We have a message for its keeper."

Marta took one look at the seal and beckoned him closer to the hearth.

"Master Pell's expecting you?"

"We were hired this morning by a woman at the bridge settlement. She said he needed it before nightfall."

"Did she say why?"

"Only that she'd have brought it herself if her leg weren't broken."

"That'll be Iona." Marta looked at the windows. "Well, you've found nightfall."

The man beside the hearth gave a humorless snort.

"Nightfall found us."

His name was Harl. He repaired river barges, and he had been repairing one when the first bell sounded early that afternoon. The water beneath his platform had suddenly begun running upstream. He had reached the river steps,

followed them toward the market, and found himself back beside his barge.

Three times.

On the fourth, a stone handrail had shifted beneath his grip and pinned his fingers.

He held up the bandage.

"The paving birds brought me here."

Vessa knelt beside his chair. "May I?"

She loosened the dressing gently. His fingers were swollen, the skin broken across two knuckles. She laid her palm over them and whispered the brief blessing she used for hurt travelers.

Warmth passed into his hand. The swelling eased.

Harl stared as she wrapped the cloth again.

"Keep it supported," she said. "And no barge repairs tonight."

"Wasn't intending any."

Orris examined the letter's seal. A heron stood inside a circle, holding a small key in its beak. The same bird appeared on the inn's lintel.

"Does Master Pell maintain the street markers?"

"His predecessor did," Marta said. "And the keeper before her. Old flood routes. People used to follow them when the river covered the roads."

"They still work?"

"You're standing here."

The young woman stepped out from behind the counter.

"Elian came home at midday. He said Master Pell was opening the old lower room, and they might be late." Her hands gripped one another. "When the bell started, I went to the tower. I couldn't get there."

"What's your name?" Vessa asked.

"Ada."

"Ada, is there a marked route to the tower?"

She nodded quickly. "Through the cooper's yard. We used to take it when the bridge road flooded."

Orris looked at the sealed envelope once more.

"I think this is the point where delivering it unopened becomes less important than knowing what's happening."

"I'll witness your terrible crime," Sivren said.

He broke the wax.

There was only one sheet inside, written in a cramped, uneven hand.

Pell -

The river has exposed the western sluice. Someone has opened the iron cabinet. The winter tongue is gone.

Do not sound the north bell. If it has begun already, keep everyone on the brass ways. Find the tongue before the water reaches the lower chamber.

The bell will call to it. You'll hear the answer below ground.

Iona

For a moment, the room was quiet except for the fire.

"Tongue," Brannik said. "The bit inside that strikes?"

"The clapper," Orris said. "Apparently a particular one."

"How can a bell call to something without ringing?" Ada asked.

Before he could answer, the note sounded again.

It was louder indoors. Cups rattled on their hooks. The fire leaned sharply toward the chimney, and every person in the room looked at the ceiling.

Under their feet came a softer sound.

Three low knocks.

Orris crouched and laid his palm on the floorboards. By the third knock, he could feel the vibration.

On the counter, a jug tipped sideways. Sivren caught it before it fell.

Marta swore under her breath.

"It didn't do that last time."

Orris stood.

"We need Pell."

"And my brother." Ada lifted her chin. "I'll show you the yard."

"You can show us from the door," Vessa said. "Tell us what he looks like and where he'd work."

Ada hesitated, looking toward the bolt.

"He has a red scarf. He never takes it off. He'll tell you he knows what he's doing, even when he doesn't."

"That narrows it down considerably," Sivren said, glancing at Brannik.

The dwarf ignored her.

"We'll look for him."

Marta handed Edran a hooded lantern. "Follow the birds through the yard. When you reach the covered passage, there's a branch marked with two herons instead of one. That's the tower route."

"Keep everybody inside," Vessa said. "If someone needs help, we'll send them here."

Marta nodded and drew the bolt.

Ada stood beside her. "Please tell him I wasn't angry. About the money."

Vessa paused on the threshold.

"We'll tell him."

Then she stepped into the snow.

CHAPTER THREE

What the Bell Was Calling

The birds led through a yard stacked with barrel hoops and beneath a passage smelling of wet timber.

Edran went first, sweeping snow from each brass marker with the side of his boot. Sivren followed within reach of his shoulder. Behind them, Orris held the lantern while Vessa watched the route they had taken. Brannik brought up the rear, turning whenever he heard movement outside the passage.

Twice, something scraped beyond the timber wall.

The second time it sounded large enough to be a cart.

"Please be a cart," Brannik murmured.

At the fork, two brass herons faced a narrow staircase between buildings. Snow covered the first three steps. Above them, the stone was bare and wet.

Orris touched it.

"River water."

"We're climbing," Edran said.

"Yes."

They exchanged a look and kept moving.

The staircase brought them onto a small square. Here, at last, they could see the north bell tower: a broad, square building rising above the rooftops, with arched openings near its crown. A wooden door stood beneath a covered porch. The brass birds ended at its threshold.

A light burned behind a narrow window.

Brannik crossed the square and knocked.

"Master Pell? We've brought your letter."

Something thumped inside.

"And we'd appreciate a brief explanation of your roads."

Sivren pressed an ear to the door.

"Someone's there."

A voice answered, faintly.

"Can't reach - "

Then came a scraping sound and a sharp cry.

Brannik set his shoulder against the door.

"Wait," Sivren said.

"He's hurt."

"And might be behind it."

She knelt at the lock, selected two tools, and worked with her face close to the keyhole. Brannik stepped aside, jaw tight.

The lock clicked.

Sivren opened the door carefully.

A flight of stone stairs filled the room beyond. The lower landing had cracked across its width, lifting one side into a steep ridge. Beside it, a young man lay on his stomach with his left ankle trapped beneath a fallen slab. A red scarf was knotted around his neck.

He blinked at the lantern.

"Don't stand on the middle."

Vessa entered along the wall and crouched near his head.

"Elian?"

"Yes."

"Your sister sent us."

His face changed. "Is she all right?"

"She's safe at the inn." Vessa examined the trapped leg.
"We're getting you out."

Brannik removed his shield and laid it beside the door. Edran took rope from his pack, looped it around a sound-looking pillar, and brought the free end toward Elian.

Orris lowered the lantern. Sivren watched the crack running through the landing.

"The slab's resting on that broken stair," she said. "Lift straight. Don't push it toward him."

Brannik planted his boots, gripped the stone, and lifted.
Nothing happened.

He changed his grip, crouched lower, and tried again. The slab rose a finger's width.

Elian gasped.

"Hold," Vessa said.

She eased the ankle free while Edran drew the young man toward them. Brannik kept lifting until Vessa's hands cleared the edge, then lowered the stone with a heavy crack.

He sat abruptly on the sound portion of the landing.

"I preferred that gate."

Vessa checked Elian's ankle. It was bruised badly but bent as it should. She wrapped it, gave it what healing she could, and helped him sit against the wall.

"You'll need help walking."

"I can - "

"You'll need help walking."

He shut his mouth.

Orris brought water from his flask. Elian drank, coughed, and looked at the empty doorway.

"Where's Master Pell?" Orris asked.

"Below. He went down when the bell started."

"Into the lower chamber?"

Elian nodded.

"Show us."

"The stairs aren't there anymore."

They followed his gaze to a wooden door beneath the main staircase. Beyond it, the lantern revealed a narrow shaft. Iron brackets lined its walls. A few held fragments of steps. The rest were empty.

Far below, water reflected the light.

Brannik leaned over the edge.

"Pell!"

An answer came from the dark.

"Here!"

Alive. Brannik exhaled.

Orris knelt at the opening.

"We've got Iona's message."

"Then don't ring the bell!"

Nobody spoke for a moment.

"We haven't," Orris called.

The reply took longer this time.

"You'd better come down."

Edran tested the pillar with his full weight. The stone around its base remained sound. He retied the rope with a second

anchor around the stair support, then lowered the end into the shaft.

"Can you climb?" he called.

"Not anymore. My shoulder won't permit it."

"We're coming to you."

Sivren descended first, using the old brackets as footholds where she could. Edran followed. Orris hung the lantern from his belt and went next, trying very hard not to look beneath his boots.

Brannik glanced at Vessa.

"Stay with him?"

She nodded. "Call if you need me."

He retrieved his shield and lowered himself into the shaft.

The water at the bottom reached his ankles.

The lower chamber was circular, cut into stone older than the tower above it. Niches lined its walls. A channel crossed the floor, entering through one iron grate and leaving through another. At its center stood a waist-high column topped with a shallow metal bowl.

A white-haired man sat on a bench above the waterline. One sleeve hung loose around his arm.

"Pell?" Orris asked.

"Unfortunately."

"What happened?"

"The stairs folded while I was on them." He nodded toward his shoulder. "The wall interrupted my fall."

Sivren checked the chamber's edges. There was one other doorway, low and narrow, with a rusted gate across it. Beyond the bars, a tunnel followed the water channel.

Orris handed Pell the letter.

The keeper read it once, then closed his eyes.

"I thought something had cracked beneath the tower. I brought Elian down to inspect it. We found the bowl warm. Then we heard the bell."

"What's supposed to sit there?" Orris asked.

"The winter tongue. But it hasn't been kept here in my lifetime."

"Why not?"

Pell looked at the water.

"Because the last keeper who used it nearly drowned the lower town."

Brannik glanced up the shaft. "That seems like information worth keeping near the bell."

"It is." Pell's voice sharpened. "Along with a warning not to bring it back."

Sivren touched Orris's sleeve and pointed to the column.

A line of wet impressions crossed the dust on its base. Narrow soles. Someone had stood there recently.

Pell followed their eyes.

"Those weren't ours."

"Somebody already brought it back," Sivren said.

She crouched, careful not to disturb the impressions. A heavier print faced the tunnel gate. One heel had dug into the dust.

"Then carried it out again. Or dragged something."

"Can you stop the ward?" Edran asked Pell.

"With the tongue in the bowl. That's where the keeper gives it the route."

Orris moved closer to the column. Letters circled its upper edge, worn but readable.

"What's it doing now?"

Pell answered reluctantly.

"Gathering the river."

The water pressed against Brannik's boots. He looked down. It had reached the next lace.

"Explain while we get you upstairs."

They made a sling from Edran's spare rope and Pell's coat. Getting him out took all four of them: Edran above to guide the line, Brannik climbing beneath to support the keeper's feet, Sivren steadying him past the broken brackets, and Orris holding the lantern where they could see.

Pell apologized exactly once. Brannik told him to save his breath, and he did.

Vessa received him on the landing. She supported the injured arm, felt carefully along the joint, and told him what she needed to do before doing it. Pell clenched his teeth. A moment later his shoulder settled back into place.

He went pale.

"I shall complain about that later."

"I'll listen," Vessa said, binding his arm against his chest.

Elian reached for the keeper's good hand.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't get down."

"You stayed alive. Excellent judgment."

Brannik picked up the lantern. "Can we have this discussion on the way somewhere warmer?"

Pell nodded, but Orris looked toward the stairs leading up the tower.

"I need to see the bell."

"You won't stop it from there."

"I know. I need to see what's ringing."

Pell studied him, then pointed with his good hand.

"At the top. Don't touch the hanging ropes."

Edran stayed to help Vessa with the injured men. Sivren went upstairs with Orris and Brannik.

The stair wound around the tower's inner wall. Halfway up, a narrow window gave them a view across Dunmere. Lamps burned behind closed shutters. A ribbon of water shone in a street that should have been dry.

Orris stopped.

"The inn."

Brannik looked over his shoulder. The Heron House stood beyond the cooper's yard. Its windows were lit. Its doorway was still clear of water.

"We'll warn them."

At the top, the stairs opened beneath a roof of heavy beams. Four arches faced the darkening town. The bell hung in the center, green with age, tall enough that Brannik could have stood beneath its rim without stooping.

Two ropes hung beside it.

Neither moved.

Sivren walked around the bell, keeping her hands behind her back. Orris lifted the lantern beneath its mouth.

Empty.

No clapper. No hammer. No mechanism inside.

"You can't ring that," Brannik said.

A moment later, it rang.

The sound struck all three of them hard enough to stagger Orris. Sivren caught his elbow. Brannik dropped to one knee, holding the edge of the floor until the note passed.

The bell hadn't moved.

Down in the town, a lamp went out. Then another, farther along the same street.

From beneath the tower came the answering knocks.

Three of them.

Orris waited until he could hear himself breathe.

"The bell's remembering," he said.

Sivren looked at him.

"That is not a comforting explanation."

"It wasn't intended as one."

They returned to the landing quickly.

Pell was standing with Edran's support. Elian had one arm around Vessa's shoulders. Both looked ready to argue about their ability to walk unaided, and both had apparently thought better of it.

"It's calling the tongue," Orris said. "Whatever was done downstairs started it, and the tongue's still close enough to answer."

"You heard it?" Pell asked.

"Through the inn's floor."

The keeper's face tightened.

"Then it's in the old water passages."

They left the tower and followed the double birds back toward the cooper's yard. Edran led Pell; Vessa guided Elian. Brannik kept his shield ready.

At the bottom of the narrow staircase, the ranger stopped.

The covered passage was gone.

In its place stood the blank side of a stone house, with water running down the mortar. A brass heron lay at their feet, its beak pointing directly into the wall.

Brannik pressed a palm against the stone.

Solid.

Pell stared at the marker.

"It shouldn't be able to do that."

"Yet here we are," Sivren said.

She was looking at the wall's base.

Beside the bird, water emerged from a gap no wider than a finger. Something caught in it fluttered against the brass: a thin strand of red wool.

She glanced at Elian's scarf. One end had been torn away.

"Your scarf. When did that happen?"

He looked down at it, confused.

"At midday. I caught it on the lower gate."

"Below the tower?"

He nodded.

Sivren drew the wet strand free.

"Then that tunnel comes under us."

Orris knelt beside the brass bird. He wiped away the water and found a tiny opening beneath its wing, shaped like a keyhole.

"Master Pell."

The keeper searched inside his collar and drew out a narrow key on a cord.

"The maintenance doors," he said. "But there's never been one here."

Orris took the key, fitted it into the bird, and turned.

A rectangular seam appeared in the stone.

Brannik hooked his fingers into its edge and pulled. A low door swung outward, releasing a breath of damp air. Beyond it, steps descended beside a flowing channel.

Along the tunnel wall, another line of brass herons glimmered in the lantern light.

Their beaks pointed downstream.

Edran raised his head, listening.

There were voices below.

Someone said, "Keep pulling."

Someone else answered, "I am."

Then came the unmistakable scrape of metal over stone.

Brannik looked at the two injured men, then at Vessa.

She shifted Elian's weight against her shoulder.

"Get them through the door first."

They helped Pell and Elian onto the steps. Edran tested the footing, then moved down far enough to make room. Sivren went after him, silent now. Orris held the lantern low.

Brannik entered last.

Above his head, the stone door began to close.

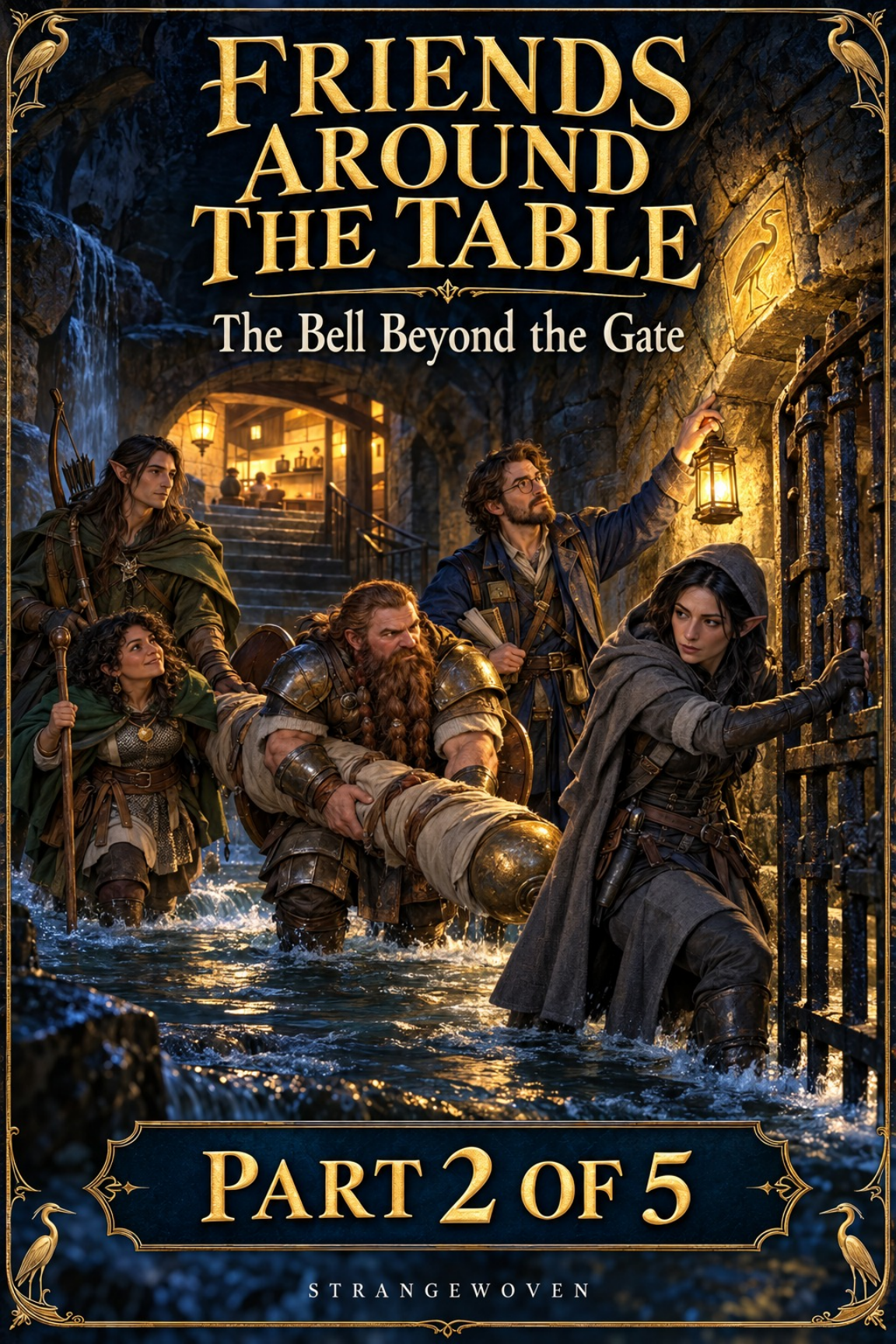
He wedged his shield into the opening. The rim creaked, held, and left a narrow line of evening light behind them.

Below, the scraping stopped.

"Who's there?" a voice called.

Brannik drew his sword, keeping it low beside his leg.

“Visitors,” he answered. “And we've had a very poor welcome.”



FRIENDS AROUND THE TABLE

The Bell Beyond the Gate

PART 2 OF 5

STRANGEWOVEN

CHAPTER FOUR

The People Below

"Put the sword away," the voice said. "We've got enough problems."

Brannik glanced down at the blade beside his leg, then into the tunnel.

"You haven't seen it yet."

"I heard it leave the scabbard."

Sivren moved the lantern forward.

Two people stood on a narrow ledge beside the channel. A woman in a patched leather work apron held one end of a canvas sling. The other rested in the hands of a broad man whose cap had slipped halfway over his eyes. Between them hung a long metal object, wrapped in sacking except where a curved bronze end protruded.

The woman looked past Sivren to the others descending the stairs.

Then she saw Pell.

"Oh," she said.

The man closed his eyes briefly.

Brannik sheathed his sword.

"That was a very informative oh."

Pell tightened his good hand around Edran's sleeve.

"Nella."

"Master Pell."

"What have you done?"

Nella set her end of the sling on the ledge. The bronze object touched stone with a sound too clear for something wrapped in cloth.

Far above, the bell answered.

Brannik felt the note through his boots.

Water shivered against the channel wall. Along the opposite side, a row of brass herons turned their heads together.

Orris stared.

"Nobody touch that again."

Nella took her hands away.

"Gladly."

Edran helped Pell onto the ledge. Vessa brought Elian down behind him and found a dry patch where he could sit. The ranger tested the stone beneath their feet before stepping around the sling.

"How far to the inn?" he asked.

"If the passages stay where they are, two hundred paces," Nella said. "But the junction's flooded."

"And if they don't?"

"I've stopped guessing."

Orris crouched beside the wrapped bronze. He kept his fingers clear of it.

The end was shaped like the clapper of a bell, broad and rounded, but narrow grooves ran along its length. They reminded him of the teeth on a key. A band of lettering encircled the exposed metal.

Pell looked down at it with an expression Brannik had seen on people confronting snakes in their bedding.

"The winter tongue."

"We were supposed to bring it to your lower room," Nella said.

"Supposed to?"

"From the cabinet at the western sluice. Put it in the bowl, wait for the mechanism to release, take it out again."

"Who told you that?"

She reached into her apron and produced a folded sheet.

Sivren accepted it before Pell could struggle with his injured arm. At the top stood the familiar heron seal. Below it were instructions in a neat hand, ending with the promise of six silver for the work.

The signature read: Keeper Pell, North Tower.

Pell looked at it.

"I didn't write that."

Nella's mouth tightened.

"Well, somebody did."

"Did you not think to knock?"

"We did. Nobody answered. The order said you might be out."

"I was teaching Elian how to repair the upper shutters."

"Then perhaps put a bell on your door."

Her companion opened one eye.

"Nella."

She pressed her lips together, then looked at the trapped apprentice.

"I'm sorry," she said. This time there was no edge to it. "We didn't know."

Elian rubbed his knee.

"Neither did we."

Sivren held the sheet close to the lantern. The seal was stamped cleanly. The paper had been folded before the ink had dried, leaving a faint reversed impression across the payment line.

"Who gave you this?"

"A clerk from the river office. Said the causeway mechanism needed resetting before tonight's freeze."

"Name?"

"Leth. Tall fellow. Always wearing gloves, even indoors."

Pell knew the name. That was obvious from the way he looked away.

Orris stood.

"Whatever that means, it can wait until we're out of here."

The water had reached the ledge.

Edran moved the lantern toward the passage ahead. At a junction a short distance away, water covered the paving markers. An iron gate stood across the left branch. The right was open, but its floor had disappeared beneath a fast-moving stream.

"Which way?" he asked.

Nella pointed left.

"Through there. Then the third maintenance door. Comes out behind the inn's kitchen."

"Why didn't you open it?"

Her companion lifted a bent iron lever from his belt.

"Because that used to be straight."

Brannik eyed it.

"You're stronger than you look."

"The gate is stronger than I look."

His name was Bram. He repaired sluice shutters with Nella, who repaired everything he hadn't broken trying to help. They had taken the work order because it looked simple and because six silver would cover a week's rent.

Now Bram stood holding one end of something that was steadily bringing the river toward them.

Vessa rose beside Elian.

"Leave it for a moment. Help me with him."

Pell shook his head.

"We can't leave the tongue."

"Why?" Orris asked.

"It's giving the water a destination. At the moment, that's us."

Brannik looked at the bronze object.

"Of course it is."

Pell pointed to the wrapped narrow end.

"Keep that higher than the head. Don't let it strike stone."

Orris slipped his coat off and folded it around the exposed bronze. Cold immediately found the gaps in his shirt.

"I'll send my tailor your bill."

Nella took one end of the sling. Brannik took the other. Bram crouched beside Elian and carefully brought the young man's arm across his shoulders. Edran supported Pell. Vessa stayed close enough to catch either injured man if the ledge shifted.

Sivren led them to the gate.

Its lock was old and ordinary. That should have been encouraging.

She tried her tools. The mechanism turned halfway, then stopped against something solid.

On the other side, stone had risen beneath the gate's bottom rail, pressing it into the arch.

"The lock isn't the problem."

Brannik looked past her. Water was pouring into the junction from the open branch.

"The problem is approaching enthusiastically."

Orris brought the lantern close to the arch. A heron marker sat above the lock, its beak angled downward. Beneath it, three shallow lines had been cut into the stone.

He had seen the same lines around the bowl.

"Master Pell. Does the tongue control all of this?"

"The bowl controls it. The tongue carries the instruction."

"And without the bowl?"

"It repeats the last thing it was told."

"To gather the river."

Pell nodded.

Orris looked at the markings, then drew the chalk from his pocket.

"I'm going to make this gate forget for a few seconds."

Sivren stepped aside.

"That sounds considerably more useful than frightening the chalk."

He drew a circle around the brass marker, then divided it with three short strokes. His fingers trembled from the cold. He steadied his wrist against the wall and spoke the same phrase he had used at the northern gate, this time turning the final word back upon itself.

The chalk darkened.

Inside the circle, the heron's head turned toward him.

Orris pressed his palm over it.

“Now.”

Sivren turned the lock. Edran leaned Pell against the wall and caught the gate with both hands.

The lower rail rose from the stone.

He pulled.

It opened just far enough for Vessa to pass sideways.

“Elian first,” she said.

Bram guided the apprentice through. Pell followed with Edran. Sivren crossed next and took hold of the gate from the other side.

Brannik and Nella lifted the sling between them.

The bronze was longer than the opening was wide.

“Tilt it,” Sivren said. “Narrow end first.”

They turned. Nella stepped backward through the gap. Brannik raised his end to clear the bottom rail.

Behind him, water struck the junction wall with enough force to splash his shoulders.

Orris's hand slipped.

The gate lurched inward.

Sivren braced one boot against the wall, her coat caught between the bars.

Brannik thrust the wrapped bronze through, stepped sideways after it, and felt iron brush the back of his neck.

“Orris!”

The wizard kept his palm on the bird.

“Go.”

“Everyone's through.”

He took his hand away and moved.

The gate slammed as he crossed. A corner of his sleeve caught; he pulled free with a sharp tearing sound.

On the other side, water surged against the bars.

For a moment, all they heard was their own breathing.

Then Bram said, "I could have done that."

Nella looked at his bent lever.

"Certainly."

Orris leaned against the wall. His fingers felt as if he had plunged them into snowmelt and left them there.

Vessa took his hand, checked it, and wrapped it in the dry end of her scarf.

"No more forgetting gates for a while."

"An oddly specific restriction."

"I like to be clear."

They moved on.

The tunnel climbed gently. At each maintenance door, Sivren checked the brass marker before they passed. The first bore a bird facing right, the second two birds facing one another.

At the third, they heard someone moving overhead.

Nella stopped beneath a square hatch.

"Kitchen."

Brannik set down his end of the sling as gently as he could and knocked upward.

Something scraped across the floor above.

"We're closed," Marta called.

"For ordinary business," Brannik said, "or all business?"

A pause.

"You'd better be those travelers."

"We've brought your missing apprentice."

The hatch opened so quickly that he barely stepped back in time.

Ada looked down.

"Elian?"

He raised his head.

"I know. I'm late."

She covered her mouth, then gave an angry little laugh that broke halfway through.

"You idiot."

"They said you weren't angry."

"I wasn't. I am now."

Bram and Edran helped him up the ladder. Ada reached for him before his boots cleared the opening. He folded one arm around her and rested his forehead against her shoulder.

Marta stood behind them with a chair already waiting.

Brannik looked at Vessa.

"We should probably mention the enormous problem."

"Give them a minute."

So he did.

* * *

"Dad."

Caleb turned from his character sheet.

June stood beside his chair, holding one cupped hand very carefully.

"It came out."

He looked at the tiny tooth in her palm, then at the gap in her smile.

"The stubborn one?"

She nodded.

"I was eating bread."

"A formidable opponent," Julian said.

June grinned wider.

Caleb set his pencil down and stood. "Let's get you a rinse and something to keep it in."

Dani closed his notebook over one finger to hold the page.

"Good stopping point. Anybody need anything?"

Maya stretched her shoulders. Nora retrieved the container of oranges. Tessa went to put the kettle on.

From the living room, Finn demanded to see the tooth. Lucy announced that she had teeth too, a fact nobody disputed.

Maya watched Caleb crouch beside June at the kitchen sink. He found a small envelope in Dani's drawer, wrote her name on it, and let her add a drawing of the victorious bread.

"Beth gets a picture," June said.

"Absolutely."

By the time Caleb sat down again, everyone had tea or water and Julian had eaten three orange segments while claiming to have taken only one.

Dani opened the notebook.

"Elian's upstairs with his sister. You're still standing beneath the kitchen hatch."

Caleb picked up his pencil.

"Vessa helps Pell onto the ladder."

* * *

“One rung at a time,” Vessa told the keeper. “Use the arm that still likes you.”

Pell put his good hand on the ladder.

“At my age, affection is becoming scarce.”

“Then appreciate what you've got.”

Above them, Ada pulled a second chair close to the first.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Wrong Route

The winter tongue rested on the kitchen floor atop two folded blankets and Orris's coat.

Marta stood with her hands on her hips, regarding it.

"Is that responsible for my pantry moving?"

Pell looked up from his chair.

"Your pantry?"

"The door opens onto the scullery now. The scullery opens onto the pantry. I haven't tried the cellar. I value my remaining patience."

"The ward's changing the routes," he said.

"I had gathered that. Is that thing responsible?"

"Yes."

"Then it can go."

"It will," Brannik said. "As soon as we know where."

Orris stood beside the wrapped bronze, flexing his chalk hand. Sensation had returned, which was not entirely pleasant. He took back the lantern and asked Marta for paper.

She handed him the reverse side of an old order for lamp oil.

"Nothing explodes on that," she said.

"I'll do my best."

He laid it on a clear section of the kitchen table. Pell came over, his chair brought with him by Edran. Nella stood opposite. Bram hovered near the hatch, looking as though he expected the river to knock.

Sivren placed the false work order beside the blank sheet.

"Begin with what this was built to do," Orris said.

Pell took the pencil in his good hand.

"The river froze badly here once. Ice blocked the bend below town. Water backed up through the lower streets. So the keepers made the winter ward."

He drew a curve for the river and a square for the tower.

"The tongue went into the bowl. The keeper chose a route. The ward closed streets, opened passages, and brought the water into a deep channel beneath the town. Then out through the western sluice."

"And the birds?" Edran asked.

"Safe ways for people. The old makers didn't want anyone following a road that had become part of the river."

"That seems sensible," Vessa said.

Pell gave a tired nod.

"It was. Until a keeper chose the wrong route. We stopped using the ward after that. Moved the tongue to the cabinet beyond the sluice so nobody could fit it by accident."

Nella stared at the drawing.

"The order didn't say anything about choosing a route."

"No," Sivren said. "It didn't."

"We set it in the bowl. The stone lit up. We thought that meant it was working."

"It was," Pell said. "On the old instruction."

Orris pointed to the tower.

"The route that nearly drowned the town."

Pell nodded.

Nella sat down on a flour barrel.

For the first time since they had met her, she had nothing to say.

Bram placed a hand on her shoulder.

Brannik studied the sketch.

"So we put it back and tell it to stop."

"Yes," Pell said. "But the lower chamber must be dry enough to stand at the bowl. If it fills, I can't set the route."

"It was at our ankles," Edran said.

"That was before the last bell."

Through the kitchen hatch came the quiet sound of moving water.

Marta shut it.

"Talk faster."

Nella leaned forward.

"There is a way to slow it. The western spill shutter. Open that and some of the water escapes below the bend. We can't turn the whole river away, but we can lower the channels."

"Can we reach it?" Brannik asked.

"Through the old customs house." She pointed to a place beyond Pell's river curve. "The shutter wheel is under the loading floor."

"You know how to work it?"

"It's my job."

Brannik looked around the table.

"Then that's where we're going."

Pell drew the route from the inn to the customs house. He was slow with the pencil, so Edran finished the line while the keeper named the turns. A path marked by brass birds ran

past the covered market, along a raised arcade, then across a footbridge.

"We take the tongue," Orris said. "If the water follows it, we bring the water toward the shutter."

"And then back to the tower?" Vessa asked.

"Once the channel falls, yes."

It was a plan with an end. Brannik liked that considerably more than waiting for the kitchen to become a dock.

Sivren was still examining the false order.

"Marta. Do you know Leth from the river office?"

"I know where he eats when someone else is paying."

"Would he have access to the keeper's seal?"

Pell answered before she could.

"The office has copies for repairs and supply orders."

Sivren turned the sheet sideways.

"Nella, where did he give you this?"

"Outside the weigh house. Near midday."

"Was anyone with him?"

"A porter. Took two boxes up to his cart."

"What kind of boxes?"

"Wooden. About that long." She measured with her hands.

"Heavy enough that he complained."

Orris looked at Pell's drawing.

"The ward didn't just shift doors. It changed signs. We followed a fingerpost and went in a circle."

Pell nodded. "Those are ordinary streets. They no longer lead where they did."

"But the brass markers should stay safe."

"Unless a channel crosses them. That's what happened outside the tower."

Sivren laid the false order down.

"What if someone moved the markers?"

Pell's head came up.

Nobody answered immediately.

Then Marta said, "The river office has been paying men to repair the market paving."

"When?"

"All week."

Pell looked at the sketch again. His finger stopped over the covered market.

"We don't assume," Vessa said. "We check when we reach it."

Sivren nodded. "And we keep that order."

She folded it into an inside pocket.

Ada entered carrying a thick brown coat.

"Elian says Master Pell will argue about this."

"I will not," Pell said.

She helped him put it on without disturbing his bound arm. He tried to protest that she needn't fuss and stopped under a look that explained why Elian had asked her to fetch it.

"He's staying here," she told Vessa. "I'll make sure he rests."

"Good."

"Thank you."

Vessa squeezed her hand.

"Tell him the money can wait."

Ada's eyes narrowed slightly.

"He told you about that?"

"You did."

Ada laughed, a little embarrassed.

"Right."

Edran borrowed a short handcart from Marta's yard. Its wheels were narrow enough for the passages, and its wooden bed could carry the tongue without letting it strike the paving. Bram and Nella cushioned the load with sacks. Brannik tested the handles.

"An improvement," he said.

Orris retrieved his coat, now damp and smelling of old bronze. Marta handed him another blanket without comment.

They left Pell at the inn. He could give instructions from a chair, but he could not walk across town quickly enough to keep ahead of the water. He pressed his maintenance key into Orris's hand.

"Bring it back."

"The key?"

"Everything."

Outside, snow had stopped falling.

The silence made the water easier to hear.

It hissed along gutters, dripped from lintels, and ran somewhere behind walls that had been dry when they entered. Across the lane, a woman watched from a second-floor window.

Vessa called up to her.

"Is everyone inside?"

"My husband's downstairs."

"Bring him up. Take what you need for the night. Stay together."

The woman looked toward the cart.

"Can you stop it?"

"We're working on it."

That was enough to make her leave the window.

Edran led them toward the market, checking each brass bird against Pell's map. Sivren walked beside him. Bram pushed the handcart while Brannik guided its front handles. Nella stayed by the wrapped tongue, watching its angle whenever the wheels crossed a crack. Orris and Vessa followed.

At the market entrance, Edran raised a hand.

Two brass herons faced down a broad aisle beneath a timber roof. Beyond them stood empty stalls and a row of shuttered shops. At the far end, lanterns shone around a doorway.

"That's not the route," he said.

The map sent them left, along the outside arcade.

Sivren crouched beside one of the birds.

Fresh mortar surrounded its edge. She scraped it with her thumbnail; pale grit came away easily.

"Moved recently."

Orris held the lantern nearer.

"Could be an ordinary repair."

"Could be."

She shifted to the second marker. Something lay beneath its tail: a small black splinter, wedged where the new mortar hadn't filled the gap.

She pulled it free.

Painted wood.

Along the inner aisle, every stall post was painted black.

Edran looked down the aisle. At the third stall, snow lay undisturbed around a pale patch between the paving stones.

"That's where it came from."

He stepped toward the nearest bird without crossing it. Beneath its beak, a fine line of light ran along the ground and vanished into the market.

On the outside arcade, the stone remained dark.

Nella moved beside him.

"The safe way is following the markers."

"And the markers are going somewhere unsafe," Sivren said.

The water behind them changed pitch.

Vessa turned. A narrow stream had rounded the corner, spreading across the lane toward their boots.

"We need to choose."

From the lantern-lit doorway at the market's far end, someone called for help.

Edran looked up sharply.

"There are people in there."

Brannik released the cart handles.

"Bram, keep it on the arcade. Nella, go with him."

He lifted his shield. Its rim was bent where the stone door had pressed against it, but the straps were sound.

"We'll bring them out."

They followed the displaced birds into the market.

At once the roof seemed farther away. Brannik's footsteps echoed as if the space above him had grown. A stall that had stood against the left wall appeared on his right.

Edran kept his eyes on the ground.

"Stay behind me."

The line of light brought them to a counting office built beneath the market gallery. Five people crowded behind its half-open door. An elderly man sat on a stool, clutching a ledger. Beside him stood a woman in a baker's apron and a man wearing a nightshirt under his coat. Two porters held a wooden shutter between them.

"The way out keeps bringing us back," the baker said.

Behind them, water covered the office floor.

Vessa slipped through the doorway and went to the seated man.

"Can you stand?"

"With help."

"Then help is what you'll have."

Orris looked toward the gallery stairs. A brass bird had been fastened to the lowest riser, pointing upward.

It did not match the others. Its legs were shortened, as if somebody had snapped them off to make it fit.

"They've made a loop," he said.

Edran followed his gaze. "The markers bring people here. That one sends them up. Where do the upper stairs lead?"

"Back into this office," the porter said. "We tried."

Sivren drew her knife and slid the tip beneath the bird on the stair.

Mortar cracked.

"Hold the lantern."

Orris did.

She levered the metal upward. It resisted, bent slightly, then came free with a snap.

The light along the floor went out.

Above them, a timber beam groaned.

The market roof dropped back to its ordinary height. A line of stalls shuffled sideways with the grinding sound of furniture dragged across stone.

The half-open office door swung wide.

"Move," Brannik said.

The porters helped Vessa lift the elderly man. Edran guided them toward the arcade. The baker and the man in the nightshirt followed closely.

Water poured through the gap behind the office.

One stall overturned. A sack of dried peas split across the aisle, scattering beneath their feet.

Brannik braced his shield against the stall's falling crossbar. Wood struck metal. He held until the others passed, then stepped back and let it fall.

Sivren caught his sleeve before he put a boot into the rolling peas.

"An undignified way to die."

"I wasn't planning to."

"Nobody schedules it."

They reached the arcade as the water spread beneath the stalls.

Bram had stopped the cart beside a stone bench. Nella stood on the footbridge ahead, turning a small service wheel set into the railing.

A drainage flap opened below.

The water rushed through, buying them a patch of clear paving.

She waved them forward.

Vessa helped the elderly man onto the bench long enough to check his breathing. The baker knelt beside him.

"I know the way to the Heron House," she said.

Edran drew the route in the snow with his finger, marking the turns they had taken.

"Use these streets. Ignore the birds inside the market. Tell Marta we sent you."

One of the porters stared at Sivren's hand.

She was still holding the bent brass marker.

"Those were put there this morning," he said.

"By whom?"

"Men from the river office. Told us the safe route had changed."

"Did you see Leth?"

The porter nodded.

"He took the customs keys. Said nobody should go there till the repairs were finished."

Nella came back from the bridge.

"There weren't any repairs scheduled."

The porter swallowed.

Brannik looked toward the far end of the arcade.

Beyond the bridge stood the customs house, a long stone building with high doors facing the river. Its upper windows glowed. A wagon waited beside the entrance.

A man was loading boxes into it.

"Your clerk?" Brannik asked.

Nella nodded.

Leth climbed onto the wagon seat. Even at that distance, Sivren could see the pale gloves on his hands.

Orris looked down at the cart, then at the water spilling beneath the bridge.

"We need the shutter."

"We do," Brannik said.

Edran unslung his bow.

"I can stop the wagon."

Vessa rose from the bench.

"Without hurting anyone."

"The reins," he said. "Across the hitching post."

He drew an arrow with a hooked head from his quiver. A thin cord followed it, uncoiling from a small spool at his belt.

Sivren looked at the distance.

"That's an ambitious shot."

Edran smiled faintly.

"I like those."

He stepped onto the bridge, raised the bow, and drew.

Behind him, the wrapped winter tongue began to hum.



FRIENDS AROUND THE TABLE

The Bell Beyond the Gate

PART 3 OF 5

STRANGEWOVEN

CHAPTER SIX

Official Business

Edran let the arrow fly.

It passed above the horse's shoulder, caught the loose length of rein hanging from the wagon seat, and carried it around the hitching post. The hooked head struck the wooden rail beyond and held.

He pulled the cord taut.

The horse had taken only one step. Feeling the reins check, it stopped.

Leth looked down, puzzled, and tugged.

Across the bridge, Edran wrapped the cord around the railing.

"Now," he said.

Sivren was already moving.

Brannik took the handcart's handles again. Bram pushed. Between them they brought the winter tongue onto the bridge, with Nella walking beside it and Orris keeping the blanket from slipping beneath a wheel. Vessa hurried after Sivren.

The five people rescued from the market were making their way toward the inn, the baker guiding them around the growing streams. Edran watched until they reached the corner, then followed his companions.

Halfway across, the bridge shifted beneath his boots.

The far bank slid a handspan to the left.

Stone scraped against stone. The rail bowed outward, pulling at the cord.

"Keep going," Nella said.

Brannik did.

One wheel caught against the seam where the bridge met the bank. Bram lifted from behind while Brannik pulled. The cart bumped free.

They reached the customs yard as Leth climbed down from the wagon.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

Sivren caught the horse's halter before it could worry at the tangled reins.

"Stopping you."

"This is official business."

"So was the work order."

Nella stepped around the cart.

Leth saw her and stopped with one boot on the wagon's lower step.

He had a narrow face, a neatly trimmed beard, and a good coat buttoned crookedly in his haste. His eyes went from Nella to the wrapped object behind her.

"You were instructed to leave that at the tower."

"No," she said. "We were instructed to put it in the bowl and take it out again."

"There must have been a misunderstanding."

"There was. I thought you knew what you were doing."

Vessa reached the wagon and looked up at him.

"People are trapped in their homes. The streets are flooding. We need the spill shutter open."

Leth glanced toward the customs doors.

"The wheel is damaged."

"Then Nella will repair it."

"You can't go down there."

"Watch us," Brannik said.

He handed the cart handles to Bram and crossed the yard.

Leth stepped into his path, raising one pale-gloved hand.

"I am responsible for this building."

Brannik looked at the hand, then at its owner.

"An unfortunate moment to mention it."

Leth moved aside.

The customs doors were locked. Orris took Pell's maintenance key from his pocket, but Sivren shook her head and held out her free hand toward the clerk.

"Yours."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The customs keys. Give them to me."

"You have no authority to - "

Behind them, the bell sounded.

The yard tilted.

Leth grabbed the wagon step. Bram braced the handcart while Nella held its load steady. Along the customs wall, a line of iron drainage covers lifted and dropped in sequence, clanging like badly tuned instruments.

From beneath the building came the three answering knocks.

The horse stamped and pulled its head away from the sound. Sivren kept hold of the halter, speaking softly until it settled.

Orris watched the water running into the yard.

"Keys," he said.

Leth gave them up.

Sivren passed them to Brannik. Then she untangled the reins, led the horse to higher ground beside the wall, and tied it to a different rail.

Edran retrieved his arrow. The hook had bent, and half the cord was wet.

"That worked," he said, sounding pleased and slightly surprised.

"Were you expecting otherwise?" Sivren asked.

"I was prepared to be flexible."

She gave him a look and went to inspect the wagon.

Brannik opened the customs doors.

The loading hall beyond was warm, brightly lit, and almost empty. Iron scales hung beside a counting desk. Racks of numbered tags lined one wall. Two upright packing cases stood by the doors, their lids nailed shut.

At the back, a raised wooden platform overlooked a broad hatch in the floor.

Water bubbled through its edges.

Nella went straight to it.

"Bram. Bring the cart here. Keep it on the platform."

He obeyed.

Brannik followed her to the hatch and took one of its iron rings. Together they lifted it.

Cold air rose from below, carrying the heavy smell of river mud.

A metal staircase descended beside a huge horizontal shaft. At its far end, a wheel taller than Brannik stood above a chain that disappeared through the wall. The lower steps were underwater.

Nella stared at the wheel.

Its central housing was open. Four bolts lay arranged neatly on a ledge beside it.

"Damaged," she said.

She turned toward Leth, who had followed them inside.

"It's been taken apart."

The clerk opened his mouth.

"Don't," she said.

He closed it.

Orris put the lantern on the platform and knelt beside the open hatch. The water below was moving toward the shaft housing, drawing scraps of straw along with it.

"Can you fix it?"

Nella was already descending.

"If the parts are here."

Vessa followed her. Brannik looked once at Leth, then at Edran.

"Keep him."

The ranger leaned his bow against the wall and took a length of rope from his pack.

Leth went pale.

"That is entirely unnecessary."

"Then make it easy," Edran said.

He secured one of the clerk's wrists to the iron rail beside the counting desk, leaving enough slack for him to sit or stand. The knot could be loosened quickly. Edran tested it, then sat on the edge of the desk within reach.

"There. You can explain things without wandering off."

Outside, wood cracked.

Sivren called for Orris.

He found her at the wagon. One of the boxes on its bed had broken against the sideboard when the yard shifted. Its lid hung loose.

Inside were leather-bound books.

Several had already slipped into a puddle beneath the wagon. She was lifting them out, one at a time.

Orris took the nearest.

River Maintenance: Disbursements and Receipts.

The year on the spine was three years old.

He opened it beneath the porch light.

"There are more in the cases inside," Sivren said. "Same bindings."

Orris turned a page, then another.

Each entry listed work, payment, and the clerk who had approved it. New bridge footings. Channel clearance. Repairs to the western spill shutter.

That last item appeared six times.

The figures were substantial.

"Nella," he called through the doorway. "When was the spill shutter last repaired?"

Her reply came up from below.

"Properly? Before I started. I've been asking for the bearings to be replaced for two years."

Orris looked at the neat columns.

The bearings had been paid for twice.

He carried the book inside and laid it on the counting desk beside Edran.

Leth looked at its cover.

"Those are confidential."

Orris opened it to the relevant page.

"Where are the bearings?"

"I don't order individual components."

"You approved them."

"On the recommendation of qualified people."

Sivren entered carrying two more books. She set them beside the first.

"And where were these going?"

"Somewhere dry."

Edran looked at the wet books, then at the locked office door behind the clerk.

"How thoughtful."

Below the platform, Brannik called for a rope.

Orris left the ledger open and hurried back to the hatch.

Nella stood waist-deep beside the wheel housing. Vessa had wedged herself onto a narrow shelf above the water. Brannik was testing the stairs, looking for a sound place to brace his feet.

"The missing pin is under the shaft," Nella said. "I can see it. I can't reach it while the water's pushing."

Bram lowered a loop of rope.

"Around your waist," he told her.

She did as he asked. He took the strain from above, steadying her while she bent beneath the shaft.

Orris held the lantern out over the opening.

Nella's hand disappeared into the water.

For one breath, then two.

She came up holding a thick iron pin.

“There.”

Brannik took it from her, wiped river grit from its surface, and passed it to Vessa. The halfling held it where Nella could inspect it.

One side had been freshly filed.

Nella looked toward the loading hall above.

“He wasn't just stopping us turning the wheel,” she said. “He was making sure it wouldn't stay open.”

Brannik's expression hardened.

From the desk, Leth said, “You don't understand.”

For a moment, nobody answered.

Then Vessa called up, perfectly clearly, “You should hope we don't.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Weight of Water

Nella set the damaged pin on the shelf beside Vessa.

"The wheel lifts the shutter," she said. "The ratchet holds the weight. Without a sound pin, that catch won't stay seated."

"Can we lift it?" Brannik asked.

"Yes."

"Then we'll hold it."

She glanced at the chain entering the wall.

"You haven't felt it yet."

"I have an optimistic nature."

"I noticed."

She reassembled the housing with the parts from the ledge. Bram lowered her tools. Vessa kept the bolts in the fold of her scarf so they couldn't roll away.

Above them, Orris and Sivren brought the remaining books under cover. They left the wagon and its boxes beside the horse, which now stood on a patch of cobbles only slightly higher than the spreading water.

Sivren had found a piece of dry bread in a feed bin. She let the animal take it from her palm.

"At least one person here is pleasant to deal with."

"I heard that," Edran called from the desk.

"You're improving."

She shut the outer doors against the cold, leaving the smaller entrance open.

At the counting desk, Leth had stopped objecting to the rope. He sat with his free hand curled around the edge of the chair.

Orris returned to the ledger.

There were two handwritings in it: the tidy script used for payments, and an older, cramped hand that had added notes in the margins.

NOT DELIVERED.

SHUTTER STILL UNSAFE.

REQUEST EXPLANATION.

The last note ended with a name.

Hessel Marr, Senior Accounts Examiner.

Orris pictured the elderly man in the market office, holding his ledger above the rising water.

"Hessel Marr," he said.

Leth stared at the tabletop.

"Was he the man you sent into the market?"

"He was conducting an inspection."

"Of the safe routes?"

"Of the accounts."

Sivren placed the bent brass heron beside the ledger.

"And you arranged a place for him to wait."

"Until I could leave."

The words came quickly, before Leth seemed to realize he had said them.

Edran straightened.

Leth looked from one face to another.

"The gallery was above flood level. The old plans show it. They weren't meant to be in danger."

"They couldn't get out," Sivren said.

"Only for an hour."

Orris thought of the shortened legs on the brass bird. Someone had stood on a stair that morning and carefully fitted a trap into place.

"You knew how to make the loop."

"It's in the maintenance instructions."

"But you didn't know what the tongue would do."

Leth's free hand tightened.

"The cabinet record said it closed the river approaches. Temporarily. The old inspection notes called it a winter traffic measure."

Pell had been right. The warning existed.

Leth had found a shorter description that suited him better.

"And the spill shutter?" Orris asked.

No answer.

Sivren drew the false order from her coat and laid it beside the ledger.

"You had the tower activated. You trapped the examiner. You removed the part that could keep the water out of the records rooms."

Leth swallowed.

"The lower archive," he said. "Not the whole town."

Orris turned toward the loading platform.

"Nella. Is the lower archive next to your chamber?"

"Other side of the partition. Why?"

"Get the wheel working."

Below, a wrench struck the shelf.

"I'm trying."

Orris looked back at Leth.

The clerk seemed smaller now. There was nothing grand about him, nothing that belonged in a ballad. He had taken money, hidden the shortages, and arranged for other people to be inconvenienced while he escaped the consequences.

The river had been less accommodating than his paperwork.

"The records stay," Orris said.

"You can't carry all of them."

"Watch us."

Sivren pulled the ring of customs keys toward her.

"Which key opens the archive?"

Leth didn't move.

She held up the whole ring.

"I can ask you or try them. One leaves more time for keeping everyone alive."

He pointed to a long black key with a square bow.

She took it and headed for the platform.

Edran caught her eye.

"Don't go alone."

For a moment, she looked ready to say she worked better that way.

Then she glanced at the water bubbling around the hatch.

"Orris."

He picked up the lantern.

They descended together.

Nella had fitted the housing back over the ratchet. Brannik stood at the wheel with both hands on its lower rim. Bram was coming down behind them, a coil of rope over one shoulder.

“Ready?” Nella asked.

Brannik nodded.

He pushed.

The wheel moved a fraction, enough to take the slack from the chain. Then it stopped.

He leaned harder. Water pressed against his thighs. His boots slipped against the submerged stair.

“Bram.”

The workman took the opposite side.

Together they turned it.

The chain rose one link.

Beyond the wall, something enormous scraped upward.

Water surged toward the opening.

Brannik felt it pull at his legs. He widened his stance and kept pushing while Bram hauled down on the opposite side. The wheel turned slowly, complaining at every spoke.

Nella watched the housing.

“Another quarter.”

They gave it to her.

Vessa pushed the ratchet catch into place. The filed pin shuddered beneath it.

For a moment, the wheel held.

Then the catch jumped.

Brannik took the weight with a grunt. Bram's hands slid along the rim before he caught the next spoke.

"Don't let go," Nella said.

"An excellent suggestion," Brannik managed.

She took the rope from Bram's shoulder and began threading it through the spokes.

Sivren and Orris moved past them toward a door set into the rear wall.

The long black key turned easily.

The archive beyond was a low room lined with shelves. Bundles of receipts filled wooden trays. Bound survey books occupied a high rack along the far wall. A narrow window just below ceiling level gave onto the river steps.

The water inside was already knee-deep on Orris.

Sivren stayed near the doorway while he brought the lantern around.

"Which ones?" she asked.

He read the shelf labels.

"Receipts first. Last three years. Left side."

She lifted the nearest tray above the water.

Orris took two others, stacking them against his chest.

They carried them to the stairs and passed them up to Edran, who had brought Leth with him and secured the rope to the loading rail.

The ranger set the trays on dry floorboards and reached for the next load.

Below, Nella pulled the rope tight around a stone support.

The wheel shifted against its bindings.

Fibers creaked.

"It won't hold by itself," she said.

"Then hurry," Bram answered.

Orris returned to the archive.

The water was falling, but slowly. He could see a pale line on the wall where it had reached. Beyond the partition, the open spill shutter roared.

He lifted a bundle from a low shelf. Its outer pages were wet. The inner stack might still be saved.

As he turned, a survey volume slid from the rack behind him.

He caught it against his shoulder.

Its cover had come loose, exposing folded plans beneath. One opened across his wrist: a map of the north tower and its lower chamber.

Orris stopped.

At the bottom, a section drawing showed the bowl, the pedestal, and the water channel.

A second diagram showed the same chamber with a man standing at the controls.

He wasn't standing beside the bowl.

He stood behind it, inside a marked circle on the floor.

"Found something?" Sivren asked.

"Possibly our way out."

"Bring it."

He tucked the plan into his shirt and followed her toward the door.

From the wheel chamber came a sharp crack.

Both of them moved faster.

The upper edge of the shelf had broken beneath Nella's boot. She caught the housing with one hand, her body swinging toward the turning chain.

Vessa seized the back of her apron.

For a terrible instant, it was not enough.

The halfling slid along the wet stone, her staff scraping beside her. Nella's free hand struck the wall and found nothing to hold.

Sivren dropped her tray onto a stair and caught Vessa around the waist.

Orris planted the lantern in an empty bracket and grabbed the staff before it fell.

"Nella. Across your chest."

He thrust it toward her.

She hooked an arm over the wood.

Together they drew her away from the chain and onto the steps.

Vessa remained on her knees, breathing hard. Sivren's arms were still locked around her.

"I have you," the rogue said.

"I noticed."

Nella coughed and sat upright. One sleeve had torn at the elbow.

Brannik couldn't look around.

His world had narrowed to the wheel beneath his hands and the ache climbing into his shoulders.

"Everyone?" he asked.

"Everyone," Vessa said.

"Good."

Bram's breath came in harsh bursts across from him.

The water had dropped below Brannik's knees. That should have made things easier, but the weight on the wheel remained immense.

"How much longer?"

Nella looked at the level, then at the rope straining around the support.

"Until we secure the catch."

"Then secure it."

"The pin is cut. It won't - "

"What shape do you need?" Sivren asked.

Nella pointed to the broken piece.

"That thickness. Flat along one edge. Iron. Something that won't bend under the load."

Brannik looked down.

At his feet, wedged against a stair, lay the bent iron lever Bram had used at the tunnel gate.

"Bram."

The workman followed his gaze.

"It's bent."

"Only at one end."

Nella reached for it.

She held the straight section against the housing, checked the clearance, and nodded once.

"It will stand proud. But it will fit."

Orris took a hammer from her tool roll. He passed it handle first.

Nella set the lever through the retaining socket.

"A little forward," she told the men at the wheel. "Enough to take the pressure off."

Brannik wasn't certain he had a little forward left in him.

He thought of the people behind the market door. Of Elian putting his head on his sister's shoulder. Of warm loaves left in a baker's window while the streets changed around them.

He pushed.

Bram gave a hoarse sound and pushed with him.

The wheel advanced.

Nella struck the lever once, twice, then a third time.

The ratchet settled.

"Slowly," she said. "Let it take the weight."

Brannik eased his hands back.

The wheel moved the width of a thumbnail.

Held.

He kept his palms against the rim for another breath.

Then another.

Nella laid a hand on his arm.

"It's holding."

Brannik let go.

Bram sat on the stairs at once. The dwarf lowered himself beside him, his hands opening and closing without quite obeying.

For a while, neither spoke.

Then Bram said, "I knew keeping that would be useful."

Brannik looked at the iron lever protruding from the housing.

"An excellent tool."

"Very versatile."

Above them, Edran called down.

"The yard's draining."

Nella tipped her head back against the stone.

Vessa smiled.

Not because everything was all right. It wasn't. They still had a ward to stop, a tower to reach, and a town full of people waiting behind doors.

But the water was going down.

For the first time since they had entered Dunmere, it was going down.

They carried the remaining trays from the archive while Brannik and Bram recovered. Edran brought dry sacks from the loading hall and made space for the wet bundles. Sivren checked the wheel bindings once more before leaving the chamber.

Nella stayed on the stairs, watching the repaired catch as if it might misbehave when her back was turned.

"That will buy us time," she said.

"How much?" Vessa asked.

"Enough to go to the tower. Not enough to admire the view."

Bram came up carrying the last tray. He put it beside the others and sat on an empty packing case.

Leth watched the rescued receipts drip onto the floorboards.

"Most of those will be illegible."

Orris took a dry sheet from the desk and slipped it between two wet bundles.

"Some will."

"Then what does any of this prove?"

The wizard stopped working.

He had heard that question before, in better rooms, from people who had never needed to raise their voices. He remembered empty spaces on archive shelves. A catalogue

carefully corrected to suggest those spaces had always been empty.

He looked at Leth.

"The deliveries can be checked. The people who were paid can be found. The people who weren't can speak."

"You don't know how the office works."

"I worked in one."

Sivren glanced at him. He had mentioned an archive before. Rarely anything more.

Orris returned to the papers.

"I know how easy it is to make a missing record sound unimportant."

Nella climbed the final steps. She stood in front of Leth, wet sleeves clinging to her arms.

"My father walked here twice about that shutter," she said. "He brought the measurements. Told your office which parts were wearing out."

Leth looked at the floor.

"You gave him a receipt for his request."

Orris found a clean pencil and offered it to her.

"Write that down. His name, when he came, what he asked for."

Nella took the pencil.

"Now?"

"A few lines. While we arrange the books."

She bent over the desk.

Vessa brought Bram a cup of water from a covered jug by the scales. He accepted it with both hands.

"I'll stay with the wheel," he said after drinking. "If that catch shifts, somebody should hear it."

"You won't try to hold it alone," Vessa said.

He looked down through the hatch, then back at her.

"No. I'll get upstairs and shout."

"Good."

Edran checked the rope at the loading rail. Then he moved a chair into the open doorway where Bram would have a clear view of both the wheel chamber and the yard.

Sivren gathered the work order, Nella's written account, and the least damaged ledger into a dry customs satchel. She fastened it beneath her coat.

"These travel with us."

Leth watched her close the buckles.

For once, he had no objection about official property.

Orris had spread the survey plan on the counting desk.

Leth stood beside his chair, silent now. A line of water marked the hem of his coat. The pale gloves were stained gray where he had gripped the rail.

Orris read the notes beneath the chamber drawing.

Then he read them again.

Sivren came up beside him.

"What is it?"

"Pell told us the bowl gives the route."

"Yes."

"It does. But he hasn't used it. Neither has anyone he's trained."

He pointed to the drawn circle behind the pedestal.

"That is where the keeper stands. It keeps the chamber from changing around him while the route is set."

"Good. We'll show him."

Orris tapped the note beside it.

The writing was small and formal.

THE KEEPER MUST REMAIN UNTIL THE LAST PASSAGE IS CLEAR.

Below, in a different hand, someone had added:

Do not leave the ring when the water falls. The return current comes after.

Sivren bent closer.

Across the bottom of the page, a brown stain partly obscured a final line.

Orris shifted the lantern so its light came across the paper at an angle.

The words emerged.

Ring release requires a second hand at the north bell.

Brannik reached the top of the stairs, rubbing one shoulder.

"Tell me that face means you've found something helpful."

"We have," Orris said. "And we need to send a message to the inn."

Edran came over.

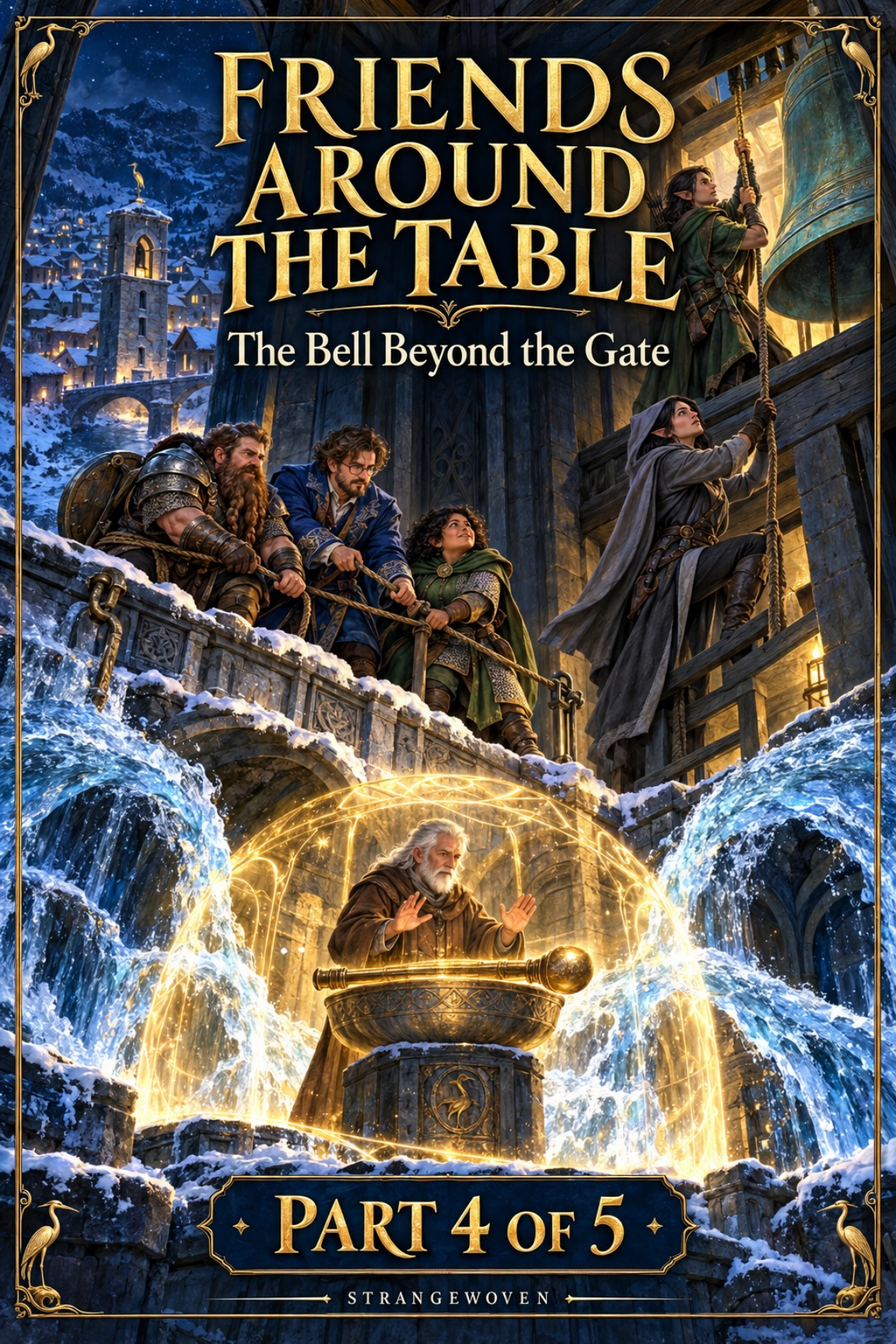
"Why?"

Orris laid one finger on the lower chamber and another on the bell loft above it.

"Because when we stop this, somebody has to be down here."

He moved his second finger to the hanging ropes.

"And somebody has to be up there."



FRIENDS AROUND THE TABLE

The Bell Beyond the Gate

♦ PART 4 OF 5 ♦

◀ STRANGEWOVEN ▶

CHAPTER EIGHT

Back to the Tower

"I'll bring Pell," Edran said.

He was already taking up his bow.

Orris folded the survey plan along its original creases. "Tell him we've opened the spill shutter. The lower chamber should be draining. We need him at the tower."

"And tell Marta we're all still alive," Vessa added.

"That too."

The ranger left through the small door, following the edge of the yard where the cobbles had begun to show through the water.

Brannik rolled his shoulders. One gave an unpleasant click.

"We'll bring the tongue by the arcade. Meet us there."

Edran raised a hand in acknowledgment and disappeared around the customs wall.

Sivren checked the satchel beneath her coat. The ledger, the false order, and Nella's account were dry. She had no intention of taking them into another flooded cellar.

"Bram. The examiner from the market is at the Heron House. Hessel Marr. If the watch comes, have them send for him."

The workman nodded.

Beside the loading rail, Leth stared at the floor.

Vessa set the water jug within his reach.

"You stay out of Bram's way."

"I'm tied to a railing."

"Then you have an excellent start."

Nella gave the shutter one last inspection. The catch held against the straight section of Bram's bent lever. Water rushed through the opening beyond, carrying away the pressure that had been building beneath the town.

She climbed out and lowered the hatch to a narrow gap, enough for Bram to hear the mechanism without risking a step into it.

"If it starts knocking, get to the yard," she told him.

"I heard Vessa."

"I'm allowed to say it too."

He looked at her wet sleeve, then at the torn place near her elbow.

"So am I."

She touched his shoulder and went to the handcart.

Outside, Brannik helped her settle the wrapped tongue. They tested the wheels once, then set off.

The footbridge had returned almost to where it belonged. A crack ran across the far end, and the handrail leaned over the channel, but it held beneath their weight. On the arcade, pools remained in every hollow. The water between them flowed steadily toward the river.

Behind the market shutters, someone was calling names.

"People coming out," Nella said.

"Tell them to stay above the ground floor," Vessa replied.

"Until the bell stops."

Nella called the warning through a shop doorway. A man answered, and passed it to someone farther along.

By the time they reached the market entrance, the words were traveling ahead of them.

Stay upstairs. Keep together. Wait for the bell to stop.

Sivren walked beside the empty patch where she had pried a brass bird from the stair. The marker was still in her coat pocket, wrapped separately from the papers. Evidence of a different kind.

Beyond the counting office, the flood had left a pale fan of peas across the floor.

Brannik looked at them.

"A formidable defense."

"You nearly succumbed," she said.

"I was evaluating the terrain."

Orris carried the lantern at his side. His hand still ached from holding the gate's ward aside, but the pain had settled into a dull stiffness. He could manage a pencil. That mattered more than anyone might have expected.

He had no spell that could empty a town's streets or make a whole river behave. What he had was a drawing made by someone who had understood the machinery, and four companions who had so far refused to leave anyone behind.

He kept the drawing inside his shirt, where it was warmest.

They found Edran at the arcade's northern end.

Pell stood beside him, wrapped in Ada's brown coat. A watch sergeant and a young guard accompanied them. The guard carried a lantern and had a carpenter's hammer tucked through his belt.

"Marta found them trying to reach the market," Edran said.

The sergeant looked at the handcart.

"Is that what's causing this?"

"Part of it," Orris said.

"And you're stopping it?"

"That's the intention."

She considered the wet clothes, the bent shield, the exhausted keeper.

"What do you need?"

Sivren unfastened the customs satchel and handed it over.

"These go to Hessel Marr. Leth is at the customs house, secured to the loading rail. Bram's there watching the spill shutter. Keep him clear of the mechanism, and keep Leth away from everything."

"On what charge?"

Sivren took out the bent brass heron.

"Ask the people in the market office where this led them. Then read the order in the satchel."

The sergeant's expression changed.

She knew what a moved paving bird meant.

"We'll find him."

"The horse in the yard will need moving to dry shelter," Vessa said.

The young guard nodded. The sergeant took the satchel and the brass marker, then led him down the arcade toward the customs house.

Pell watched them go.

"Marr is writing things down already," he said. "Marta gave him her breakfast ledger. I think he might fill it."

"Good," Orris said.

He brought out the plan.

Pell read it against the wall, holding one corner with his good hand. His eyes moved slowly over the note about the return current.

"I knew the ring held the keeper in place," he said. "I thought it was simply a precaution against the moving floor."

"It may be both," Orris said. "But we know not to leave it early."

Pell nodded. He didn't try to make his ignorance sound smaller.

"The operating instructions are in the old surveys," he said.

"The safety warnings are in the tower records. They should have been kept together."

"They can be," Vessa said. "After tonight."

The keeper looked at her, then back at the plan.

"Yes."

Orris pointed to the lines around the bowl. The survey gave them names: Inward, Hold, Outward. Beneath them was a simple operating sequence, with the symbols drawn beside each instruction.

"Outward returns the water to the deep channel," he said.

"Hold lets the streets settle. Then the upper bell releases the ring."

Pell touched the sketch of the hanging ropes.

"Two ropes. The long one swings the bell for a warning. The short one moves the external hammer. That's what releases the keeper."

"One strike?" Edran asked.

"Once the return current has passed. Yes."

"I can do that."

"I'll be between you and the chamber," Sivren said. "Pell tells us when. I pass it up."

Brannik took the cart handles.

"Then let's get him something to stand on."

They followed the remembered streets to the cooper's yard. The covered passage had returned, though one wall still bulged inward, and the snow on its roof lay in broken ridges where it had shifted. Nella checked the brass markers against Pell's directions.

No one had moved these.

The stair to the tower square was wet but clear.

Pell climbed slowly with Edran's help. Brannik and Nella carried the tongue in its sling, leaving the handcart beneath the arch. Orris followed with the lantern. Vessa stayed on Pell's other side.

At the tower door, the keeper stopped.

He looked at the cracked landing within, at the slab that had trapped his apprentice.

"He shouldn't have been here."

Vessa waited.

"I brought him down to inspect the old room. I thought understanding it would make him safer."

"It will," she said. "What happened wasn't something you chose."

Pell's gaze went to the wrapped bronze.

"I ought to have recognized it sooner."

"Tell him that when you're both home."

He drew a breath, and entered.

Nella took the young guard's example and inspected the damaged stair supports. There was enough sound timber for her to brace a short ladder across the broken landing, giving them a clear approach to the shaft.

Edran checked the anchors they had used to bring Pell up. The ropes were wet, but the knots hadn't shifted.

"One at a time," he said.

Brannik and Nella lowered the tongue first, using its sling and a line around each end. Orris descended to guide it onto the dry edge of the chamber. Vessa followed, then Pell, supported in the same sling that had carried him out.

His boots touched the floor.

He looked around.

The water had fallen below the top of the channel. Damp stone shone in the lantern light. Near the pedestal, a faint circle showed where silt had settled differently around an inset brass rim.

Pell had never seen it uncovered.

"There," Orris said.

Brannik came down last. He set his shield beside the wall, then took one end of the wrapped tongue while Orris took the other.

Vessa helped Pell into the circle.

It fit him closely, barely wider than the space he needed to turn.

Above, Sivren knelt at the shaft opening.

"I'm here. Nella's at the door. Edran's going up."

Pell raised his voice.

"Nobody sets that bell moving. The short rope only, when I call."

Sivren repeated the instruction up the stairwell.

A moment later, Edran's answer came back.

"Understood."

* * *

The doorbell rang.

Caleb glanced toward the hall. "That'll be Beth."

Dani rested his pencil across the notebook. "We'll hold here."

June was already crossing the living room with her coat half on and a folded drawing clutched against her chest. Caleb helped find the second sleeve, then knelt to straighten the collar.

"Museum next weekend," she reminded him.

"I have been reliably informed."

"Early."

"After breakfast."

She considered that, then nodded.

Beth came in far enough to greet everyone. Rachel handed her a container of dinner, and Elena found June's bag beside the cardboard castle. Finn wanted to know whether the castle could stay until she came again.

"Ask the people who own the floor," Beth said.

Dani looked toward Elena. She regarded the enormous construction occupying their rug.

"Until tomorrow afternoon. Then the dragon needs to find a smaller hospital."

June gave Caleb the drawing.

Five figures stood beside a blue river. One was very small and held a stick. One had a beard that reached his boots. Above them, in careful uneven letters, she had written DON'T FALL IN.

Caleb looked at Vessa's character sheet on the table.

"Excellent advice."

He hugged her, walked them to the car, and stayed while June explained something through the open window. Nobody at the table called him back.

Maya took the chance to sit beside Lucy for a minute. Her daughter had abandoned architecture and was leaning sleepily against Rachel, watching the end of a film. Maya rubbed her back until she settled.

When Caleb returned, Tessa was studying June's drawing.

"She's captured Brannik's proportions beautifully."

"And his beard," Maya said, taking her seat.

Dani looked around the table.

"Ready?"

Five nods.

He lifted his pencil.

* * *

Brannik and Orris unwrapped the bronze.

It was warm now. Not hot enough to hurt, but unnaturally warm in the cold chamber. The grooves along its narrow end glimmered faintly.

Pell studied the plan one last time.

Then he set it on the dry shelf beside the lantern.

"Bring it here."

CHAPTER NINE

Wait for the Silence

They laid the winter tongue in the bowl.

The bronze settled against the metal beneath it with a soft click.

Every niche in the chamber filled with light.

Brannik took a step back. Vessa caught the keeper's elbow, but Pell stood steady inside the ring. A pale line rose around his boots, tracing the circle in the air.

Orris felt a pressure inside his ears.

Overhead, the bell began to sound.

Not one note this time.

A slow, gathering sequence, each tone beginning before the last had quite faded.

"It's waiting," Pell said.

His voice sounded oddly close, as though he stood beside each of them at once.

On the bowl's rim, three marks shone: Inward, Hold, Outward.

The winter tongue rested in the groove pointing toward Inward.

Pell put his good hand on its narrow end.

"I'll turn it. Don't touch it after that."

"We won't," Orris said.

The keeper turned the bronze toward Outward.

It resisted at first. He couldn't bring his injured arm to bear. His fingers slipped, caught again.

Brannik started forward.

Vessa raised a hand without looking away from Pell.

"Let him."

The old man leaned his weight over his good arm.

The tongue moved.

The light in the niches bent toward the river grate.

Water struck the chamber wall.

Brannik had time to see a dark bulge through the upstream bars before it burst into the channel, rose above its sides, and swept across the floor.

"Wall!" Orris shouted.

He and Vessa stepped onto the bench where they had found Pell. Brannik reached it a moment later, water pushing hard against his calves.

At the pedestal, Pell stood untouched.

The current divided around the circle, leaving a narrow column of clear air within.

He looked down at it.

For an instant, wonder overcame everything else in his face.

Then he looked at the bowl again and kept his hand steady.

Upstairs, Sivren heard the rush.

"Everyone?"

"On the bench," Vessa called. "Pell's in the ring."

"Holding," Sivren answered.

She rose from the opening and moved into the stairwell.

"They're holding!"

Far above, Edran stood beside the bell.

The short rope hung within reach. He had followed its path to an external hammer mounted on the timber frame. Its striking face rested just clear of the bell's outer wall.

The long rope led to the great wheel that could swing the whole bell.

He moved that rope behind a beam so it couldn't be mistaken for the other.

Then he waited.

Through the eastern arch, Dunmere lay spread below him. Water gleamed in lanes where he had walked only a short time before. A row of lit windows shifted, slowly, toward the street beside them.

Somewhere in the darkness, a woman called for someone to keep hold of the banister.

The bell hummed without moving.

Edran tightened his hand around the short rope, careful not to pull.

Movement caught his eye on the roof opposite.

A man had climbed out through a dormer window and was edging along the gutter. Below him, something small and pale scrambled against a sloping awning.

Edran took a step toward the arch.

He could reach that roof. A line around the beam, a climb down the outer wall. He was already measuring the distance when Sivren's voice came up from the stairs.

"Still at the rope?"

He stopped.

Below him, Pell stood inside a ring that would not release him until someone struck the bell. Orris, Vessa, and Brannik were waiting beside a river they couldn't see. Edran had given his word about this one small piece of the work.

"Still here," he answered.

Across the square, another window opened. A woman leaned out, listened to the man on the roof, and disappeared inside.

She returned with a long-handled brush.

Working together, they lowered it toward the awning. The little shape caught hold of the bristles, climbed far enough for the man to reach it, and vanished beneath his coat.

He made his way back to the dormer on hands and knees.

Edran let out a breath.

He stayed beside the rope.

Below, Orris read the next line on the survey plan, holding it high enough to keep it dry.

"Until the outward channel clears the lower mark," he said.

Pell looked toward the wall.

Two brass lines had emerged beneath the niches. Water churned above both.

"I see them."

The room gave a slow twist.

Brannik pressed his shoulder against the wall behind the bench. The floor didn't move so much as change the direction it considered level. Water climbed one side of the room, swept around the pillar, and poured through the downstream grate.

The grate groaned.

Orris looked at it sharply.

"That's a lot of water."

"It's a river," Brannik said.

"A fact I'm finding increasingly difficult to overlook."

Vessa had tied the hem of her coat up around her waist. She took the rope hanging from the shaft and passed a loose bight to Brannik, then Orris.

"Something to hold."

Brannik wrapped it around his wrist once.

The light around Pell brightened.

His face had gone gray with effort. He wasn't lifting anything, but the pressure on his hand was visible in his rigid wrist.

Vessa watched his breathing.

"Slowly, Master Pell. In through your nose."

"Busy," he said.

"You can manage both."

He gave a short, unwilling laugh, then took a measured breath.

She had a little healing left. Enough for a torn hand, perhaps, or a dangerous cut. Spending it now would ease his shoulder, but it couldn't take his place in the ring.

She kept it in reserve and gave him something simpler.

"Elian's at the inn," she said. "Ada's making certain he stays put. When we're done, you can tell him how well he followed instructions."

Pell's eyes lifted from the bowl.

"He'll be unbearable."

"You'll manage."

He adjusted his feet inside the circle and settled his grip.

Across the town, something heavy crashed.

Edran turned toward it.

The market roof had settled fully back into place. A long sheet of snow slid from its tiles and broke across the empty square.

Beyond it, water was moving down the streets in broad streams, following the old river channels toward the open spill shutter.

He could see the customs yard.

A lantern moved at the doorway. Two figures led the wagon horse toward the arcade. A third stood with his arms close to his sides while someone beside him held a rope.

The watch had reached them.

Edran looked back at the short rope.

"Still here," he called down.

Sivren repeated it to the chamber.

"Still here," Pell answered.

The water fell below the upper brass line.

Then the lower.

"Hold," Orris said.

Pell turned the tongue to the middle groove.

The great rush ceased.

Water slid off the bench, leaving beads along Brannik's boots. The downstream grate dripped. In the niches, the light softened to a steady amber.

Pell sagged.

"Stay inside," Vessa said immediately.

He nodded.

Brannik looked at the dry floor between the bench and the ring.

It was tempting. Three steps, perhaps four, and he could put an arm around the old man before those knees gave way.

He kept his feet on the bench.

The note on the plan had been quite clear.

Do not leave when the water falls.

Orris lowered the sheet slightly.

“The return comes from the other side.”

They all looked toward the downstream grate.

At first there was nothing.

Only the drip from its upper edge.

Pell's breathing sounded loud in the room.

Then the water beyond the bars drew back, exposing a stretch of channel that hadn't been visible before.

Brannik tightened his grip on the rope.

“Get low.”

The return current hit.

It came beneath the grate, through the grate, around the edges where old stone met iron. The whole chamber filled with white turbulence.

Orris lost sight of Pell.

Something struck the bench beneath his feet. He fell against Vessa, felt her shoulder beneath his arm, and grabbed the rope with both hands.

Brannik caught the back of the wizard's coat before he could slide away.

For a moment, all three of them hung between the rope and the wall while the river tried to take the bench out from beneath them.

Above, Sivren saw water rise in the shaft.

She hauled the slack out of the line and looped it around the pillar.

“Hold on!”

She couldn't tell whether they heard her.

There was no answer, only the roar.

The rope snapped tight against the stone.

Sivren set both feet and took the strain.

At the tower door, Nella heard her cry and came running. She caught the line behind her, helping keep it from slipping around the pillar.

"Tell me when," Nella said.

Sivren couldn't spare breath for an answer.

Below, the current pulled Orris sideways. His boot left the bench.

Brannik held on to his coat.

The seam tore.

Orris's free foot scraped the wall, found the bench again, and pressed down.

Vessa moved her grip from the rope to his wrist, giving him enough room to draw himself upright.

Pell appeared through the water.

He was still in the ring.

The old man had lowered himself to one knee, his good hand locked around the tongue. The current curved over him in a clear arch, carrying silt and fragments of reed through the light.

His eyes found Vessa's.

She nodded at him.

He nodded back.

Then the pressure began to ease.

The water dropped from the bench. Orris's feet settled firmly beneath him. Brannik released the torn coat only when the wizard had his back against the wall again.

The return current narrowed into the channel.

One last wave passed through the grate.

After it came air.

The sound of it was extraordinary: a long breath drawn beneath the town, passing through pipes and channels that had been full of water for hours.

Pell looked at the bowl.

The three marks around its rim had gone dark.

Only the circle beneath him still shone.

He lifted his head.

"Now!"

Orris looked toward the shaft.

"Short rope! Now!"

Sivren released the strain on the rescue line, leaving Nella to tend it, and ran to the stairwell.

"Edran! Short rope!"

Above, Edran pulled.

The external hammer lifted, paused at the top of its travel, and fell.

One clear note rang across Dunmere.

This time the bell moved beneath the blow. Edran felt the vibration through the rope and the timber under his feet.

Down in the chamber, the light around Pell's boots opened like a door.

He let go of the tongue.

Vessa was off the bench before Brannik could move. She crossed the wet floor and reached him as he tried to stand.

"Slowly," she said.

"You keep saying that."

"You keep needing it."

Brannik came to his other side.

Together they brought him away from the pedestal.

Orris waited until their boots were clear of the circle. Then he took a fold of the blanket, wrapped it around the bronze, and lifted the tongue from the bowl.

It was cold.

Ordinary cold metal, heavy in his hands.

The light in the niches went out.

His lantern became the only light in the room.

For several breaths, nobody spoke.

Brannik waited for another note, another surge, another movement of stone underfoot.

Nothing came.

Water trickled through the channel, no deeper than his palm.

From above, Sivren called, "Well?"

Vessa looked at Pell.

He listened a moment longer.

Then he began to laugh.

Not loudly. Not for long. Just enough that Vessa felt the trembling in his shoulders and started laughing too.

"It's stopped," he said.

She raised her voice.

"It's stopped!"

Sivren put a hand against the wall beside her.

It stayed where it was.

She looked up the stairwell.

“You can let go of the rope.”

Edran loosened his fingers one at a time.

Outside, the last note spread over the roofs and faded into the night.

A window opened near the tower square.

Then another.

Someone called, asking whether anyone had seen a dog with one white ear. A voice answered from farther down the street. A door banged. People began speaking to one another across the spaces that had separated them all evening.

Edran leaned out beneath the western arch.

At the northern gate, the great iron-bound leaves stood open.

Beyond them lay the road, pale beneath the snow.

No twisted approach. No vanishing tracks.

Just a road.

He thought of the words scratched above the guardroom.

Wait for the silence.

For once, the instruction made perfect sense.

Below him, Dunmere began to come outside.

FRIENDS AROUND THE TABLE

The Bell Beyond the Gate



PART 5 OF 5

STRANGEWOVEN

CHAPTER TEN

A Place Beside the Fire

Getting out took longer than stopping the river.

Pell discovered that his legs had very firm opinions about standing. Orris refused to leave the survey plan behind. Brannik insisted he could manage the tongue and then, on attempting to lift it, revised his opinion without comment.

They used the sling.

Nella and Sivren hauled from above while Brannik guided the wrapped bronze past the broken brackets. Edran came down from the bell loft and helped Pell onto the landing. Vessa followed, carrying the lantern. Orris brought up the rear with his damp coat hanging in two distinct sections beneath one arm.

He regarded it in the light from the doorway.

"I liked this coat."

Brannik glanced at the torn seam.

"It performed admirably."

"You pulled the back off."

"The rest of you came with it."

Orris considered that.

"I suppose I can give it a favorable review."

They took the tongue to the keeper's office, above the damaged landing and well away from the bowl. Pell locked it inside an empty iron-bound chest. Nella checked the hasp, then took a piece of chalk and wrote a warning across the lid.

DO NOT FIT TO ANYTHING.

Pell read it.

"A little informal."

"Will anyone misunderstand it?"

"I should hope not."

"Then it's an improvement."

The keeper secured the key inside his coat. He would arrange a proper place for the tongue, with proper instructions kept beside it. For tonight, separating it from the bowl would do.

Outside, the square was filling.

People stood in coats over nightclothes, carrying lamps, calling to neighbors. A woman inspected the front step of her house, which had returned with a crack down the middle. Two men helped lift a cart wheel from a drain. Someone had brought a basket of bread and was passing it around without asking for payment.

Brannik accepted a piece.

He had earned the right to chew before speaking.

"Was it you?" a man asked Pell.

The keeper looked at the five travelers and Nella.

"It was us."

The distinction seemed important enough that nobody corrected him.

An older woman touched Vessa's shoulder as they passed. She didn't say anything. Vessa laid her hand over the woman's for a moment, then kept walking.

At the bottom of the square, a boy was trying to persuade a dog with one white ear to come away from a pile of washed-up branches.

Edran watched the animal nose beneath them, emerge with a thoroughly soaked ball, and carry it triumphantly to its owner.

He smiled.

Sivren noticed.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That looked like something.”

“Someone else has had a successful evening.”

They found the handcart where they had left it. Brannik helped Pell onto its wooden bed while Nella tucked a blanket around his knees.

“This is undignified,” the keeper said.

“Your dignity can walk,” Vessa replied. “The rest of you is riding.”

He settled back.

The way to the Heron House was ordinary now.

They turned a corner and reached the street that belonged beyond it. A narrow passage remained narrow. Windows looked into rooms instead of different parts of the town.

Orris caught himself checking a fingerpost.

“Well?” Brannik asked.

“Accurate.”

“Remarkable craftsmanship.”

At the inn, Marta had propped the door open with a bucket.

Warmth spilled across the threshold.

She stood just inside, holding the kitchen spoon with which she had first directed them off the looping street. Behind her, the common room was crowded. Extra stools had appeared around the tables. Blankets hung near the hearth, safely clear of the sparks. People made room for one another without waiting to be asked.

Marta looked at Pell in the cart, at the travelers, at Nella's torn sleeve.

"All of you?"

"All of us," Vessa said.

Marta stepped aside.

"Then stop letting the heat out."

Ada came through from the kitchen. She saw Pell and went at once to help him from the cart. Elian rose behind her, took one step on his injured ankle, and sat down again under three simultaneous looks.

"I was testing it."

"Test the chair," Ada told him.

Pell lowered himself into the seat beside his apprentice.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Pell said, "I should have sent you upstairs sooner."

Elian looked down at his bandaged ankle.

"I should have listened when you told me not to cross the landing."

"Yes," Pell said. "You should."

He rested his good hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I'm very glad you were here when they found you."

Elian swallowed and nodded.

Ada tucked a blanket over both their knees, as if that settled the matter for the moment.

Brannik removed his shield and propped it beside the hearth. Its bent rim caught the firelight. He ran a thumb over the place where it had held the stone door open.

"Can that be mended?" Nella asked.

"It had better be. We've reached an understanding."

"I'll have a look tomorrow."

"You repair shields?"

"I repair things people have bent while trying to be helpful."

He looked at her.

"An extensive trade."

"You have no idea."

Marta brought stew before anyone could ask for it. Then bread, clean water, and a bowl for Orris to soak his stiff hand. She found him a spare wool coat that smelled faintly of cedar.

He accepted it with more gratitude than he could put into words.

Sivren chose a chair with its back against the wall. Vessa sat beside her, eased her boots off, and wriggled her toes toward the fire.

"You caught me," she said quietly.

Sivren broke a piece of bread.

"You were holding Nella."

"I know."

There was a small silence.

"Thank you," Vessa said.

Sivren handed her half the bread.

"Eat before Brannik notices there's more."

Across the room, the dwarf looked up.

"I heard my name."

"An administrative matter," Orris said.

Edran laughed into his bowl.

For several minutes, that was enough. Food, fire, familiar voices. Nobody needed to decide where to go or what to try next.

Hessel Marr waited until they had finished eating.

The examiner had changed into a borrowed pair of slippers. His ledger lay open on the table, with Marta's breakfast book beside it. The customs satchel rested against his chair.

"I've given the watch copies of the order and the first account," he said. "They have Leth. Bram is staying at the customs house with two guards until the water settles completely."

Nella stood.

"I should go back."

"He sent a message," Marr said. "The catch is holding. He wants you to eat something."

She looked at her untouched bowl.

Then she sat.

Marr drew a page from beneath the ledger.

"I'll need statements from all of you. In the morning."

"Good," Brannik said.

"There may be questions."

"There generally are."

The examiner's mouth twitched.

Pell reached into his coat and brought out a small purse. He counted twelve silver coins onto the table.

Orris looked at them.

"The letter."

"Delivered," Pell said.

"Opened."

"An entirely sensible decision."

Brannik glanced at Marta.

"There were also beds."

"There are still beds," she said. "Upstairs. Where they ought to be."

Vessa looked toward the crowded room.

"Enough for everyone?"

"Some people have dry houses and spare rooms. We're sorting it out."

"Then yes," Vessa said. "Beds."

Marr drew a second sheet toward Nella. This one had a clean heading and a blank space for a signature.

"An emergency work order. Actual repairs. Actual parts. You and Bram will itemize what's needed."

She looked at the page but didn't take the pencil.

"We put the tongue in the bowl."

"On a forged instruction carrying an official seal," Marr said.

"You'll explain that in your statement. Then you'll help us repair the shutter."

"And the paving markers," she said.

He added it.

Only then did she sign.

Orris watched the pencil move. A record of something that had happened, made in front of people who would remember it.

He found that reassuring.

Marr waited until Nella had returned to her stew before addressing him again.

"You mentioned working in an archive."

Sivren glanced over.

"Municipal records," Orris said.

"You knew what to save."

"Receipts are difficult things to invent twice in the same way."

"Quite."

The examiner rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Would you look at something tomorrow? All of you, if you're willing."

Brannik's spoon stopped halfway to his mouth.

Marr raised a hand.

"Tomorrow. Nobody needs to leave this fire tonight."

The spoon resumed its journey.

"What sort of something?" Edran asked.

"A letter from a village called Rillcross. They requested an inspection of their road. The request came back marked as an error because the village isn't on the district register."

Orris looked up.

"Was it ever?"

"According to the last survey, no."

"And according to the villagers?"

"They've lived there for generations."

Marr took a folded letter from his inner pocket and placed it on the table.

"I thought it was a boundary mistake. The neighboring district denying responsibility for repairs. But someone has been drawing money for maintaining that road."

His gaze moved toward the recovered ledger.

"Money for a road to a village we apparently don't have."

Orris didn't touch the letter yet.

He looked at the others.

Sivren was studying the examiner. Edran had leaned forward. Vessa sat with her bare feet toward the fire, listening. Brannik finished his mouthful before speaking.

"Does this road have a bridge?"

"I believe so."

The dwarf closed his eyes briefly.

"Of course it does."

Orris smiled despite himself.

"We'll talk in the morning."

Marr nodded and left the letter beside the lamp.

Edran reached across to turn it so they could all see the address. Sivren caught the lamp before his sleeve brushed it. He murmured thanks without looking away from the paper.

Vessa drew her chair a little closer.

Brannik broke the last piece of bread into five portions, discovered that one was noticeably larger, and exchanged it for the smallest before anyone could comment.

Outside, Dunmere's streets stayed where they belonged.

Inside, the five travelers settled around the table.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When They Could

"And that's where we'll leave them," Dani said.

The spoon in Brannik's hand became Maya's pencil, resting across her character sheet.

The firelight gave way to the small lamp on the sideboard. Beyond the dining room, a television menu waited quietly for someone to choose another film.

For a second, nobody answered.

Then Julian let out a long breath.

"I would like it recorded that Sivren did not trust that man."

"Which man?" Nora asked.

"Eventually, all of them."

Tessa leaned back in her chair.

"That's not a position. That's weather."

Caleb laughed and reached for his mug. Empty. He looked at it with the mild surprise of someone who had forgotten owning a kitchen.

Maya checked the clock.

Nine fifty-four.

"Good landing," she told Dani.

He closed the notebook.

"I wasn't sure you'd bother with the records."

Nora looked offended.

"You put an archive underwater in front of Orris."

"I suspected."

"You knew."

Dani smiled and began gathering the narrow paper strips from behind his screen.

"I knew you might."

Julian pointed at the largest one.

"Was there another way through the market?"

"There were several ways through the market."

"Did any have fewer peas?"

"Almost all of them."

Maya put a hand over her eyes.

The laughter brought Elena into the doorway.

"Did everybody survive?"

"Us or them?" Caleb asked.

"Whichever ones haven't helped clean up yet."

Chairs moved at once.

They had a system, though nobody had ever written it down. Character sheets went into folders. Loose pencils found the chipped mug Dani kept for them. Dice were checked beneath chairs before the children could discover them in the morning.

Julian found a blue die beside his shoe and held it up.

"Whose?"

"Mine," Nora said.

"Did it do well?"

"It has been given opportunities to improve."

He returned it respectfully.

In the living room, Marcus was folding the blanket that had served as the castle roof. Adrian gathered cups. Finn had

fallen asleep with his head on Elena's cushion, one hand still resting on the cardboard drawbridge.

Lucy slept against Rachel.

Maya sat beside them and brushed a curl from her daughter's forehead.

"Ready?" Rachel whispered.

"Give me the bags. I'll come back for her."

Rachel nodded, easing her arm into a more comfortable position beneath Lucy's head.

Tessa checked her phone while Marcus found their coats. A message from her father showed a photograph of an empty casserole dish.

Under it he had written: Unnecessary quantity. Very good.

She showed it to Nora.

"Glowing praise," Nora said.

"For him, practically a speech."

At the kitchen counter, Caleb folded June's drawing along its existing crease and slipped it into his game folder. Dani stood beside him, wrapping leftover bread.

"Still out next weekend?" Dani asked.

"Museum. Then we're making something that will probably involve glue in places glue shouldn't be."

"We're out too. Finn's school lantern walk."

"He'll like that."

Dani looked toward his sleeping son.

"He's been working on his lantern all week. I'm under strict instructions about carrying it level."

"Saturday after next?" Tessa asked from the hall.

"Looks possible," Nora said.

Maya came back for Lucy. "We'll check nearer the time. My mother wants help moving a cabinet, and her definition of cabinet has grown before."

"Send a picture," Dani said. "We can make it a group problem."

"Brannik can carry it," Julian offered.

"Brannik is fictional."

"And yet, very confident."

Maya lifted Lucy carefully. Her daughter stirred, tucked her face against Maya's shoulder, and settled again.

Rachel picked up the bags.

"Good game?" she asked.

Maya glanced at the table, where the last dice tray was being put away.

"Good game."

"Nobody spent all night arguing about a door?"

"We were remarkably decisive about the doors."

From the kitchen, Dani said, "There were consequences."

"There usually are," Rachel replied.

They left with a container of vegetables, the game folder, and fewer oranges than they had brought.

At the gate, Julian remembered his scarf and went back for it. Tessa offered Nora a lift. Caleb checked that he had June's bag before remembering it had gone home with June. Adrian stood beneath the porch light, patiently holding Julian's keys.

Goodbyes took several minutes, as they generally did.

Dani stayed at the door until everyone was in a car or walking toward one. Then he locked up and returned to the living room.

Elena had lifted Finn from the sofa. Dani took him carefully, feeling the familiar weight settle against his chest.

"He wanted to show you the hospital before bed," she whispered.

"I'll ask for the morning tour."

Finn stirred at the sound of his voice.

"Dragon's better," he mumbled.

"Good to hear."

"Don't break it."

"The dragon?"

But Finn was asleep again.

Dani carried him upstairs.

When he came back down, Elena was at the dining table, stacking the last two placemats.

"They sounded happy," she said.

"I nearly drowned them."

"Ah. A good evening."

He smiled and took the placemats to the sideboard.

His notebook lay there, shut. Between its pages waited a village that wasn't on a register, a road that needed inspecting, and a bridge Maya would certainly have opinions about.

It could wait.

Elena switched off the dining-room lamp, and Dani followed her into the kitchen to finish putting things away.

At Caleb's house, June's drawing went on the refrigerator.

At Maya's, Lucy woke just long enough to ask whether the dragon had gone home. Maya assured her it had excellent care.

Nora found Leila still awake over her notes and divided the bread she had brought back. Tessa sent her father a message promising a smaller casserole next time. Julian discovered his scarf had been in Adrian's coat pocket all along.

Before bed, Dani checked the group chat.

Tessa had posted a photograph of June's warning.

DON'T FALL IN.

Beneath it, Nora had written: Advice received slightly late.

Maya replied: Coat saved most of wizard.

Julian added: Rogue available for further rescues. References supplied.

Caleb sent one final message.

Good night, everyone.

Dani put the phone down.

They would come back to the table when they could.

There was a road waiting.

END OF BOOK ONE