

PHANTOM QUILL · PROOF, NOT PROMISES

The Unremembering of Verdigris Lane

*A fair-play fantasy mystery, written end-to-end in Phantom
Quill*

from a single 409-word prompt

409-word prompt → 22,531-word book (55×)

4 / 4 clues planted and paid off

0 continuity breaks across 22,000+ words

13 structural acts, no collapse

*The prompt that made it — then the book it made.
Everything after the next page, the machine wrote.*

THE PROMPT

The entire human input

Kept under 500 words.

(My input to the model. Kept under 500 words. A fantasy mystery deliberately engineered to stress long-form continuity: clues planted early that must pay off ~20k words later, and a narrator whose own recollection is the final clue.)

Write me a fantasy **mystery** — a real whodunit, fair-play, with planted clues that pay off at the end — set in **Verdigris**, a sinking canal-city where **memory is a commodity**: distilled into amber "recollect" vials, bought, sold, worn, and stolen. The rich wear borrowed memories like jewellery; the poor sell their childhoods to make rent. A licensed **Mnemonic Inquisitor** can step into a preserved memory and walk it like a room.

My investigator is **Wren Calloway** — mid-forties, precise, tired, the best reader of stolen memory in the city, and quietly going broke. Close third person, past tense, dry and observant; let her competence carry the dread.

The case: a memory-broker named **Halloran Voss** is found dead in his locked counting-house, and the one thing taken is not gold but **his own final hour** — excised clean from the corpse, a theft only another Inquisitor could perform. Wren is hired to recover it. As she traces the missing hour through pawned vials, canal-guild politics, a charm-forger's apprentice, and a flooded archive, the evidence keeps pointing at someone with her exact technique — and her own memories of the week Voss died begin to feel **secondhand**, like vials she doesn't remember buying.

The fair-play spine I want honoured (these must seed early and resolve late):

1. a **verdigris stain** that recurs where the killer has been;
2. a **child's nursery rhyme** Voss hummed, that Wren "remembers" but shouldn't;
3. a **debt-ledger** with a torn corner;
4. a **second key** to the counting-house no one will admit casting.

The turn: the missing hour, when finally recovered and walked, shows the murder from the killer's eyes — and the eyes are **Wren's**. She didn't kill Voss, but she **sold** the memory of doing something to him, and someone wore it. The solution must be *deducible* from clues laid honestly along the way, not a cheat.

Tone: atmospheric, melancholic, a little baroque but **controlled** — think fantasy noir. Vary sentence rhythm; trust plain description; reserve the ornate for real moments. Hold POV firmly on Wren. Keep continuity airtight: names, debts, who-knew-what-when, and the four clue-objects must stay consistent across the whole piece.

Length: a **long story / short novella, 20,000+ words**, built to test whether you can sustain a coherent fair-play mystery at that length. Don't rush the ending; earn the reveal.

The Unremembering of Verdigris Lane

The dawn over the Merchant's Quay was the color of a day-old bruise. Rain slicked the cobblestones to a greasy black mirror, and the air, thick with the damp-wool smell of the canals, did little to scrub the city clean. Wren Calloway felt the chill seep through her coat as she stepped across the threshold of Halloran Voss's counting-house. The Watch had propped the heavy oak door open, but the air inside was still and dead, holding the night's last breath.

Captain Isadora Grieve stood waiting by a towering ledger-stand, her uniform a stark slash of navy blue against the room's mahogany gloom. Lamplight threw her shadow long against shelves crammed with bonded scrolls and brass-bound account books. She didn't waste time on pleasantries. Her voice was flat.

"Bolted from the inside, top and bottom," Grieve said, gesturing with her chin towards the door's formidable locks. "His personal key was in his waistcoat pocket. The clerks raised the alarm at first bell. We had to take the door off its pins."

Wren's gaze swept the room. It was a place built to deny entry, a vault of promises and debts rendered in iron and wood. Dust motes turned in the shafts of weak light from the high, barred windows. Everything was in its place: the inkwells stoppered, the quills racked, the ledgers squared. Everything but the man sprawled behind the vast, claw-footed desk.

Halloran Voss had been a large man. Death had not diminished him. He lay on his back, one hand flung out as if reaching for a dropped coin. His eyes were open, fixed on the ornate plasterwork of the

ceiling. There was a neat, dark puncture in the starched white of his shirt, a single, economical wound. But that wasn't what had killed the air in the room. Wren could feel the other absence, a silence more profound than death. It was a hollow carved into the very atmosphere, a faint, static hum at the edge of hearing, like the echo of a plucked string.

"The final hour," Wren stated. It wasn't a question.

"Excised," Grieve confirmed. "Cleanly. Professionally. No residue to speak of."

Wren walked a slow circle around the body, her boots making no sound on the thick pile of the Aubusson rug. She kept her hands clasped behind her back. She did not touch. She did not kneel. Her craft was in the seeing, not the handling. The Watch constables saw a corpse. Wren saw a vessel whose most precious cargo had been plundered. To steal a memory was to steal a piece of a man's soul, to deny him even the testimony of his own end.

"Can you see anything in what's left?" Grieve asked. The question was rote, a box to be ticked on a report. "Any shimmer? Any bleed-through from the cut?"

"To walk the residue from a botched excision? That's a deep dive, Captain. The Toll would be significant." Wren's gaze drifted to a small, dark smudge on the rug near Voss's outstretched hand. "I'm not spending the name of my first dog or the scent of my mother's baking on a maybe. Not for the Watch's retainer."

Grieve grunted. She knew the terms. Every Inquisitor rationed their past. You didn't burn a year of your childhood to find a lost cat.

Wren let the silence settle. The violation was the thing. Not the blood, not the stillness of the man's heart. It was the robbery. Someone had looked Halloran Voss in the eye, killed him, and then, with the methodical skill of a surgeon, had reached into his cooling mind and

carved out the memory of their own face. They had unwritten their crime from the only ledger that mattered.

Her focus drew tight, collapsing from the enormity of the crime to that one small, incongruous detail. The smudge on the Aubusson. It was barely the size of her thumbnail, a faint discolouration against the deep indigo wool, easily mistaken for a fleck of dried mud or a spot of spilled ink. But it wasn't. It was the wrong colour, a tired, powdery green-bronze that seemed to absorb the lamplight rather than reflect it.

Calloway finally broke her stillness, sinking into a crouch. From a leather satchel at her belt, she produced a thin silver stylus and a folded square of clean, waxed paper. She never worked without them. The paper she placed beside the stain, a stark white canvas to judge its colour. With the tip of the stylus, she gently disturbed the fibres of the rug. A few minute particles of the substance lifted, dust-fine.

“What is it?” Grieve’s voice was low, impatient.

“Residue,” Calloway murmured, her eyes fixed on the tiny grains. “Verdigris alloy. Common in restoration work. Specifically for the filigree settings on antique recollect-charms.” She looked around the immaculate office, at the polished mahogany and gleaming brass. “You don’t find it in a place like this. Not unless someone brings it with them.”

She scraped the few grains onto the paper, folded it with a clinical precision, and tucked it into an inner pocket of her coat. Evidence. Tangible, real, and blessedly silent. It told no lies and paid no Toll.

Rising to her feet, she turned her back on the corpse and faced the Captain directly. The air between them seemed to thin, to sharpen.

“This was not some back-alley memory-thief, Captain. The excision is flawless. Too flawless.” Her voice was quiet, stripped of everything but fact. “There’s no tearing at the seams, no mnemonic bleed. To cut a

fresh hour that cleanly, from a mind still warm... it takes training. A steady hand. And the kind of nerve only practice can give.”

Grieve’s expression didn’t change, but something in the set of her jaw hardened. She understood the geometry of the implication. The list of practitioners in Verdigris with that level of skill was not long. It was a formal, Guild-certified roster. A short, cold list of names.

“An Inquisitor,” Grieve stated. The word hung in the dead air of the counting-house, an accusation looking for a home.

“Or someone who used to be,” Calloway corrected softly.

The Captain’s gaze held hers, direct and unblinking. In it, Calloway saw the shift. She was no longer just the consultant, the specialist tool brought in to solve a puzzle. She was a name on that list. A key that fit a lock. A suspect. Wren met the look squarely, her own expression a mask of professional neutrality. The city was sinking, and the water was rising around them both.

Section 2 — Elara Voss hires Wren: recover the stolen hour, name the killer, protect the succession.

The Guild of Mnemonic Inquiry kept its parlours on the third floor of a grey stone edifice that listed, by a degree perceptible to the sober eye, toward the slow-moving sludge of the Grand Canal. Mist clung to the leaded glass of the window, rendering the world outside a watercolour of blurred gondola lanterns and the skeletal rigging of trade ships. The room smelled of old velvet and the faint, acidic tang of the solutions used to stabilise fragile recollects.

The woman who sat opposite Wren Calloway introduced herself as Elara Voss. She did not look like the daughter of a man who had built an empire on borrowed time. Her mourning dress was of good wool, but its cut was severe, its black dye faded from years of wear, not new for the occasion. Her hands, resting on the polished surface of the table between them, were her most telling feature: knuckles slightly

calloused, nails cut short and clean, with a faint, almost invisible green line staining the cuticle of her right thumb. A restorer's hands.

"Captain Grieve informed me you were at the counting-house," Elara said. Her voice was low and carried a resonance that seemed at odds with her slender frame. It was a voice accustomed to precision, not pleasantries. "She also informed me of her official limitations."

Wren inclined her head, a gesture that conceded nothing. "The Watch finds bodies. They aren't equipped to chase ghosts."

A flicker of something—not quite approval, but a shared understanding—passed through Elara's cool grey eyes. "My father dealt in ghosts, Inquisitor. He bought them, sold them, leveraged them. It was his life's work to put a price on the past. I imagine his ledger of enemies is longer than the city's register of sanctioned sins."

"And you have no idea who might be at the top of that list?" Calloway asked. The air in the room was still, the mist outside muffling the city's hum.

"The list is the problem. It could be a dozen rivals he undercut. A client whose recollect he'd counterfeited—a practice he was not above. It could be a lender from the flooded districts calling in a debt he couldn't pay." She spoke of her father's trade with a flat, surgical contempt, as if describing the feeding habits of an unclean animal. There was grief in her posture, in the rigid set of her shoulders, but it was an old grief, worn smooth with time. Her father's death felt like a postscript to a story written long ago.

Calloway watched her, cataloguing the details. The lack of tears. The steady hands. The way she used the past tense for her father's business practices as easily as for the man himself.

"I don't want a list of possibilities, Inquisitor," Elara continued, her gaze sharpening. "I want the man. I want the hour he stole. I want to see the face of the one who killed him, and then stood over his body

and so meticulously excised the memory of the act.”

The word settled in the quiet room. *Excised*. It was the correct term, the professional’s term. Grieve had used it. Calloway had used it. It was not a word a layman, even the daughter of a memory-broker, would necessarily choose over ‘stolen’ or ‘erased’. The thought registered and was filed away, a minor dissonance in an otherwise coherent performance.

“Recovering a cleanly excised hour is difficult,” Calloway said, choosing her words with care. The notice from Brother Hollis, with its demand stamped in blood-red ink, felt like a physical weight in her pocket. The Undertow did not grant extensions. “The Toll for such a walk would be severe. You would be buying my past to recover your father’s.”

“I am aware of the Toll, Inquisitor.” Elara’s voice did not soften. If anything, it gained a harder edge, as if Wren had offered a tedious, well-known fact. “Everything of value has a cost. My father taught me that much. Name yours.”

The directness of it was bracing. There was no feigned sympathy, no polite tiptoeing around the harsh economics of the craft. Just a demand. Wren felt the stiff paper of the Undertow notice through the fabric of her coat, a silent pressure against her ribs. Brother Hollis did not deal in sympathy either.

“Two thousand sols,” Wren said. The figure landed in the quiet parlour with a clean, metallic weight. “One thousand now, as a retainer. The balance upon delivery of the memory.” It was a high price, enough to invite haggling from most merchants on the Quay. It was also the exact sum, plus interest, that would keep the Undertow from repossessing the last of her grandfather’s navigating charts and, more urgently, her rooms.

Elara Voss did not even blink. The cool grey of her eyes remained

fixed on Wren's face, assessing not the price, but the practitioner. "The sum is fair," she said, after a moment's pause that felt more like calculation than consideration. "But my terms are specific."

She leaned forward slightly, the faint scent of turpentine and linseed oil rising from her worn wool dress. "You will find the hour. You will extract it and stabilise it within a standard recollect vial. And you will bring that vial to me." She held up a single, slender finger, arresting Wren's expected nod. "Unwalked."

The word hung between them. Unwalked. To be handed a raw memory, a volatile and unexamined piece of a person's final moments, was to be handed a locked box with no key. The entire purpose of an Inquisitor was to walk the memory, to interpret its sensory data, to navigate its emotional currents and find the truth hidden within.

"You want the raw recollect?" Calloway kept her voice even, betraying none of the professional affront that pricked at her. "Without analysis? Without a report? That's unusual. You would be paying for the retrieval, not the inquiry."

"I am not paying for your opinion, Inquisitor. I am not paying for a truth filtered through whatever remains of your own past." The words were sharp, precise, and yet delivered without malice. It was a statement of fact. "I want what the killer took. Exactly as he took it. Nothing more."

Wren studied the woman's face. The grief was there, she decided, but it was a cold, hard thing, like frozen ground. This wasn't about sentiment. It was about possession. Elara Voss wanted the final piece of her father returned to the family ledger, a last asset to be squared away. It was the squeamishness of the wealthy, a desire to own the evidence without having to step in the blood. An unwalked memory was a clean, sterile object. A walked one was a shared trauma.

Two thousand sols. The number echoed in the space behind her eyes.

It was the price of Hollis's smile instead of his scowl. It was another month of peace.

"As you wish," Wren said, the words tasting of compromise and relief. "The memory, untainted. You'll have it."

Without another word, Elara reached down beside her chair and lifted a heavy leather satchel onto the table. The clasp opened with a dull click. She withdrew a purse of dark, oiled leather, its mouth drawn tight with a cord. It wasn't the clinking bag of a merchant; it was the solid, dense weight of a banker's satchel. She pushed it across the polished wood.

"One thousand," she stated.

Wren's hand closed over it. The coins inside were gold Imperials, not silver sols, their milled edges a silent testament to old, unshowy wealth. The weight of it was real, an anchor in the shifting tides of her debts. It was the first full breath she'd taken all day. She gave a single, formal nod. The contract was made. The hunt had begun.

Section 3 — Guild Hall: the excision narrows to a handful of master hands; Wren's name is on the list.

The purse was a solid, comforting weight in her pocket as she descended the main staircase, leaving Elara Voss to her cold vigil in the upstairs parlour. The Guild's registry was on the ground floor, a cramped, dusty chamber, rarely visited by the public, tucked behind the grander offices, where the real business of memory was ground down into ink and paper. The air here smelled of sealing wax and the slow decay of parchment, a dry, papery scent that clung to the back of the throat.

Master Fendrel, the Guild Registrar, was a creature of the archives, as pale and dry as the vellum he curated. He looked up from a towering ledger as Wren approached the counter, his spectacles perched on the very tip of his nose. A weak morning light struggled through the

grimy window behind him, illuminating the fine dust that coated every surface.

“Inquisitor Calloway,” he murmured, his voice a dry rustle. “It has been some time. A renewal?”

“An inquiry, Master Fendrel.” Wren placed her hands flat on the polished, ink-stained oak of the counter. “I require the active roster. Practitioners certified for Level Three Mnemonic Excision.”

Fendrel’s eyebrows, two thin, grey arches, lifted slightly. “Level Three? That is a specific and... invasive specialty. A formal request from the Watch?”

“A private contract,” Wren replied, offering no more. The gold in her pocket negated any need for further justification. In Verdigris, coin was its own authority.

The registrar gave a slow, deliberate blink. He was a keeper of secrets, and he understood their value. Without another word, he turned and, with a soft grunt of effort, heaved an enormous, iron-bound volume onto the counter. The thud echoed in the quiet room. The cover was worn smooth, its leather darkened with age, the title embossed in faded gold leaf: *Register of Certified Practitioners and Their Declared Specialties*.

He opened the book, the thick pages whispering as they turned. He ran a bony, ink-stained finger down a long column of names written in an elegant, looping script. “Level Three,” he muttered to himself, his finger tracing the lines. “The list grows shorter every year. Braddock is dead. Melisande retired to the southern vineyards, they say. Good for her. Always said the Toll was catching up to her eyes.”

His finger paused. “Ah, here’s a curious one. Relinquished. E. Voss. Odd. The family paid her training bond in full, years ago now. Halloran Voss himself. A shame, that. She had a delicate hand, the tutors’ notes say.” The name registered with a faint, irrelevant chime.

A client's name, a common one in this city of merchants. Wren's focus was elsewhere, on the living, on the handful of names still in practice. A practitioner who quit the craft was no more a threat than a retired soldier. The knife was racked, the skill dormant. Her mind passed over it, seeking the active threats, the hands still steady enough to hold the blade.

Fendrel's finger continued its slow journey down the page. "Let's see... active, licensed, and within the city walls... yes. Here we are." He turned the massive book around for her to view.

The list was brutally short. Six names.

The first five were men and women she knew, at least by reputation – some notorious, others merely skilled. Colleagues in the loosest sense of the word. Competitors, more accurately. Each one capable. Each one a potential killer.

And then there was the sixth name.

Calloway, Wren. Certified Levels One through Three. License current.

Seeing it there, in the registrar's immaculate script, was different from hearing Grieve's unspoken accusation. It was a cold, clerical fact. She was on the list. In the eyes of the Guild, in the eyes of the Watch, she was one of six people in this sinking city with the certified skill to stand over a dying man and carve a hole in his memory without leaving a scar. A key that fit the lock. She felt the invisible net tighten, its fibres woven from her own qualifications, her own hard-won craft.

Her gaze remained on the page, her expression unreadable. The weight in her pocket suddenly felt less like a retainer and more like the first piece of evidence against her. She reached into her coat for her casebook and a fresh-sharpened pencil, the graphite tip poised to copy the names of the five suspects who were not her.

Her pencil scratched across the page, a small, precise sound in the dusty silence. The names were copied. Five of them. She closed the

casebook, the sound a soft finality.

“Much appreciated, Master Fendrel.”

The registrar merely nodded, already turning back to his ledgers, his world contracting once more to columns of ink and brittle paper. Wren left the cramped office and moved toward the Guild’s common parlour, a chamber often filled with the quiet murmur of conversation, where practitioners waited for commissions or recovered from the disorienting chill of a deep walk. It was a place of quiet courtesies and sharp-eyed assessments.

The parlour was warmer than the rest of the building, a low fire crackling cheerfully in a wide stone hearth. The air held the familiar scent of spiced tea and the sharper, metallic tang of mnemonic stabiliser. Three of the names from her new list were present.

Joric was slumped in a high-backed chair near the fire, his face the colour of old parchment. He was nursing a cup of something that steamed, and his hands, when he lifted the cup, trembled with a fine, persistent tremor. The Toll, paid in full. He was a cautionary tale in a threadbare coat, a man who had sold too many of his own years to walk through the memories of others. He met Wren’s gaze with weary, bloodshot eyes and gave a slight dip of his head. He was no threat. A Level Three excision required a surgeon’s steadiness, not the palsied grip of a man whose own past was coming apart at the seams.

At a table near the window sat Silas Vance, polishing a set of silver-inlaid retrieval tools with a chamois cloth. Vance was younger, with a confidence that bordered on arrogance. He worked often, took risks, and was rumoured to have a silent partner who covered his more... speculative ventures. He didn’t look up as she entered, but she saw the tension in his shoulders, the deliberate, almost too-perfect calm of his movements. He was a predator at rest.

“Heard the news from the Quay?” The question came from Lyra, a

woman with iron-grey hair braided into a severe coronet. She sat opposite Vance, her own work laid out before her: a set of antique recollect-charms she was restoring. A small pot of verdigris paste sat open at her elbow. The sight of it sent a low hum of connection through Wren.

Vance paused his polishing. “What news?” he asked, his tone bored, as if the affairs of the city were a tiresome distraction.

“Halloran. The Broker. Found dead in his counting-house this morning,” Lyra said, her voice low. “Watch is calling it a robbery.”

Joric made a small, harsh sound from his chair by the fire. “He had it coming. The man bought childhoods for pennies and sold them for fortunes. The gods of the deep have a long memory.”

“They say his last hour was taken,” Lyra added, her sharp eyes flicking from Vance to Wren, gauging reactions. “Cut clean. Professional work.”

There it was. The implicit question that now hung over all of them. *Was it one of us?*

Silas Vance set down his polishing cloth. He smiled, a thin, humourless expression. “Then it wasn’t a robbery. It was a repossession. Someone collecting on a debt he couldn’t document.” He picked up a delicate silver probe, holding it to the weak light, admiring its flawless point. “There’s a lot of that going around. Desperate men taking desperate contracts.” His gaze slid toward Joric, a casual cruelty in the glance. Joric just sank deeper into his chair.

Wren watched Vance’s hands. Steady as stone. Not a tremor. He could have done it. He had the nerve, and his open disdain for the victim was a plausible enough motive. But it felt too loud, too obvious.

“A clean cut is a rarity,” Wren said, her voice entering the conversation for the first time, quiet and level. “Most of the talent has left the trade. Or been pushed out.”

Lyra sighed, dabbing a speck of verdigris paste onto a charm's filigree setting. "It's true. The good hands are gone. Melisande's gone south. Braddock's in the ground." She shook her head. "Remember Halloran's own girl? What was her name... Elara. Trained right here. Had a real gift for it, they said. Quit before she even took her vows. Smartest one of the lot of them, probably." The registrar's words, echoed. A name, mentioned and dismissed in the same breath. A ghost in the Guild's ledgers. Wren's mind filed it, a piece without a place.

"It takes more than a gift," Vance murmured, his focus still on his tools. "It takes a certain... pragmatism. A willingness to pay the price."

His hand was immaculate, not a speck of dust or ink to mar its skin. But Lyra's hands, Wren noted, were stained. The same powdery green residue she had scraped from the victim's rug was caked under her nails, ground into the lines of her knuckles. She was a restorer. Of course they were stained. It was an alibi and an accusation in one.

One man too tired. One man too clean. One woman with the killer's trace element as a tool of her trade. A fifth man, Kael, she knew was working a long contract up the coast and hadn't been seen in a month. That left three names on the ledger worth a second look. Vance, Lyra, and the one who wasn't here: a quiet, unassuming practitioner named Maris.

And herself. Always, herself.

The trail from the Guild led down, always down, into the flooded districts where the city's foundations surrendered to the slow, green water. Here, the grand stone facades gave way to leaning tenements of salt-bleached timber, connected by a web of rickety walkways and slick, moss-furred bridges. The air was thick with the scent of brine and wet rot, and the cloying, pervasive sweetness of decay. Wren moved through it with the economy of long practice, her boots finding sure purchase on planks that would give under a heavier or less certain step.

Nix's shop was a cramped, cluttered space suspended over a sluggish canal, its single room crammed to the rafters with the detritus of forgotten lives, each item whispering its own silent story. Brass astrolabes, tarnished silver locket, stacks of water-warped books—every object seemed to hold a film of dampness, a patina of neglect. The man himself sat behind a counter made from a ship's hatch, his face lost in the gloom cast by a single, sputtering tallow lamp. He was polishing a sextant with a rag, his movements small and precise. He didn't look up as the bell over the door gave a dull, rust-choked jingle.

"The tide's high today," Nix said, his voice a low rasp. "Brings in all sorts."

Wren approached the counter, laying a small, folded paper upon its scarred surface. It was the pawn ticket she'd found tucked into the back of Voss's desk drawer, hidden beneath a false bottom—a single, overlooked detail in an otherwise sterile room. "I'm looking for the item associated with this."

Nix finally stopped his polishing. He didn't look at her face. His gaze went directly to her hands, flat on the counter, then to the ticket. He was a creature of the trade, and its particulars. He remembered the clasp of a purse, the cut of a glove, the tremor in a finger signing away a keepsake. Faces were unreliable variables. Hands and coin told the truth.

He picked up the ticket, his own fingers dry and scaly, like a lizard's. He squinted at the scrawled number. "Ah. Yes. An unusual piece. Came in three nights ago."

He slid off his stool and disappeared into the shadowed labyrinth of his stock. Wren could hear him muttering, the scrape of a wooden crate being moved. He returned a moment later holding a small, lead-stoppered vial. It wasn't the clean, amber-coloured fluid of a Guild-certified recollect. This was murky, the liquid within a cloudy,

unsettling grey, with a dark thread of something that looked like clotted blood suspended in its centre. A duplicate. A cheap, unstable copy, prone to corruption.

“A rushed job,” Nix rasped, placing it carefully on the counter as if it might bite. “The seller was in a hurry. Paid to have it copied off-site, then brought the duplicate here. Didn’t want to hold it.”

“The seller,” Wren said, her voice quiet. “What do you remember?”

Nix’s gaze flickered to her own hands again, as if comparing. “Nothing of the face. Hooded coat, made of good, heavy wool. Kept to the shadows. But the hands...” He paused, a flicker of true memory in his clouded eyes. “Gloved. Fine leather. But the cuff of the coat sleeve was pushed back on the right wrist when she passed the vial over. Saw a smudge on the skin, just at the edge of the glove. Greenish. Like old bronze.” He tapped the counter with a long fingernail. “The coin was good, though. Old Imperials. Heavy.”

Verdigris. Gold Imperials. The pieces clicked into place with a cold, clean sound. Wren pushed a stack of silver sols across the counter, more than the ticket required. “I’ll take it.”

Nix swept the coins into a drawer without counting them. He knew the weight. The deal was done.

Wren took the corrupted vial, the glass cool and slightly greasy to the touch. She didn’t have the luxury of a Guild parlour for this walk. She needed a quiet corner, a moment of stillness. Nix gestured with his chin toward a rickety stool in the back, half-hidden behind a stack of sea-charts. An offer of professional courtesy.

She sat, her back to the cluttered shop. From an inside pocket, she took a small, waxed-paper packet of dried blackcurrants, a habit from her leaner days. A sharp, familiar sweetness, a small ritual to ground her before a walk. She placed one on her tongue, the skin of the fruit tough against her teeth. She bit down.

And tasted nothing. Not a dullness. Not a faintness. A perfect, hollow void where a flavour should have been. Her mind knew the word *blackcurrant*. It held the memory of the taste, the sharp, dark burst of it. But the sensory connection, the wire from tongue to brain, had been severed. It was like reading a description of colour in a world of absolute grey. The knowledge was there; the experience was gone.

The Toll. Paid in advance, it seemed, for a walk she hadn't even taken. She hadn't lost a name, or a face from a photograph this time. Just a small sliver of the world's texture. A terrifying erasure. Her throat tightened. She swallowed the flavourless pulp and tucked the packet away.

Her hand trembled as she reached for the vial. She needed to focus, to anchor herself. She closed her eyes, breathing in the shop's damp, musty air, seeking the calm centre to step into another's mind. As she did, a tune surfaced from the quieted depths of her own memory. A child's rhyme, simple and insistent.

One for the lock, two for the key...

The words were there, clear as a bell, but they had no source. It wasn't a song from her childhood. It felt like a memory she had woken up with, fully formed and without a past, an echo in an empty room.

Three for the door that should not be...

She pushed the unsettling familiarity away. It was a distraction. The vial was cool in her palm. The murky fluid within seemed to coil around its dark, clotted heart. She held it up to the weak light from the shop's single window, preparing her consciousness to pierce its skin.

Her focus slipped through the greasy film on the glass, piercing the membrane of the stolen moment. There was no clean transition, no gentle easing. This was a brutal plunge, a fall into cold, murky water. The world resolved not as a coherent scene but as a collage of fractured impressions, the shoddy work of a back-alley copier.

Sound came first, distorted and looping. The scratch of a quill on heavy paper, a sound that repeated every three seconds, unnaturally sharp. The low, wet cough of a man alone. And underneath it, a hum. A low, tuneless vibration that seemed to emanate from the very fabric of the memory. He was at his desk. Wren could feel the press of the mahogany edge against his ribs, see the glint of lamplight on a silver letter-opener through his eyes. The vision's edges smeared, details bleeding into one another like ink on damp parchment. A stack of ledgers to his left seemed to breathe, their leather covers expanding and contracting in a slow, nauseating rhythm.

This was the poison of a duplicate. It captured facts but butchered truth. Emotional resonance was gone, replaced by a jittery, false static. She tried to turn his head, to look toward the door, but the memory fought her. It was a shallow recording, a skin-deep impression with no volition of its own. All she could do was ride the corrupted loop.

Quill scratch. Cough. The hum.

Then the tune sharpened. The low vibration coalesced into a melody, hummed under the man's breath. It was the same simple, rising and falling air that had surfaced in her own mind moments before. The child's rhyme. He hummed it as he worked, a mindless habit, a tune to fill the silence of the locked room.

One for the lock, two for the key...

Wren felt a cold shock. She knew the notes, the words that went with them, words this fragment of a man was not even thinking. The tune was a key turning in a lock deep inside her, opening a door to a room she had never known. It was her memory, somehow, nested inside his. The dissonance was sickening, a violation of her craft. You walked another's past; you did not find your own waiting there.

Three for the door that should not be...

The memory degraded. A dark spot, the clotted thread from the vial,

bloomed in Voss's vision, eating the ledger's details. The quill sound warped, slowing until it sounded like stone grinding on stone. The humming stopped. A new sound bled through—the soft tread of a boot on the Aubusson rug, a sound the broker had not registered. It was an artifact of the recording, a detail captured by the copier but not the subject. Someone else was in the room. The memory shuttered, the image tearing into strips of light and shadow, then snapped.

Wren gasped, pulling back with a wrenching effort. The pawnshop air flooded her lungs, thick with dust and tidal damp. It was blessedly real. The weak light from the window felt like a balm on her eyes. Her heart hammered against her ribs. The walk had lasted perhaps thirty seconds of real time, but she felt as if she'd been drowning for an hour.

Her hand, slick with a cold sweat, went instinctively to her pocket for the packet of blackcurrants. A grounding ritual, an anchor after the disorienting chaos of a corrupted walk. Her fingers fumbled with the waxed paper. She placed one of the small, dried fruits on her tongue, her jaw anticipating the sharp, wine-dark burst of flavour.

She bit down.

And the void met her again. A hollow void. The texture was there—the leathery skin, the soft pulp, the tiny seeds—but the taste, the very essence of the thing, was gone. Not forgotten. Erased. The memory of the flavour was sharp and clear, a cruel ghost mocking her deadened senses. The loss, discovered in shock just moments ago, was now confirmed by this deliberate, desperate test. It was real. A piece of her world, small but whole, had been cut away forever. A wave of something cold and desolate washed through her, a grief too strange to name.

Section 5 — Grieve grants access to Voss's official records.

She re-entered the counting-house an hour later, the taste of nothing still a cold stone in her gut. The murky vial from Nix's shop was a

leaden weight in her pocket, a secret she would not share. Two Watch constables were measuring floorboards with a knotted rope, their movements heavy and pointless. The air was the same, dead and still, but now held a new charge for Wren: the faint, phantom echo of a nursery rhyme.

Grieve was at the main ledger-stand, her patience worn thin. She looked up as Wren approached, her expression grim. “Find anything in the dregs out there?”

“A rumour,” Wren said, her voice betraying none of the chaos of the last hour. “That Voss was over-leveraged. That his official books were a performance.” It was a truth built from a lie, a plausible path to her conclusion.

The captain grunted. “His ledgers are immaculate. Every sol accounted for, every transaction cross-referenced. If he was hiding debt, he didn’t hide it here.”

“Then it wouldn’t be in the official accounts.” Wren’s gaze moved past the towering, brass-bound volumes to a smaller, more private-looking cabinet near the hearth. It was made of dark, unpolished river-wood, its lock simple iron, not gleaming brass. A place for household accounts, or personal correspondence. A place for secrets. “He wouldn’t keep a record of his sins on the front page.”

Together they moved to the cabinet. It wasn’t locked. Grieve opened the double doors to reveal shelves of smaller, plainly bound books, a library of the broker’s private finances. Wren ran a gloved finger along their spines, reading the faded ink labels. *Household Expenses*. *Shipping Tariffs*. *Guild Tithes*. Deeper in, at the back of a shelf, was a ledger bound not in leather but in cheap, pressed board, the kind used for temporary records. There was no label on its spine.

Wren drew it out. It was lighter than the others, and felt newer. The air it displaced smelled of fresh ink and paper, not the dry dust of ages.

She placed it on the surface of Voss's desk, opening it to the first page.

The script inside was Voss's familiar, cramped hand, but the entries were cryptic. No names of clients, only initials. No sums, only figures followed by strange sigils. And against each entry, a date of repayment stamped in red ink. Most were marked paid. But as she turned the pages, the red stamps grew fewer. The final two pages were a sea of black ink, a chronicle of spiralling debt. The initials changed, coalescing into a single, repeating mark: a circle with a vertical line drawn through its lower half, the sign of the Undertow.

But it was the top of the final page that drew the eye. A section of the paper, a perfect rectangle about two inches wide and an inch deep, had been excised from the top right-hand corner. It wasn't a tear. Wren leaned closer, her eyes tracing the edge. It had been cut, sliced cleanly with a razor-sharp blade. The paper showed no stress, no fraying. A surgical removal.

"Someone cleaned the books before they left," Grieve said, her voice a low growl. She leaned over Wren's shoulder, her shadow falling across the page. "Took the one entry that mattered most."

"And they did it recently," Wren murmured, pointing with the tip of her pencil to the faintest indentation on the page beneath. The pressure of Voss's quill had left a ghost of the writing from the removed corner. It was illegible, a mere whisper of a line, but it was there. "The paper hasn't had time to settle. This was cut within the last day."

Grieve straightened up, crossing her arms. Her gaze wasn't on the ledger anymore. It was on Wren. The professional respect had cooled, replaced by the flat, neutral stare of a law officer assessing a variable. "A man is killed. His memory is cut out. His ledger is cut up. Always the same steady hand. Always the same precision."

Wren did not look up. She took out her own casebook—a slim, sturdy

volume bound in dark grey leather—and opened it to a fresh page. The book was her anchor, her external memory, the one place the Toll could not reach. With a sharpened pencil, she began to write, her script small and exact.

Case 047: Halloran Voss. Discovered 14th of Sallow-month, first bell.

She paused. Sallow-month. Was that right? She felt a flicker of uncertainty, a brief, disorienting fog. The fourteenth. No, that was yesterday. She glanced at the Guild-hall clock visible through the high window. It was well past midday. She carefully drew a neat line through ‘14th’ and wrote ‘15th’ beside it. A simple mistake. The kind anyone might make. But her hand felt suddenly cold.

She continued her entry, forcing the thought away, detailing the discovery of the private ledger, its designation, the nature of the excised corner. She noted the remaining entries, the sigil for the Undertow. Her pencil scratched methodically across the paper, a small, dry sound in the silent, heavy air of the counting-house. It was the only sound she could trust.

The pencil stopped scratching. Wren closed the casebook and placed it back in her coat, the small act a deliberate boundary between the evidence and the speculation that now filled the air. She met Grieve’s hard stare without flinching.

“I am also on that list, Captain,” Wren stated, her voice even. “A fact of which we are both aware. I am the consultant you hired. If that has changed, my retainer is forfeit and this inquiry is over.”

Grieve held the look for a moment longer, a silent weighing of possibilities. Then she gave a short, sharp nod, a concession to procedure, if not to trust. “The inquiry stands. Find me the hand that held the knife, Calloway. I don’t care whose name is on the Guild roster when you do.” The implication was clear: bring me a better suspect than yourself.

Wren inclined her head. The chill between them was a new and solid thing. She turned and walked out of the broker's office, leaving the captain to her measurements and her suspicions, the ghost of a child's song a faint, unnerving echo.

The hour was past midnight when she finally sat at the small, scarred desk in her own rooms. The city outside was quiet, the usual cacophony of bells and cries muted by a thick river-fog that pressed against her windowpanes like a damp cloth. A single oil lamp cast a warm, isolated circle of light, pushing back the encroaching shadows. The purse of gold Imperials sat beside the lamp, a squat, heavy promise of solvency. In the centre of the light lay the day's acquisitions: the folded paper with its green-bronze dust, the murky vial from Nix's, and her casebook, open to the page she had started in the dead man's study.

She worked slowly, methodically, transcribing her field notes into the permanent record. The casebook's pages were thick, rag-paper stock, designed to outlast the memories of the woman who filled them. Her pen, a fine-nibbed pen of polished steel, moved with a steady, practiced rhythm. She detailed the state of the corpse, the flawless excision, the encounter with Elara Voss. She described the registrar's list, copying the five names again, a neat column of potential guilt. Vance. Lyra. Joric. Maris. Kael. She added a note beside Lyra's name: *Restorer. Works with verdigris alloy.* And beside Elara's dismissed registry entry: *Training relinquished. Paid by H. Voss.*

Finally, she came to the duplicate. She uncorked the vial and let a single, grey drop fall onto a glass slide, examining it under a loupe. It was poorly stabilised, already showing signs of mnemonic decay—the reason for the corrupted walk. She recorded its provenance: a pawn ticket found in the victim's desk. Her pen hovered over the page. She had sold a memory three nights ago. A duplicate of the security audit she'd performed for Halloran Voss weeks earlier, the job itself lawfully

excised from her mind as per the contract. She had sold it to Nix to pay the rent. That was the memory Elara Voss had bought. That was the memory the killer had worn like a glove.

She began to write the entry. *Duplicate memory vial, procured from the fence Nix. Ticket dated the 12th of Sallow-month.*

The date came to her with absolute certainty. The twelfth. A cold, rainy evening. She remembered the specific way the water dripped from the shop's awning, the feel of the worn sols in her pocket before she made the sale.

Then her eyes fell on the pawn ticket itself, lying beside her inkwell. She picked it up. Nix's spidery script was smudged, but the date, stamped with his official press, was clear in the lamplight.

11th of Sallow-month.

Wren stared at the ink. The eleventh. Not the twelfth. Her mind insisted, offering the sound of the rain, the smell of wet cobblestones. A perfect, clear memory. A perfect, clear lie.

A cold dread, far deeper than the simple fear of being caught, settled in her stomach. The Toll had always been a thing of barter—a walk for a piece of the past. A name for a name, a face for a face. It was clean, in its own brutal way. This was different. This was not a removal. This was a corruption. A subtle warping of the fabric of her immediate past, so seamless she would never have noticed without the objective, undeniable proof of the stamped ink.

Her hand was steady as she dipped her pen again. She drew a single, precise line through the number 12 in her casebook. Beside it, she wrote 11. The ink was black and final. The book was truth, an anchor against the unnavigable sea her mind had become.

She pushed back from the desk, the chill of the room seeping into her bones. Sleep felt like a distant country she had no visa for. She lay down on her narrow cot, pulling a rough wool blanket up to her chin,

but her eyes remained open, staring into the darkness. The city was sinking, she thought, and the water was not only rising from below. It was seeping in from within.

Section 6 — Brother Hollis and the memory-lenders: real menace, clean alibi — Voss alive serviced the debt; dead, it defaults.

The headquarters of the Undertow was less a building than a wound in the city's flank, where the Grand Canal had breached an ancient crypt. Merchants had built walkways over the drowned rooms. To reach it was to descend into the city's guts, following dripping stone stairwells that smelled of wet rock and older, colder things. The air grew heavy with the fungal breath of standing water. There was no door to Brother Hollis's domain, only a final, arching bridge of slime-slicked planks leading into a cavernous, vaulted chamber. The canal formed a black, silent pool within.

Lanterns hung from rusted chains, their light casting long reflections on the water. The archive was stone shelves carved into the crypt walls, rising from the dark water. Hundreds of ledgers, each sealed in waxed canvas, rested there. This was the Undertow's library of debt, its assets literally and figuratively underwater.

A man sat at a heavy stone table on a raised dais, the sole island of dry land in the chamber. He was hunched over an account book, his pen scratching with a sound that was swallowed by the immense, damp silence. This was Brother Hollis. He was not large, nor physically imposing, but he had the stillness of a patient predator—a heron waiting by the water's edge. He did not look up as Wren's boots sounded on the plank bridge.

"Inquisitor Calloway," he said, his voice quiet but carrying perfectly across the water. It was a voice that had adapted to the acoustics of the space, a flat, resonant tone that cut through the oppressive quiet. "Your account is current. This is not a social visit."

“It’s about another of your clients,” Wren said, stopping at the edge of the stone dais. “Halloran Voss.”

Hollis finally lifted his head. His face was pale, his eyes the colour of the deep, undisturbed water that filled the room. There was no flicker of surprise, only a profound weariness. He set down his pen with deliberate care.

“The broker is no longer my client. He is my loss. A considerable one.” He gestured to an empty stool opposite him. “Sit. Perhaps you can explain to me the economics of killing a man who owes you a fortune.”

Wren took the seat. The stone was cold and damp through her coat. “You were his largest creditor. The Watch considers that a motive.”

A small, humourless smile touched Hollis’s thin lips. “The Watch thinks in terms of blood. I think in terms of ink. Voss owed the Undertow a sum that would buy this entire district. That debt was secured against his official assets, his bonded inventory of recollects. His death freezes those assets. His daughter, as the sole heir, inherits the debt, but she also inherits the right to contest it in the courts for years.”

He leaned forward, the lantern light carving deep shadows into his face. “But it gets worse. I sent my assessors to his warehouses this morning. The inventory he leveraged? The high-value recollects from founding families, the war-hero memories? At least half are forgeries. Duplicates. Unstable, worthless grey-market trash. He built a palace of promises on a foundation of sand, and someone kicked it over.”

His voice dropped, losing its cold precision for a flicker of genuine, bitter anger. “To murder him was to tear up the contract. It converts a tangible, if difficult, asset into an endless legal battle over a pile of counterfeit goods. Why would I burn my own house down, Inquisitor? He was worth infinitely more to me alive, sweating, and paying his interest.”

The logic was as cold and solid as the stone table. It wasn't an alibi; it was a balance sheet. The red herring, menacing and plausible, evaporated under the harsh light of financial reality. Wren felt the list of suspects shrink, the circle tighten.

"He was selling the forgeries?" she asked.

"Selling them? He was using them as collateral," Hollis corrected, his disgust palpable. "Borrowing from me against their inflated value to pay off smaller debts elsewhere, to maintain the illusion of liquidity. A classic spiral. The man was a kite dancing in a hurricane, and the string just broke."

The logic was unassailable. It left no room for passion or revenge, only the cold arithmetic of loss. Wren rose from the stone stool, her list of suspects now edited. Hollis was not a killer; he was a banker whose investment had failed. He watched her go with those same flat, watery eyes, already turning back to his ledgers, to the cold comfort of numbers that, unlike men, could be relied upon.

She ascended back into the hazy, water-logged city, the air growing warmer and thicker. The trail was no longer branching. It had narrowed to a single, deep-worn path, leading back to the cluttered, overhanging shop where she had walked a dead man's final, corrupted moments. It led back to the duplicate.

The rust-choked bell above Nix's door announced her return with a resentful clank. The pawnbroker was where she had left him, hunched over his counter, though the sextant had been replaced by a tarnished silver music box he was attempting to coax back to life. He did not look up, but the tiny, meticulous movements of his hands ceased.

"The tide recedes, and still the flotsam returns," he rasped, his voice thick with annoyance.

Wren laid a gold Imperial on the scarred wood of the counter. It gleamed in the sputtering lamplight, a bright spot in the gloomy room.

“I have more questions about the vial I purchased.”

Nix’s eyes flickered to the coin, then away. “The goods are sold as seen. No refunds. No guarantees.”

“I’m not interested in a refund,” Wren said, her voice low and even. “I’m interested in the seller. You told me they were in a hurry. That they had the duplicate made elsewhere. Tell me more.”

The pawnbroker’s gaze settled on the coin. He nudged it with a grimy fingernail, turning it over, testing its weight and worth. The silence stretched, filled only by the slow, constant drip of water from the eaves outside. “It was an odd transaction,” he finally conceded, his voice losing some of its edge. He swept the Imperial into a drawer. “Most sellers of illicit recollects want coin, quickly and quietly. This one... this one wanted a container.”

Wren waited, motionless.

“They didn’t sell the vial to me,” Nix elaborated, leaning forward slightly. The secrets of his trade loosened his tongue. “They pawned something else. A worthless piece of scrap iron. All they wanted was the ticket. Paid the fee, took the ticket, and left. I saw them outside, under the walkway. They wrapped the vial in the ticket, tight, and passed it to a buyer who was waiting in the shadows.”

A hand-off. Not a sale. A delivery, disguised as a pawn. It was clever. It created a layer of separation, a transaction that was not what it seemed.

“The seller,” Wren pressed. “You saw their hands.”

“I saw a glove,” Nix corrected impatiently. “Fine leather. But the buyer... the one who took the package... when their hand came out of the shadows, I saw the wrist. The sleeve of their coat was dark wool, very fine. And at the cuff, I saw it again. That green smudge. Verdigris.”

Elara. The buyer, not the seller. Elara had been waiting in the shadows for the delivery. The realisation landed with a cold, heavy finality. But that meant the seller...

Wren kept her face a mask. "The ticket. From the piece of scrap iron. Do you still have your copy?"

Nix grunted, annoyed by the triviality of the request. He shuffled through a wooden box filled with flimsy slips of paper, his dry fingers rustling like dead leaves. After a moment, he pulled one out. It was creased and grey with grime. "This is it. They never came back for their iron. Imagine that."

He tossed it onto the counter. It was a flimsy, forgettable thing, a piece of the city's endless, grubby paperwork. Wren picked it up. It had been folded in three, the creases worn deep. As she carefully unfolded it, something small and stiff slipped from within its folds and fluttered onto the dark wood of the counter.

It was the missing corner of the ledger page.

The world seemed to shrink to the dimensions of that small rectangle of paper. It was undeniably the same stock, the same faint blue ruling. She could see the ghostly impression of Halloran Voss's heavy-handed script pressed into its surface. It lay there between them, a piece of a murder scene in a flooded-district pawnshop, connecting a back-alley memory deal to a locked-room killing with irrefutable power. The killer, in their haste to secure the wrapping, had been careless. Or the seller had.

Wren's blood ran cold. She was the seller. She remembered pawning an old nail she'd found on the street, getting the ticket, wrapping the duplicated memory of her security audit. She remembered the hurried transaction, the need for rent money pressing in on her. But she did not remember this piece of paper. It was a detail that had been scoured from her mind, either by the Toll or by the lawful excision that had

followed the job.

She looked at Nix. His face was a mask of disinterest. To him, it was just a scrap of paper. He had no idea what he had just handed her.

Her hand was steady as she reached into her coat, not for coin, but for her casebook and pencil. She did not trust the memory of this moment to survive the next hour, the next walk, the next payment of the Toll. The truth had to be pinned down, inked to the page before it could dissolve. She turned her back to the counter, creating a small private space in the cluttered shop.

She opened the book. The pencil felt solid in her fingers. She wrote, her script small and tight, anchoring the revelation in neat, black lines.

Procured pawn ticket from Nix, used as wrapping for duplicate vial sale, date 11th Sallow-month. Seller (W. Calloway) sold to buyer (presumed E. Voss, per Nix's testimony re: verdigris stain). Folded within ticket was the missing corner from H. Voss's private ledger.

She described the corner itself: *rag-paper stock, top right, cut cleanly with a blade*. She did not write down the implications. She did not write down the cold certainty that she had personally delivered the instrument of a man's death, and that a piece of the crime scene had been in her possession for days without her knowledge. The book was for facts only. The facts were a wall. On the other side of it, a chasm was opening up, and she could feel her past slipping into it.

Section 7 — Wren researches seam-detection in the drowned stacks: how to spot where a worn memory changes hands.

She did not return to her rooms. To be surrounded by her familiar things, her history, would be a mockery when the ground of that history had begun to crumble. The ledger corner, tucked into a separate fold of waxed paper, was a cold spot against her ribs, physical proof of the hole in her past. The path she took was not one of her usual, rationed walks; it was a descent, a pilgrimage to the only place in

Verdigris whose memory was longer and more merciless than her own.

The Undertow's archive was not a place one visited without purpose. Its silence was not peaceful; it was the profound quiet of the deep, a pressure on the ears. She bypassed Hollis's dais, giving the hunched figure a wide berth, and moved toward the submerged stacks. A different keeper, an old man with a face as wrinkled as a tide-chart, sat on a low stool at the head of a narrow causeway. He did not speak, only gestured with a skeletal hand toward a slate tablet hanging from a hook. The rules were written in chalk, stark and unadorned: *No Flame. No Ink. All Debts Paid in Silver or Silence.*

Wren placed a few silver sols on a small stone plate. The old man swept them into a pouch without looking at them and returned his attention to the black water, his duty done. She walked the stone causeway, the only sound the soft slap of her boots on the damp flags. The air was cellar-cold, freighted with the mineral scent of wet rock and the faint, sour odour of decomposing paper held barely at bay by wax and salt. The lanterns cast a weak, shifting light that did not penetrate the darkness below the water's surface, where the lower shelves of the archive were lost to the canal's waters.

Her purpose was specific, and terrifying in its novelty. For her entire career, her craft had been a lens turned outward, a tool to parse the histories of others. Now, she was forced to turn it upon herself. The question was not who killed the broker, not anymore. The question was, what had been done to her? The missing detail of the ledger corner was not a simple blank, not the familiar fog of the Toll. That was a subtraction. This felt like a mend, a seam stitched so perfectly into the fabric of her recall that she had never felt the scar.

She sought the section on illicit craft, the treatises on the forging of recollects and the mechanics of mnemonic counterfeiting. The archive's cataloguing was esoteric, arranged not by subject but by a

chronology of transgressions. She found the shelf she needed under a carving of a serpent eating its own tail, a section marked *Omissions & Intrusions*. Here were the forbidden texts, the Guild's suppressed knowledge, the dark arts of her own trade.

The books were bound in canvas that had gone stiff with age and damp, their titles stamped in faded black. *On the Degradation of Copied Recalls. The Malleability of Fresh Trauma. A Forger's Primer*. She ran her gloved fingers along the spines, the rough texture a grounding touch against the rising panic in her chest. Her search was clinical, her movements precise. She would not allow the fear to have a name, would not write it in her casebook. But it was there, a cold knot below her ribs: the thought that someone had not only used her memory as a weapon, but had edited the record of the transaction in her own mind, tailoring the evidence of her complicity. To be framed was one thing. To be made an unwitting accomplice, your own mind the scene of the first, silent crime—that was a violation of a different order.

Her fingers stopped on a slim, heavy volume tucked between two larger tomes. It had no title on its spine, only a single, stamped sigil: a key with a fractured bit. She knew the symbol. It was the mark for works on counter-excision, the art of detecting and repairing the work of other Inquisitors. It was a study of seams, of the subtle tells left behind when one mind trespassed upon another. With a slow, deliberate breath that did nothing to calm her racing heart, she drew the book from its place. The waxed canvas was cold and unyielding in her hands. She carried it to one of the small, dry alcoves carved into the wall, a reader's cell furnished with nothing more than a stone bench and a single, unwavering lantern. She sat, placing the book on her lap, the weight of it a final, terrible burden.

She opened the book. The pages were not vellum but a strange, water-resistant parchment made from processed kelp, cool and slightly rubbery to the touch. The text was not script but a series of precise,

angular runes, the forbidden cant of the Guild's deepest theoreticians. Wren could read it as easily as she could the merchants' common tongue, a fluency that now felt less like a skill and more like a curse.

The diagrams were what held her. They depicted the architecture of a recollected moment not as a picture to be viewed, but as a vessel to be entered. The theory was brutal in its simplicity. When an Inquisitor stepped into a preserved recollection, their own consciousness displaced the original's, fitting into the sensory shell of the past. A perfect walk was a perfect fit. But when a mind wore a memory it had not originated—especially a duplicate—the fit was imperfect. The wearer's own mental signature, their emotional static, their very intent, abraded the delicate inner surfaces of the moment. It created stress points, micro-fissures, a subtle friction along the temporal edges. A seam.

The book described how to find them. Not by looking, but by listening with a different sense. It required a delicate, peripheral probe, a light touch of the consciousness against the container's walls, feeling for the tell-tale dissonance. It was the psychic equivalent of running one's fingertips over a flawless pane of glass to find the one hairline crack. It was an art that bordered on self-violation, demanding a level of sensitivity that left the practitioner dangerously open.

She needed a test. Her hand went to the pocket where the murky vial from Nix's shop rested. She drew it out, the grey fluid within swirling with a sluggish, unhealthy motion. She would not walk it again; the plunge into its corrupted depths had been too violent. But a surface read, a diagnostic touch... that she could risk.

Placing the vial on the stone bench beside her, she closed her eyes. The profound, damp silence of the archive settled around her. She extended the needle of her focus, not to pierce, but to trace. She let her awareness brush against the glass, then through it, to the very edge of the captured moment within. It was like touching a soap bubble,

feeling the delicate tension of its skin. She moved along the perimeter, following the book's instructions, ignoring the chaotic sensory data at the memory's core and concentrating only on the boundary.

And then she felt it.

It was not a sound or an image, but a texture. A faint, recurring drag. A patch of resistance, like fine-grit sandpaper against smooth silk. It was alien. It did not belong to the broker's lazy, habitual consciousness. This was a sharper presence, a focused will pressing against the container, forcing the recollection to serve a purpose for which it was not designed. When she directed her focus toward the hummed tune of the nursery rhyme, the friction intensified. Voss had hummed it absently. The wearer had hummed it with the specific, pointed intent of a key being turned in a lock. The seam was real. Elara—it had to be Elara—had been present at the murder, wearing Wren's own stolen knowledge like a mask to get there.

The confirmation sent a tremor through her, a deep, internal shudder. She withdrew her focus sharply, the connection snapping. The silence of the crypt rushed back in, colder than before. Her hand, of its own volition, slid into the inner pocket of her coat, seeking a familiar object. Not the tasteless fruit. Something older. Her fingers found the stiff, worn edges of a photograph.

She pulled it out, a small, dog-eared square of card. It was her only picture of Master Braddock, her Guild tutor, taken the day he'd certified her for Level Two inquiry. The image was faded, the figures rendered in shades of sepia and grey. There was Braddock, his face creased with a rare smile. There she was, younger, thinner, her expression severe with concentration. And between them stood a third person.

A woman, with her hand resting on Wren's shoulder. Wren could see the dark fabric of her dress, the way her head was tilted slightly, as if sharing a joke with Braddock. She could see the shape of her, the space

she occupied in the faded light of that long-ago afternoon.

But her face was a perfect, smooth blank. Her name was a hollow space in Wren's throat.

The absence was not a blur or a shadow. It was a complete and total erasure, a hole cut from the world with impossible precision. She knew, with a certainty that defied logic, that she had loved this person. The ghost of that affection remained, a warmth surrounding a void. But who she was, what she had meant, the sound of her voice—all of it was gone. Sliced away. This was the Toll's true price. Not the loss of a flavour, but the quiet, unannounced theft of a life from her history. She had been standing next to a ghost for years and had never known.

A wave of nausea and vertigo washed over her. She gripped the edge of the stone bench, her knuckles white. The book of forbidden craft lay open on her lap. The corrupted vial sat beside her. The photograph of the faceless woman trembled in her hand. They were all pieces of the same puzzle. A crime had been committed against Halloran Voss. But a deeper, quieter crime had been committed against her.

The audit. The memory she had sold. The lawful excision. The nursery rhyme. It all began there, in that job she could no longer recall. The seam in the duplicate proved it had been used. The only way to know what had truly been taken from her, and what had been put in its place, was to return to the origin. To the broker's counting-house. To the vault she had been hired to breach, with a key she no longer remembered and a passphrase that now echoed with the chilling resonance of a murderer's hum.

Section 8 — Vault audit: Voss's recollects are cut with forgeries — the empire is a shell over the Undertow debt.

She put the photograph away. The faceless woman, the gaping hole in her own story, was a wound too deep to probe in the damp chill of the archive. It was a private ruin, and the city was full of those. She left the

book of forbidden craft on the stone bench, a secret returned to the darkness, and ascended the dripping stairs, climbing back toward a world of solvable crimes. The cold dread in her stomach had not dissipated; it had condensed, hardened into a purpose as sharp and fine as a needle. To understand what had been done to her, she first had to finish the job she had been hired to do.

The Watch House on the Merchant's Quay smelled of wet wool and stale chicory. Captain Grieve was not in her office but in the main muster room, overseeing the sharpening of pikes, an exercise in discipline that seemed to give her a grim satisfaction. The scrape of whetstone on steel was a raw, rhythmic sound. She saw Wren enter and straightened, her expression giving nothing away.

"More rumours, Calloway?"

"A confirmation," Wren replied, her voice steady. She would not speak of duplicates, of pawn tickets, of the ledger corner now tucked away like a talisman. That knowledge was poisoned. "Halloran was systematically counterfeiting his own stock. Using diluted or entirely fabricated recollects as collateral for loans. I have it from a source in the flooded districts."

Grieve's hard gaze sharpened with interest. "The Undertow." It wasn't a question. "You've been busy."

"His largest creditor now holds a portfolio of worthless memories. As do, I suspect, half the merchants on this quay who ever did business with him. You wanted a motive besides a back-alley robbery? You now have hundreds. Anyone he defrauded. Anyone who discovered the truth and came to collect." Wren let the implications settle in the noisy room. "I need access to his main vault. A full audit of the inventory. To prove the scale of the fraud."

The captain considered it, her eyes sweeping over Wren's face, searching for the tells of a lie. But Wren was offering a clean,

prosecutable truth, a path forward that led away from the uncomfortable puzzle of a locked room and a professional excision. It was a gift. After a long moment, Grieve gave a short, decisive nod. “You have your warrant. Two of my constables will accompany you. Touch nothing but the vials. I want a full report by nightfall.”

The broker’s primary vault was a chamber behind the counting-house, its circular steel door a marvel of engineering, rumoured to have been salvaged from a sunken treasury ship. The constables watched, their expressions a mixture of boredom and awe, as Wren manipulated the complex sequence of locking wheels. The tumblers fell with a cascade of heavy, satisfying clicks, and the immense door swung inward on silent, well-oiled hinges.

The air that flowed out was cool and sterile, smelling of ozone and the delicate chemical scent of mnemonic stabiliser. This was the heart of the broker’s empire. Thousands of vials lined the shelves, ranked in polished wooden racks, each one glowing with a soft, internal luminescence. The amber of genuine, high-quality recollects cast a warm, golden light throughout the vault. It was a library of lived experience, a vast collection of stolen time.

Wren ignored the constables, her focus narrowing to the task. She started with the premier collection, the assets the broker would have leveraged most heavily. From her satchel, she produced her own diagnostic tools: a silver tuning fork, a multi-faceted loupe, and a small, lead-lined case. She selected a vial from the rack, its label reading, *The Last Stand of the Crimson Guard, from the perspective of Lord-General Marius*. A memory worth a small fortune.

She held it up to the light of her lamp. To the naked eye, it was perfect. The amber fluid was clear, the bead of captured time within it a single, flawless pearl. But when she placed the tuning fork against the glass, the hum it produced was wrong. It was a flat, dull tone, lacking the complex overtones of a genuine, emotionally dense recollection. She

looked through the loupe, turning the vial slowly. There it was. Not a seam, but a suspension. Tiny, almost invisible motes of un-dissolved fabrication material, like silt in clear water.

“It’s cut,” she murmured, more to herself than to the hovering constables. She took another, *A Prima Ballerina’s Opening Night*, and then a third, *The Inaugural Voyage of the Sea Serpent*. All the same. The core of each was genuine—a sliver of the real experience, the hook of authenticity. But the rest was padding. Filler. Generic sense-data—the roar of a crowd, the scent of greasepaint, the taste of salt spray—pasted around the core to give it weight and duration. It was masterful work, a fraud of immense subtlety and skill. Halloran had been shaving slivers from his greatest assets and selling the dilutions as whole. He was a vintner watering down a priceless wine.

She worked for hours, moving methodically along the racks, testing, cataloguing. Her casebook filled with notes, a damning record of the broker’s deception. The fraud was absolute. The entire inventory, the foundation of his wealth and reputation, was a lie. It was the motive Grieve wanted, served on a silver platter. It explained the desperation, the spiralling debts, the need for secrecy.

It explained everything, and it explained nothing. A defrauded client might want him ruined, might even want him dead. But it did not explain the surgical excision of his final moments, a cut that bore the signature of a Guild-trained hand. The two crimes felt like they belonged to different worlds: one a grubby story of coin and desperation, the other a cold act of professional violence. She had solved the broker’s secret, but the mystery of his death, and her own part in it, remained untouched, locked away in a room she could no longer find the key for.

She left the constables to seal the vault and delivered her preliminary findings to the Captain, a neat summary of catastrophic fraud that gave the Watch dozens of credible avenues of investigation. It was a thick

cloud of smoke to cover her own movements. Grieve took the report with a curt nod, her attention already turning to the logistics of interviewing half the city's aggrieved merchants. Wren slipped away before any more questions could be asked, the warrant for the vault having served its true purpose: it had confirmed the broker's desperation, the motive behind his hiring of a discrete auditor to test his own security. An auditor he had supplied with a key.

There was only one place in Verdigris to have a Guild-certified lock copied without the Guild's knowledge: the Anvilwrights' Clink. It was a narrow, soot-choked lane where the air tasted of coal smoke and hot iron. The ringing of hammers was a constant din. Workshops were open-fronted caves, their sandstone walls blackened with centuries of grime. Heat shimmered, distorting the shapes of the men who worked the forges, their faces slick with sweat.

Wren found Tam Vellum in the last workshop, a smaller, quieter space than the others. He wasn't a smith of anchors and gate-hinges; his work was finer. He was a charm-forged, a caster of the delicate metal filigree that housed recollects. A small crucible glowed like a captured ember on his hearth, and the tools laid out on his bench were as fine as a surgeon's. He was a small man, with the stooped shoulders of someone who spent his life bent over intricate work, and his eyes, when he looked up at her, were wide with a rabbit's terror.

"Guild business," Wren said, her voice cutting cleanly through the rhythmic clang of a distant hammer. She did not show a badge. She did not need to. Her tone, the cut of her coat, the stillness of her posture—they were their own authority here.

Vellum wiped his hands on a leather apron, a nervous, useless gesture. "I... My dues are paid, Inquisitor. My castings are all to code."

"I'm not here about your castings," Wren said, her gaze falling on a freshly made wax positive sitting on his bench, a perfect mould of a complex lock mechanism. "I'm here about your copies."

The man flinched as if struck. The colour drained from his face, leaving it the colour of dirty tallow. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Wren took a step closer, her shadow falling across his workbench. She picked up one of his fine-tipped scribes, its steel point needle-sharp. “A second key was made for the lock on Halloran Voss’s counting-house. A forbidden casting. The work was fine, precise. The alloy was balanced for discretion, not durability. It was made by someone who understood the mechanics of the lock and the art of the filigree. Someone like you.”

Vellum began to tremble, a fine tremor that started in his hands and spread through his entire body. “He swore it was sanctioned,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “A private matter. He paid in gold.”

“He is dead, Tam,” Wren said, her voice softening just enough to sound like a threat wrapped in silk. “His gold can’t protect you from the Guild’s judgement now. But I might.”

The forger collapsed onto his stool, his head in his hands. The confession, when it came, was a torrent of terrified words. “It was Voss himself! He came to me, not a month ago. He brought the wax impression. Said it was for a security audit. A test of his own systems, he said. He needed a second key, a single-use copy, for an auditor’s hand.”

Wren stood still, the air in the hot, cramped workshop suddenly feeling thin and cold. “An auditor’s hand?” she repeated, her voice perfectly level.

“Aye,” Vellum nodded, not looking at her. “He was specific. The grip had to be different from his own. His hands were... thick. Like a butcher’s. This was for someone else. Slender. The palm-rest narrow, the thumb-guide set high.” He looked up then, his terrified eyes finally meeting hers, and in them, she saw a flicker of recognition, a connection being made. “He brought me a glove to size the grip. Said it

belonged to the auditor. Dark leather, fine. Worn at the fingertips.” He swallowed hard. “Just like the one you’re wearing now.”

The world narrowed to the sound of a hammer striking an anvil down the lane. Clang. A heartbeat. Clang. Another. Wren looked down at her own gloved hand, resting on the edge of his workbench. Slender. Long-fingered. She saw it as if for the first time, a foreign object at the end of her arm. The key was for her. The audit was real. The broker had hired her, given her the means of entry, and then, as per the contract, had paid for the memory of the job to be excised from her mind upon its completion.

She had been inside that locked room. She had been there weeks before the murder, walking its floors, testing its secrets. The nursery rhyme... it was coming back to her, not as a memory, but as a phantom limb, an ache where a piece of her had been. It was the passphrase for the safe. He had taught it to her.

Her mind was a ledger with a page torn out, but the writing had left an impression on the next sheet. She had done the job, taken the pay, and submitted to the excision. The question that opened up before her was a chasm, dark and sickeningly deep. The memory had been hers to do with as she pleased in the hours between the end of the audit and the walk to the excisor’s chair.

She turned without another word, leaving the terrified forger to his crucible. She walked out of the clinking heat of the lane and into the damp, grey anonymity of the city, her own footsteps sounding alien on the familiar stones.

Back in her rooms, the city’s evening bells began to toll, the sound muted by the fog. She lit her lamp, the circle of light a small defense against the encroaching dark. She did not look at the purse of gold, or the vial, or the folded paper containing the ledger corner. She looked only at her casebook, open to the page on the Voss investigation.

Her hand was rock-steady as she picked up her pen. The ink was black, definitive. Below her meticulous notes on the broker's fraud, below the list of suspects that had once included her own name, she wrote a new heading on a clean line.

Inquiry Addendum.

Beneath it, she wrote a single, simple sentence. The question had inverted. It was no longer a search for a killer's identity. It was a search for her own.

What was done with the duplicate of the audit memory before its lawful excision?

She did not return to her rooms. The question she had written in her casebook was not a thing for quiet contemplation; it was a lit fuse. It demanded motion. The path back to the flooded districts was a descent into the city's unlit throat. The air grew thick and saline. The clamour of the upper quays faded to the metronomic drip of water from leprous stone.

The bell above Nix's door gave the same deadened clank. The pawnbroker was where she had left him, a spider in the centre of his dusty web, his attention fixed on a tarnished silver locket. He looked up, and a flicker of profound annoyance crossed his features.

Wren said nothing. She placed a bottle on the counter between them. It was a flat, unlabeled flask of rotgut gin, the colour of canal water, purchased from a stall two bridges over for a handful of copper bits. Its fumes alone were enough to strip varnish. Beside it, she set a single, smudged glass.

Nix's gaze drifted from her face to the bottle. A slow, reptilian blink was his only response.

"The buyer," Wren said, her voice low. "Not the one who brought you the vial. The one who was waiting outside. The one who took the package wrapped in the pawn ticket."

He made a small, dismissive gesture, a flick of his scaly fingers. "Shadows have no faces."

Wren uncorked the bottle. The stench of cheap juniper and chemical solvents filled the small shop. She poured a measure of the clear, oily liquid into the glass. The pawnbroker's eyes followed the motion.

"You see hands," she stated. "You see coin. You see the things that matter. Tell me what you saw."

He watched the glass for a long moment, then his hand shot out, snatched it, and downed the contents in a single, shuddering swallow. He set the glass down with a sharp rap. "The hand that took the package was gloved. Kid leather, dark grey. Stitched with silk." He paused, his memory stirring. "The fingertips were worn, stained dark. Not with labourer's grime. It was a finer sort of stain. The kind a charm-restorer gets, working with fixatives and polishes."

The connection was a cold, clean line drawn in her mind. Elara Voss, her hands calloused from her work. Lyra, in the Guild parlour, her pot of verdigris paste open on the table. Wren pushed the bottle an inch closer to him. He refilled the glass himself this time, his movements less grudging.

"The coin to pay my fee for the pawned iron came from the seller," he rasped, staring into the gin as if divining truths from its depths. "But the buyer passed something to the seller. A purse. I heard the weight of it. Gold."

"What kind of gold?"

"Old," he said, a note of professional appreciation entering his voice. He took a slow, savoring sip. "Imperials, yes, but pre-Sinking mint. The press was deeper then. They have a different balance in the palm, a softer ring when you drop them. That was old family coin. Not some merchant's grubby new profits."

Wren thought of the purse Elara had given her. The solid, dense

weight of it. Old wealth, unshowy and absolute.

Nix drained his glass and held it out. Wren filled it a third time. He seemed to have forgotten her presence now, lost in the pure, transactional memory.

“It was the sleeve,” he murmured, his eyes unfocused. “The buyer’s coat was good wool, dark as a moonless night. When their left hand reached out to take the package, the cuff rode up just a fraction. And I saw it on the skin of the wrist, just where the glove ended.” He looked at Wren then, his gaze sharpening, offering up the final, most valuable piece of the recollection. “A smudge. Shaped like a new moon. A crescent of that same powdery green dust from the rug you asked about. The restorer’s mark.”

Verdigris.

The word solidified in Wren’s mind, a key turning a lock. The stain on the Aubusson carpet in the broker’s counting-house. The residue on the buyer’s wrist. The two pieces fit together with a perfect, damning symmetry. And there was a third. She felt the echo of it, a phantom sensation in her memory. She had seen that specific green residue somewhere else, recently. On someone’s hands. A woman. She could almost picture it—a hand resting on... something. A table? A workbench? The image was smoke, dissolving as she tried to grasp it. A name hovered at the edge of the void, a shape without letters.

The Toll had not taken the memory whole. It had simply snipped the thread that connected it to the rest of the pattern. The fact was an island, isolated and without context, its significance lost in the fog.

Wren left the bottle of rotgut on the counter, a silent payment for the pawnbroker’s time. She stepped out of the cluttered darkness into the perpetual twilight of the lower districts. The fog had thickened, swallowing the narrow alleys. The world became a corridor of damp stone and muffled canal sounds. She had taken no more than twenty

steps along the slick planks of the walkway when two figures detached themselves from the gloom ahead. They wore the heavy, oilskin cloaks of the City Watch, their faces shadowed by the brims of their helmets.

“Inquisitor Calloway,” one of them said, his voice flat. “The Captain requires your presence.”

It was not a request. They fell into step on either side of her, a silent, disciplined escort. They did not touch her, but their proximity was a cage of its own. The city she walked through was no longer neutral territory. Every shadow seemed to hold a pair of watching eyes. They led her up from the water’s edge, climbing the winding stairs back toward the grander stonework of the Merchant’s Quay, the air thinning, losing its briny thickness but gaining a new, colder edge.

The muster room at the Watch House was nearly empty now, the whetstones silent. Grieve was waiting in her office, a small, brutally functional room with a single barred window that looked out onto a wall of damp brick. The only decoration was a rack of carefully maintained civic ordinances bound in black leather. She stood behind her desk, which was clear of all clutter save for a single sheet of paper and an inkwell. The air smelled of clean iron and old paper.

“Sit,” Grieve said. She did not sit herself. She remained standing, a pillar of navy wool and authority. Wren took the hard-backed wooden chair opposite the desk. The door clicked shut behind her, one of the constables remaining outside.

“I have a report from the Anvilwrights’ Clink,” Grieve began, her voice devoid of any warmth. “From a charm-forged named Vellum. He claims he was coerced into casting an illegal duplicate of the key to Halloran’s counting-house. He claims it was ordered by the broker himself, for an auditor. An auditor whose hand, he says, matched a glove provided for the sizing. A glove just like yours.”

Wren met the Captain’s gaze. “That is correct.”

Grieve's expression did not change. "And you failed to mention this? That you had access? That you had been inside the premises before?"

"The memory of that audit was lawfully and contractually excised upon its completion," Wren replied, her voice a careful monotone. "As per the terms of my employment with Halloran. I have no recollection of the event. I only re-established the fact of it this afternoon."

"How convenient," Grieve said. The words were quiet, but they landed like stones. "A hole in your past exactly where a motive should be. Walk me through your week, Calloway. Start three nights ago. The eleventh of Sallow-month."

Wren's hands rested in her lap, her posture calm, betraying none of the cold current that ran beneath her skin. This was the test. "The eleventh. I was... in my rooms for most of the evening. Reading." The lie was small, a necessary omission. To admit she was in the flooded districts selling the memory that became the murder weapon was an admission she could not afford to make.

"And the twelfth?" Grieve pressed, her eyes never leaving Wren's face.

"The twelfth, I met with Brother Hollis regarding an outstanding account. Then I returned to my rooms." Another careful edit. The truth, stripped of its damning context. Her mind offered the memory of rain on the twelfth, a sharp, clear image. The pawn ticket, stamped with the eleventh, was a silent contradiction.

"And the thirteenth?"

"Was spent at the Guild parlours, researching historical recollects for a potential commission."

Grieve was silent for a long count, her stillness an accusation in itself. "Your account is... tidy," she said at last. "Perhaps too tidy. May I see your casebook?"

It was the demand Wren had been expecting. She reached into her

coat and produced the slim, grey volume. It felt heavier than usual. She placed it on the desk. Grieve did not touch it immediately. She looked from the book to Wren's face, a final assessment. Then, with a slow, deliberate movement, she drew it toward her and opened it to the first page of the Voss case.

She read in silence. Her expression was unreadable as she took in Wren's neat, precise script, her cataloguing of the crime scene, the analysis of the verdigris alloy, the list of Level Three practitioners. She turned the page. Wren watched the captain's eyes move, tracking the lines of ink. She saw them pause on the entry about Nix's vial. She saw them stop dead on the date.

Grieve looked up from the page, her gaze as sharp as broken glass. "You told me you were in your rooms on the evening of the eleventh. Reading." Her finger tapped the page. "But your own notes state you procured a duplicate vial from a fence in the flooded districts on that date. A vial connected to the victim."

Wren felt a chill that had nothing to do with the room's temperature. The lie, so small and desperate, had unravelled. But worse than the lie was the lapse that had allowed her to make it. She had forgotten her own correction. The objective truth she had so carefully inked to the page had slipped from her immediate grasp, replaced by the ghost of a false memory.

"My recollection of the evening was in error," Wren said, her voice tight. "The book is the accurate record."

Grieve's eyes narrowed. She saw it. The crossed-out number. The 12, struck through with a single, neat line, and the 11 written beside it. "You corrected it."

"I discovered a discrepancy between my memory and a dated document," Wren explained. "I amended the record to reflect the fact."

For the first time, a flicker of something other than suspicion crossed

the captain's face. It was a grudging, professional respect for the method, even as the woman employing it dissolved into a suspect. She flipped through another few pages, her gaze scanning, assessing. The book was meticulous. It was the work of a clear, analytical mind, a mind that trusted ink over impulse. And it was the work of a mind that knew itself to be failing.

Grieve closed the book and pushed it back across the desk. The interview was over.

"Your story has holes in it, Calloway. Your memory is a sieve. You had a key, you had access, and you had a financial relationship with the deceased that you failed to disclose." She let the summary hang in the air. "By all rights, I should be holding you."

She paused, her gaze hard. "But this book... this is the only thing in this entire investigation that feels solid. It's the work of an honest inquisitor. Or a very clever killer." She walked to the door and opened it. "You are free to go. But you are not to leave the city. You will find that your movements are of great interest to me. Every bridge you cross, every door you open. Understand?"

Wren stood, taking her casebook from the desk. The smooth leather felt like the only real thing in the world. "I understand."

She walked out of the office, past the stony-faced constable, and into the night. The fog had begun to thin, and a sliver of moon was visible between the high rooftops. She could feel the captain's eyes on her back, and she knew that somewhere in the shadows of the quay, another pair of eyes had already picked up the watch. The city was no longer her home; it was her cell.

Elara Voss lived and worked in a set of rooms above a disused dye-works, where the air was permanently stained with the phantom scent of woad and saffron. The workshop was a single, long chamber, meticulously organised. Racks of fine-toothed files and polished agate

burnishers lined one wall. On a broad workbench beneath a wide, north-facing window, the disarticulated pieces of antique recollect-charms lay on velvet cloths like the bones of delicate, metallic birds. The source of the city's quietest poison sat in a small, earthenware pot on the corner of the bench: a thick, blue-green paste of verdigris alloy, a tiny silver spatula resting beside it.

Elara poured tea from a plain iron pot into two ceramic cups. There were no pleasantries. The ritual was a formality, a quiet space to measure one another in. She moved with a restorer's economy, her hands steady, the faint green line at her cuticle a stark confirmation against the pale clay of the cup.

"Captain Grieve paid me a visit," she said, her voice as calm as the still surface of the tea. "She has a theory. That my father's death was the result of his financial indiscretions. A crime of commerce, not passion."

"It's a plausible theory," Wren replied, wrapping her cold hands around the cup's warmth. "His deceptions were extensive. The list of those he wronged is long."

"And yet it doesn't account for the method, does it?" Elara's cool grey eyes met Wren's over the rim of her cup. "A furious, cheated merchant does not typically leave such a... tidy scene. They do not possess the skill for such a precise, surgical act of memory theft."

The word was a deliberate choice. Not 'excision'. She was learning.

Wren took a slow sip. The tea was bitter, brewed from roasted barley. "Skills can be purchased. Verdigris has a market for everything." She let the silence settle for a moment, then began to hum, a soft, tuneless sound at first, as if searching for a melody. She found it, a simple, rising and falling air.

"One for the lock, two for the key..."

She let the line hang in the quiet room, watching Elara's face. There

was nothing. No flicker of recognition, no subtle tensing of the jaw. She did not even blink. It was a perfect performance of ignorance, so flawless it was a confession in itself. An innocent person would have shown a flicker of curiosity at the strange little tune. Elara showed only a profound and unnerving stillness.

Wren continued, her voice barely a murmur. *“Three for the door that should not be... An old city rhyme. For warding off bad luck, they say.”*

“I’m not familiar with it,” Elara said. Her voice was flat, without affect. She placed her cup back on its saucer with a soft click, the sound unnaturally loud in the tense quiet. “My father did not approve of such superstitions.”

“No,” Wren agreed softly. “He was a man of locks and keys. Tangible things.” She opened her casebook on her lap, a deliberate gesture. The book was her shield and her weapon. She didn’t look at it, but its presence changed the geometry of the room. “When we first spoke, at the Guild, you used a specific word. You said you wanted the man who ‘meticulously excised’ the memory of the act. That was before the Watch had released any details about the nature of the theft.”

Elara’s expression remained placid, but a new light entered her eyes, a cold, watchful intelligence. She did not deny it. She did not feign confusion. “My father’s business was my life’s education, Inquisitor. I grew up with the language of the trade. I know a clean cut from a clumsy tear.” She leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping, becoming almost confidential. “Just as you, I imagine, know the precise mechanics of his counting-house locks. An expert would be required to bypass them. An auditor, perhaps.”

The thrust was clean, a needle-fine point aimed directly at the hole in Wren’s own past. Elara was defending, but also counter-attacking, using a truth Wren couldn’t fully grasp to corner her. They were no longer client and inquisitor. They were two players in a game whose rules only they understood, and the board was the city itself. Wren felt

the invisible net Grieve had cast around her being drawn tighter, its strings pulled by the very woman who had hired her to investigate.

“The broker hired auditors from time to time,” Wren conceded, her voice a flat plane of neutrality. “To test his systems. It was a matter of professional paranoia.”

Elara’s smile was a small, precise thing that did not touch her eyes. “And you are a professional known for your discretion. It makes a certain kind of sense, doesn’t it? The narrative is so... neat.” She picked up one of the delicate, silver-gilt frames from her workbench, holding it to the light. “Consider the story the evidence tells, Inquisitor. A master key is cast for a hand other than my father’s. A complex lock is bypassed without force. A memory is removed with a skill possessed by only a handful of people in this city.”

She set the frame down and folded her hands on the workbench, her posture one of serene, almost sympathetic concern. The verdigris crescent on her cuticle was a tiny, damning moon against her pale skin.

“The Watch will follow that story. It is simple. It is clean. And it leads directly to a name on the Guild’s register.” Her gaze was direct, unwavering. “It leads to you, Wren Calloway.”

The use of her full name was a deliberate intimacy, a twisting of the knife. Wren felt the chill of it, the cold, perfect logic of the trap. Every piece was a truth. There was a second key. She had been the auditor. She possessed the skill. Her very competence was being braided into a noose.

“I find myself in a difficult position,” Elara continued, her voice softening into a mask of thoughtful consideration. “You are the Inquisitor I retained. I hired you because of your reputation for uncovering the truth, no matter how complex. And yet, the truth Captain Grieve is constructing is anything but. It is a simple, brutal

equation that points to my own chosen agent.”

She sighed, a small, delicate sound of feigned regret. “Of course, I will speak to the Captain on your behalf. I will tell her that I believe you to be a person of unimpeachable integrity. I will explain that any evidence that seems to incriminate you is merely a tragic coincidence.”

Every word was a perfectly placed stone, walling Wren in. The offer of support was the most vicious threat of all. Elara, the grieving daughter, vouching for the character of the very specialist she hired, would only cement Wren’s involvement in the Watch’s mind. It would paint her as a trusted figure who had betrayed that trust, a wolf invited into the sheepfold.

Wren closed her casebook. The soft thud of the cover was the only sound. She rose from her chair, the cup of bitter tea untouched. The warmth had fled it, and now it was just cold dregs.

“Thank you for the tea, Mistress Voss,” she said. The title was a formal distancing, a rejection of the false intimacy Elara had offered. “And for your... confidence.”

Elara inclined her head, a queen accepting the fealty of a courtier. She did not rise. She remained seated amidst her tools of restoration, the architect of a perfect crime, her hands clean but for the one small stain she had ceased to hide.

The two women looked at each other across the quiet, organised room. The truth was a tangible presence between them, as solid and unspoken as the iron tea pot on the table. Elara had killed her father. She had used Wren’s stolen, duplicated memory of the security audit to do it—wearing Wren’s knowledge of the locks, the safe, the passphrase rhyme like a suit of armour. And she had paid Wren for the investigation with the very gold she’d used to purchase the memory in the first place, weaving her into a web of complicity from which there was no escape.

Wren knew it. And Elara knew that she knew.

There was nothing left to say. There was no evidence Wren could take to Grieve that would not look like the desperate fabrication of a guilty woman trying to shift the blame. Her own corrupted memory, her own missing time, her own casebook with its damning corrections—they were all now instruments of the frame.

Without another word, Wren turned and walked out of the workshop, her footsteps echoing on the wooden stairs. She left Elara Voss in the clean, north-facing light, a restorer of broken things, patiently polishing the pieces of her story until it shone with an unassailable, murderous truth. The faint scent of woad and saffron followed her down into the street. Elara sat in plain sight, protected by a wall of interlocking facts.

Section 11 — The trap: word goes out that the stolen hour has surfaced and will be authenticated at dawn.

The street below was a canyon of wet stone and gathering dusk. Wren did not go back to her rooms. To go back was to be cornered, to be the subject of Grieve's patient surveillance. Instead, she walked, letting the city's labyrinthine alleys swallow her. She moved with a purpose that had no destination, her mind working, stripping the problem down to its cold, mechanical core. She could not outrun the story Elara had written for her. She had to force a new ending.

The rumour began as a careless whisper in the Guild parlour. Wren returned there near the ninth bell, when the day's business was done and practitioners gathered for spiced wine and shared complaints. She found Silas Vance by the fire, his arrogance softened by a long day's work.

"Voss?" she said, accepting a cup from the steward and letting her voice carry just enough for others to overhear. "The trail went cold. Grieve is chasing phantoms, interviewing every merchant he ever

cheated.” She gave a small, weary sigh. “All I found was a mnemonic echo. A resonance. Too degraded for a full walk, but I managed to stabilise a fragment. Barely a few seconds long.”

Vance looked up, his professional curiosity piqued. “Anything useful in it?”

“A sound,” Wren lied, staring into her cup. “The killer’s boot heel on the floorboards. An unusual tread. Grieve has the fragment now, under seal. She’s sending it to an acoustician in the morning, hoping for a match to a cobbler’s mark.”

It was a perfect lie. The precise, technical details gave it the ring of truth. An acoustician. A cobbler’s mark. It was the kind of esoteric, long-shot clue that defined a desperate investigation. She saw Vance register the information, file it away. He would repeat it before the bell tolled again. By midnight, it would be the talk of the trade. And by morning, it would have found its way to the one person who could not afford to let that fragment be examined.

She left the Guild and went to the Watch House. She did not ask for the Captain, but for the night-watch sergeant, a man whose face was a roadmap of old bar fights.

“I have reason to believe an attempt will be made to tamper with evidence in the Voss case,” she told him, her voice low and urgent. “Specifically, the samples taken from the crime scene. The killer cannot risk them being analyzed.”

The sergeant’s expression was skeptical. “The Captain’s got you on a short leash, Inquisitor.”

“This has nothing to do with my leash,” Wren countered, meeting his gaze. “It is a professional assessment. They will come tonight. They will be quiet, and they will be skilled. Watch the evidence locker.”

She left without waiting for a reply. The bait was set. The trap was armed.

Hours later, she stood in the damp chill of an unlit office across the square from the Watch House, the room's single window a dark lens on the scene below. Grieve was there with her, a silent shadow smelling of cold night air and authority. They had not spoken in over an hour. There was nothing to say.

The square was empty, slick with a fine mist that haloed the gas lamps. Then, a figure detached itself from the deep archway of the Notary's Guild. It was a slight form, wrapped in a dark cloak, moving with a fluid, unhurried grace that blended with the shifting fog. The figure crossed the square, keeping to the pools of shadow between the lamps, and slipped into the narrow alley that ran alongside the Watch House—an alley that led to a single, barred window into the records room, a known vulnerability.

"They're confident," Grieve murmured, her voice a low rumble beside Wren.

"They have to be," Wren answered. "The risk of being caught is less than the risk of what's in that vial."

Minutes stretched into a tense, elastic silence. Then, a faint sound drifted across the square—the metallic scrape of a tool against the window's iron bars. It was a quiet, patient sound. Professional. A flash of movement from the mouth of the alley. Two of Grieve's constables, moving like ghosts. The scraping sound stopped. There was a brief, muffled scuffle, a single sharp cry, and then silence again.

The constables emerged from the alley, a third figure held firmly between them. The captive did not struggle. The hood of their cloak had fallen back, revealing a face pale in the lamplight.

It was not Elara.

It was Lyra, the grey-haired restorer from the Guild parlour. Her face was a mask of cold fury, her hands, bound behind her, still encased in the fine, oil-stained leather gloves of her trade.

Grieve made a low, guttural sound of affirmation. “An accomplice. Good work, Calloway. You flushed one of them out.”

Wren watched the constables lead the furious, silent restorer across the square. The trap had worked, but it had caught the wrong animal. It had caught the baited dog, not the hunter who sent it. “That’s not an accomplice, Captain. That’s a smokescreen. A proxy. Elara hired her.”

The Captain turned from the window, her face set like cold iron in the gloom. “You have a theory for everything, don’t you? A convenient narrative to explain away every piece of evidence that points back to your own door.” She stepped closer, her voice dropping to a low whisper, sharp with menace. “You told me they would come for the evidence. You were right. You knew the method, you knew the motive. You know everything except how to sound innocent.”

“Because I am not innocent,” Wren said, her own voice quiet, stripped of artifice. “I sold the key. Unwittingly. I delivered the weapon. But I did not guide the hand.”

“Prove it.” The challenge was absolute, a granite wall.

There was no proof Grieve would accept. Not now. The story was written, its ink drying. Wren gave a single, formal nod, an acknowledgement of the end of the game. “I will.”

She left the office, walking past Grieve as if she were a stranger. She felt the Captain’s gaze follow her down the stairs and out into the misty square, a weight on her shoulders. The watchdogs would be closer now, their leash shorter. She had one night.

Her rooms felt different, the familiar objects—the scarred desk, the worn rug, the single, faded photograph—seeming to belong to someone else. The air was thin, the silence charged. This was the antechamber to a profound change. She lit her lamp, the flame a small, steady point of light in a world that had come loose from its moorings.

She did not pace. She did not allow the fear its customary motion. She

sat at her desk, opened her casebook to the page after her last entry, and picked up her pen. The steel nib felt cool and solid against her fingers. She dipped it in the inkwell, the small sound a final punctuation mark on the life she had lived until this moment.

Then she began to write.

Her script was not rushed. It was the same small, precise hand she always used, the letters formed with a patient, almost loving care. She was not writing a report. She was building an ark, loading it with every fact, every inference, every piece of the truth she had painstakingly assembled, to be floated on the waters that were about to rise and wash her own mind clean.

She wrote of the duplicate memory, sold by her own hand to cover a debt. She named the buyer: Elara Voss, identified by the verdigris stain and the purse of old gold. She detailed the nature of the memory itself: the security audit of the counting-house, lawfully excised, which had contained the two keys to the crime—the physical one, cast for her hand, and the mnemonic one, the nursery rhyme that opened the safe.

Her pen scratched on, a lonely sound in the quiet room. She wrote of the seam, the tell-tale friction in the corrupted duplicate that proved it had been worn by an alien consciousness. She laid out the motive she had pieced together from Hollis's fury and Elara's cold contempt: Halloran, deep in the Undertow's debt, was preparing to sell the last of the family archive, the repository of his dead wife's memories. An unforgivable transgression.

Finally, she wrote of the trap, of the lie about the acoustic fragment. She described Lyra, the proxy, sent to destroy a fiction and in doing so, confirm the killer's fear. Elara Voss, she wrote, had not only killed her father but had orchestrated the investigation from its first moment, hiring the person whose stolen memory was the murder weapon, framing her with a set of truths that could not be denied.

When she was finished, the page was dense with black ink on cream paper. It was the whole of it. The complete and terrible geometry of the crime. She read it over once, her eyes scanning the lines not as a writer, but as an archivist, confirming the integrity of the record. It was all there. It was sound.

She dipped the pen a final time, and at the bottom of the page, she wrote the date. And then, with a steady hand, she signed her name. *Wren Calloway.*

She did not close the book. She left it open on the desk, a silent record for whoever would find it in the morning—Grieve, or the shell of a woman who had once been herself. The ink was still damp, glistening in the lamplight.

Her movements became a quiet ritual. She rose and went to the small, lead-lined box where she kept her most dangerous tools. From it, she took not a vial, but a silver retrieval stylus, its tip honed to a microscopic point, and a small, crystalline focusing lens. The attempt she was about to make could not be done with a captured recollect. There was no captured recollect. There was only the faintest mnemonic residue clinging to the scene of the crime, the psychic stain of a violent, excised death. To walk it was impossible. But to rebuild it, thread by thread, from the dust of its own annihilation—that was the art of a Level Three Inquisitor. The art that had placed her name on Grieve's list.

She knew the cost. To pull a coherent memory from such profound trauma, to force its ghost back into form, would require a payment of equal weight. The Toll would not take a flavour, or a face, or a year. It would take a foundation. It would take the whole of the case. It might take the memory of her own name.

She sat on the floor, her back straight against the leg of the cot. She held the stylus in one hand, the lens in the other, their cold metal a final connection to the tangible world. She closed her eyes. Her

consciousness, which for days had been a lens turned outward, now turned inward, gathering itself into a single, focused point. She quieted the fear. She quieted the hope. There was only the work.

In her mind, she rebuilt the counting-house. The heavy desk. The Aubusson rug. The precise spot where Halloran Voss had fallen. She focused on the silence there, the hollow carved into the atmosphere by the excision. She let the needle of her focus drift toward that void, that perfect, terrible wound in the fabric of the past, preparing to plunge.

Section 12 — The walk: her own audit, precise and lawful — the second key, the safe, the marker, the leaving.

The plunge was not a fall but an act of will, a deliberate unspooling of the self into the void. She did not walk; she wove. Her consciousness became a loom, the stylus and lens its shuttles, pulling threads of phantom resonance from the cold air of the broker's study. A scent of ozone, the ghost of a boot-print on the rug's thick pile, the faint, psychic indentation of a man's final, terrified thought—these were her raw materials. She gathered them, sorted them, and began to braid them into a coherent moment, paying for each thread with a sliver of her own coherence.

The world resolved. It was not the grey, corrupted smear of the duplicate. This was crystalline, perfect. She was standing in the broker's private office, the air still and tasting of dust and money. Lamplight cast a warm, steady glow. She was looking at her own hands, encased in dark, fine-grained leather gloves. In her right, she held a key of a strange, soft-looking alloy, its grip moulded to her palm. The key Vellum had cast.

She moved toward the ornate safe set into the wall behind the desk. Her movements were fluid, economical, freighted with a professional calm she could observe but no longer feel. This was the audit. This was the memory she had sold. She slid the key into the lock. The tumblers turned with a smooth, oiled precision. A faint tune surfaced in the

memory's soundscape, hummed under her own breath, a mindless melody to accompany the work.

One for the lock, two for the key...

Her fingers found the second mechanism, a dial inscribed with archaic runes. Her gloved fingers spun it, the clicks counting out a sequence that corresponded to the rhythm of the tune.

Three for the door that should not be...

The final tumbler fell. A heavy thud. She pulled the thick steel door open. Inside, shelves held personal ledgers and a small collection of private recollects, their amber glow pulsing faintly. She did not touch them. Her contract was to prove access, not to plunder. From a pocket, she took a small, silver sol, minted in the year of her Guild certification, and placed it squarely on the topmost ledger. The marker. Proof of entry.

Job done. She swung the heavy door shut, spun the dial, and withdrew the key. The memory was clean, sterile. It was the record of a lawful, completed contract. There was no blood, no fear, no death.

Now came the true work. Her focus shifted. She was no longer just a passenger in the reconstructed moment. She was its anatomist. Following the esoteric instructions from the book in the archive, she let her awareness expand to the edges of the memory, feeling for its container, its skin. She searched for the seam. She brushed her consciousness against the interior surface of the moment, feeling for the tell-tale friction, the abrasion left by a foreign mind wearing a stolen past.

There.

It was a subtle drag, a psychic dissonance that began the instant the safe door clicked shut. The air in the memory did not change, the light did not dim, but the *intent* shifted. The professional calm that had permeated her own actions curdled, replaced by a cold, patient

waiting. The hummed tune of the rhyme had stopped. The silence that followed it was not empty; it was coiled. This was the seam, the place where her lawful memory ended and Elara's trespass began. The memory had been worn, used, and then put back, its lining scarred by the wearer. She pushed her focus deeper, pressing against the seam, demanding to see what came after. The image wavered, the strain of the reconstruction immense. She saw her own gloved hand, the one that had placed the silver sol, rise and move toward her coat. Then the perspective shifted violently, a lurch in the flow of time. She looked down at her hands again. They were no longer hers.

The gloves were different. Not the sturdy, functional leather of Wren's own pair, but finer, supple kidskin, dyed a deep charcoal grey. The fingertips were stained, and at the cuff of the right wrist, where the sleeve of a fine wool coat had pulled back, was a faint, crescent-shaped smudge of powdery green. A restorer's mark. The hand turned, its movements deliberate, and closed the safe. The hum returned, but it was a different voice now, a woman's low alto, and the melody was not the same. It continued past the known notes, into a verse Wren had never heard.

"Four for the name that can't be told.."

A sound from behind. The scrape of a chair. The heavy sigh of Halloran Voss turning from his ledgers. He saw the figure at his safe, saw the key still in the lock. His face, seen through these borrowed eyes, was a mask of confusion, not fear.

"The audit is complete," he said, his voice thick with authority. "You have no business—"

The figure turned slowly. Elara Voss. Her face was calm, her expression unreadable. She drew the key from the lock and held it up. In the lamplight, its soft alloy gleamed.

Recognition dawned in her father's eyes, followed by a flicker of pride.

“Clever. A test of my own test. Well done. You may report that the system is—”

She began to hum again, that same unknown, final verse. She walked toward the desk, her steps silent on the thick rug. She placed the key on the polished mahogany and picked up the silver letter-opener, balancing it in her gloved palm.

“I was never taught that last part,” the broker said, a note of unease entering his voice. “The third verse was as far as the rhyme went.”

“Mother taught it to me,” Elara said, her voice quiet. “The day you sold her favourite reading-chair to cover a loss on the salt exchange. She said it was the verse for things that are taken and can never be reclaimed.”

The blood drained from his face. He understood. Not just who she was, but why she was there. He opened his mouth to speak, to bargain, to threaten, but the word never formed. She moved with terrifying precision. One step, a fluid turn of the wrist. The silver blade slid between his ribs with a soft, wet sound, economical and absolute. He made a small, surprised noise, a gasp, and slumped back in his chair, his eyes wide, fixed on the face of his daughter.

She did not wait. She did not watch him die. She knelt beside the chair, her gloved hands moving with the swift, certain grace of a Guild-trained practitioner. The gestures were an obscene parody of a blessing, her fingertips tracing the patterns of recall over his temples, finding the neural pathways, locating the fresh, bright thread of the last hour. Wren watched, a helpless passenger, as Elara’s consciousness sank into her father’s cooling mind and, with the practiced skill of a master weaver running a thread in reverse, unmade the moment. She pulled the memory out, thread by thread, until a perfect, seamless void was left behind.

The world shattered.

Wren gasped, a raw, ragged sound, her eyes flying open. She was on the floor of her own room, the rough wool of the blanket scraping her cheek. The lamp flame guttered, casting frantic shadows. The cold of the floorboards was a shocking, solid reality. The memory—the one she had built, the one she had invaded—was gone, but the truth of it remained, a searing after-image burned onto her mind. She scrambled for her casebook, her anchor, her proof.

Her eyes fell upon the open page, on her own neat script. The names felt foreign. *Vellum. Nix. Hollis.* Characters in a story she had read long ago. The intricate chain of deduction she had so carefully forged—the pawn ticket, the ledger corner, the two keys—it was all just words, their connections dissolving like salt in water. The Toll was not a thief in the night; it was a tide, pulling the shore out from under her feet, leaving her stranded with a conclusion whose premises had vanished.

She could feel the week sliding away, the urgent press of the investigation fading to a dull, historical fact. Who was the man in the photograph on her wall? Why did the taste of gin from a pawnbroker's shop feel more real than the memory of her own last meal? The terror was not in the forgetting, but in the knowing that she was forgetting.

Her hand, slick with sweat, gripped the pen. She had to anchor it. She had to speak it before the tide took it all. Her lips felt stiff, clumsy.

"Elara Voss," she whispered, the words raw in the silent room. She said it again, louder, forcing the sound into the physical world. "Elara Voss. She used my memory. She wore my audit." Her gaze locked on the casebook, the signed verdict a lifeline. "She hummed the fourth verse. The one for the name that can't be told."

Section 13 — Elara taken; the Guild attests the seam; Wren exonerated.

The ink on the page was the only thing in the world that felt solid. Captain Grieve's office was crowded, the air thick with the competing

smells of damp wool and the Guild's dry, papery authority. Master Fendrel, the registrar, stood beside the captain's desk, his pale hands folded. Between them lay Wren's casebook, open to the final, signed page.

"The Guild attests to the findings," Fendrel said, his voice a dry rustle. "Our finest sensitives examined the duplicate vial. The mnemonic abrasion is... profound. The memory was worn, Inquisitor Calloway is correct. Worn by a second consciousness, one whose intent was radically different from the originator's. There is a seam. The evidence is incontrovertible."

Grieve looked not at the registrar, but at Wren, who stood by the window, watching the grey light filter through the grimy panes. The captain's expression was no longer one of simple suspicion; it was a harder, more complex thing, a grudging respect for a tool that had proven its worth by dissecting its own wielder. "Her book, and your Guild's ghost-seeing. On that, a woman will be condemned."

The door opened. Two constables brought Elara Voss into the room. She was not in chains. She wore the same severe black dress, and her hands were clasped before her, the faint green crescent on her cuticle the only spot of colour. Her face was a mask of placid composure. She looked past the captain, past the registrar, her cool gaze settling on Wren.

"It is a remarkable piece of work, Inquisitor," Elara said, her voice carrying a resonance that filled the small office. "To reconstruct a narrative from such disparate, broken pieces. My father would have been proud."

"Your father is dead," Grieve stated, her voice flat.

Elara's eyes never left Wren's. A small, knowing smile touched her lips. "He taught us both the trade. You simply learned the lesson he intended. I learned the one he deserved."

There was nothing more to say. The constables led her out. The confession was not for the Watch's ledgers, but for Wren's. A final, private turning of the knife.

The hearing was a formality, held in a wood-paneled chamber that smelled of beeswax and judicial dust. Wren sat in the witness chair, her own casebook open on the rail before her. She was the city's expert, the final authority on the crime's central text. She no longer remembered writing a single word of it.

The magistrate, a man with a face like a tired bloodhound, leaned forward. "Inquisitor, can you attest to the contents of the reconstructed memory? Can you describe the events that transpired in Halloran's study after the completion of your audit?"

Wren looked down at the page. The script was familiar, an echo of her own hand, but the thoughts behind it were a stranger's. The words described a murder with a chilling, clinical precision she could not connect to any experience of her own. She traced a single sentence with her finger, a sentence about a fourth verse of a song she no longer knew. The memory of the reconstruction, the visceral horror of watching the murder through Elara's eyes, was a perfect, smooth blank. The Toll had been paid in full.

Her throat was dry. She took a sip of water. The book was the truth. The ink held. She had to trust the woman who had written it.

"According to my findings," Wren began, her voice a stranger's in her own ears, "the perpetrator, Elara Voss, confronted her father..."

She left the chamber before the final gavel fell, the magistrate's voice droning on, a sound as distant and meaningless as the cry of gulls over the harbour. The second half of her fee had been delivered to her rooms by a Guild courier, a heavy purse left on her doorstep with no accompanying note. The contract was fulfilled. The case was closed.

Later, in the quiet of her own rooms, the circle of lamplight felt

smaller than it ever had before. The purse sat on her desk, a lump of silent, heavy gold. Beside it lay the casebook, still open to the final page. She sat and pulled it closer, her gaze tracing the lines of ink as if they were a map to a country she had never visited.

The handwriting was hers. The steady, disciplined script was as familiar as the shape of her own fingers. But the mind that had composed the sentences, the intellect that had forged the intricate chain of logic, was gone.

The wearer's humming of the fourth verse, a family secret, confirms identity.

She had no memory of a fourth verse. She could not recall the tune of the first.

The stain on the buyer's wrist, a crescent of verdigris alloy, matches the residue found at the scene and the material on the suspect's workbench.

The words were precise, the observation acute. She remembered a smudge of green on a rug. The rest was a story she had been told, a very convincing one.

The critical evidence is the mnemonic seam, an abrasive dissonance within the duplicated memory, proving its use by a second, hostile consciousness.

It was the lynchpin of the entire argument, a discovery of profound technical skill. She could feel a phantom echo of the violation, a cold spot in her mind where the knowledge had been, but the memory of the act itself, of finding that seam, was gone. It was like reading the conclusions of a brilliant stranger who had, for a brief time, inhabited her body, solved a murder, and then departed, leaving behind only this meticulous, signed confession.

She closed the book. The sound of the leather cover shutting was soft and final.

The next morning, she took the gold and walked down into the city's damp heart. She did not seek out the archive in the drowned crypt. She

went to a small, unremarkable office near the fish market where one of the Undertow's clerks kept accounts. She settled her grandfather's last debt without a word, pushing the coins across the counter. The clerk, a man with ink-stained teeth, counted them, stamped her papers, and slid them back. The transaction was as bloodless and silent as an ending.

On the walk back up toward the higher lanes, she passed a fruit-seller's stall, the pyramids of bright citrus and dark berries a riot of colour in the grey air. On a small wooden tray were dried blackcurrants, looking like tiny, wrinkled jewels. She bought a small paper cone of them. Her fingers knew the texture, the slight tackiness of the skin. She placed one on her tongue and chewed. The pulp was leathery, the tiny seeds gritty against her teeth. The taste was a memory of a memory, a hollow shape in her senses where a sharp, dark sweetness was supposed to be.

Back in her rooms, she put the closed casebook on the shelf above her desk. It fit neatly beside the other volumes, its plain grey spine anonymous among the others. Her gaze lingered on the object next to it: the old, dog-eared photograph. In the faded sepia, she stood beside Master Braddock, and between them was the smooth, blank oval where a woman's face should have been. The book held a truth she could no longer claim. The photograph held a loss she could no longer name.

She stood at the window for a long time, watching the mist roll in from the canal, blurring the edges of the city, softening the lines of the rooftops opposite. It crept down Verdigris Lane, covering the cobblestones and the lampposts, until it was impossible to be certain where the city ended and the grey water began.