

EARTH, AGAIN
Episode 7

by

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SCENE 1 - "SMOKE ON THE HORIZON"

EXT. TRAIL - IDAHO PANHANDLE - LATE AFTERNOON

Rain. Steady, patient rain. It drips through canopy, runs off leather, patters on the brim of a hat. Hooves on wet ground, slow and heavy. The horses plod. Nobody's pushing them.

LIV (V.O.)

Joshua has been dead for four days.
Or five. I've stopped counting
because counting makes it real, and
real is the sound of creek stones
being stacked over a boy who died
at fifteen.

The rain. The hooves. Keeper panting somewhere behind - even
the dog sounds tired.

LIV (V.O.)

The rain hasn't stopped since we
entered Idaho. Everything is wet -
leather, wool, skin. The horses are
miserable. Nobody talks much. I
used to think silence meant people
were angry. Out here it just means
there's nothing left to say.

LIV (V.O.)

Grief doesn't pause for the road.
And the road doesn't pause for
anything.

The group rides single file through dense timber. Rain
dripping through pine canopy. The creak of wet saddles. A
horse snorts, shakes its mane - water spraying. Harlan coughs
once, short, guarded - his ribs still tender.

ROBERT

(to Calloway, low)
How far?

CALLOWAY

To Spokane? We're close now.

A beat. The rain. The hooves.

ROBERT

You think it's still there?

CALLOWAY

A city on a river with falls? Fresh water, fish, power if anyone was stupid enough to use it? It's there.

MIRA

A city of two hundred thousand people doesn't disappear. It just becomes something else.

ROBERT

I went to a conference there once. Before. The river cuts right through downtown. You could hear the waterfalls from the hotel lobby.

A beat. The strangeness of remembering a hotel lobby on horseback in the rain.

CALLOWAY

(to Mira)

You know it?

MIRA

Only by reputation. Last real city between the mountains and Seattle. If anything survived in eastern Washington, it'd be Spokane.

CALLOWAY

That's what worries me.

LIV

Why?

CALLOWAY

A place that survived ten years has rules. And people who enforce them. We're five strangers on horses who look like we lost a fight with a river. They'll have opinions about us before we open our mouths.

Keeper stops. Not alarmed - nose up, ears forward. Curious. The faint smell of wood smoke on the wet air.

HARLAN

(quiet)

Keeper's got something.

CALLOWAY

I know. I smell it too. Hold up.
Let me take a look over the ridge.

Calloway dismounts. The sound of boots on wet ground. He moves uphill through the timber.

The group waits. Rain. Horses shifting. Mira adjusting her hood.

Calloway comes back. His footsteps down the slope - deliberate, unhurried. He mounts up. The creak of wet leather.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)

Smoke from chimneys. Walls along
the river. People on the bridges.

A beat.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)

It's Spokane, and it's alive.

MIRA

Then we go in. We need supplies -
we won't make it across the plateau
without restocking.

ROBERT

We go in, we get what we need, we
get out.

MIRA

May not be that simple.

CALLOWAY

Yeah. A place this big doesn't just
let you pass through. It decides
whether to let you in.

The rain. The smoke on the wind. The horses, sensing something ahead - ears forward, pace quickening slightly. Even the animals know.

They ride toward the city.

SCENE 2 - "THE GATE"

EXT. SPOKANE - SOUTH APPROACH - DUSK

The sounds change. After weeks of wilderness, the audio world shifts - and it's overwhelming.

Voices in the distance, more than one conversation layered over another. A hammer on metal, rhythmic, purposeful. A dog barking - not Keeper.

Wood being sawed. Children laughing, high and clear, somewhere behind a wall. The sounds of people living. Dense, layered, almost too much after the quiet of the trail.

The road narrows. Hooves on loose gravel, then on planking - a wooden bridge approach. The river loud underneath them now.

ROBERT

(quiet, almost to himself)
It's like approaching an ancient Roman city. Timber walls, sharpened stakes, a gate with men on top. We went all the way back to the beginning.

CALLOWAY

They're serious about protecting their borders.

MIRA

(quiet)
Nobody do anything interesting.

GATE CAPTAIN - (he/him), Spokane's first line of defense - armed, alert, and not interested in stories.

GATE CAPTAIN

That's far enough. Who are you and what do you want?

MIRA

Travelers. Out of Montana, heading west. We've been on the road since February. Lost a member on the trail a few days back. We need to resupply, rest, and we'll be on our way. A day, two tops.

GATE CAPTAIN

What's your business west?

MIRA

Family. We're trying to reach family near the coast.

A beat. The Gate Captain weighing that.

GATE CAPTAIN

The one favoring his ribs - how'd that happen?

HARLAN
Horse trail. Went down a ravine.

GATE CAPTAIN
And the hand?

ROBERT
Lost a finger on the trail.
Frostbite. It's... fine.

MIRA
We are armed, but not here to cause
any trouble.

The Gate Captain laughs.

GATE CAPTAIN
If you weren't armed, you wouldn't
have made it here.

Another beat. The Gate Captain makes a decision - you can hear it in the way his posture changes, the tension leaving his voice.

GATE CAPTAIN (CONT'D)
Come on in. You'll want to head to
the Marketplace - south side.
Trade, stables, food if you can pay
for it. I'd head for the Last Pint.
The innkeeper, Boris, has room -
tell him the gate captain sent you.

MIRA
That sounds great, thank you.

GATE CAPTAIN
Across the main bridge is the
Hearth. Families live there. The
island in the river is the Falls -
that's where the Listener is. You
don't go there unless he sends for
you.

MIRA
Where's the clinic?

The Gate Captain pauses. Not many travelers ask that first.

GATE CAPTAIN
The Hearth. North side of the main
bridge. You a healer?

MIRA
I am.

GATE CAPTAIN
 (a shift - warmer, barely)
 They could use one. Go on through.

The gate opens - heavy timber, the scrape of wood on stone. The group rides through single file. Hooves on cobblestone now - a different sound, harder, more permanent than any trail. The city closes around them.

As they cross the bridge, Calloway pulls alongside Mira. Low, just between them.

CALLOWAY
 (quiet)
 Marker post. Left side.

A beat. Mira turns her head.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)
 Two tallies. One side - births.
 Dozens of marks.

MIRA
 And the other side. Seventeen
 banishments.

CALLOWAY
 An easy way to track the
 population.

They ride on. The bridge under the horses' hooves. The river below - you can hear it, wide and fast. And ahead, the city. The sound of it growing with every step.

SCENE 3 - "THE LAST PINT"

EXT/INT. SPOKANE - THE MARKETPLACE - EVENING

CALLOWAY
 There. Two-story building with the chimney smoke. Looks like a proper inn.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)
 "The Last Pint."

LIV
 That's either a promise or a warning.

CALLOWAY
Stable is around back.

They ride around back. The sound of other horses already in stalls - shifting, nickering at the new arrivals.

HARLAN
(approving)
Dry straw. Clean water. They've got salt blocks in the stalls - haven't seen those in years. Somebody knows what they're doing.

They get the horses in. Saddles off, quick and efficient. Keeper shakes off the rain - the spray of it - then his claws on the stable floor, already nosing into corners.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
I'll come back and tend to them proper before bed.

From inside the building - muffled through the walls - voices, laughter, the clatter of plates. Someone shouts something and a whole table roars. The warmth of it leaking out through the cracks.

LIV
Sounds lively.

MIRA
So far, I'm liking Spokane.

They walk in through the front. The sound of the ground floor hits them in the doorway - people eating, drinking, talking.

SARAH - (she/her, 20s), a server at The Last Pint - friendly, fast, and warm.

SARAH
Two stews, one bread, table by the window!

A chair dragging across the floor. Laughter - actual laughter, from a table in the corner.

The clatter of a kitchen working behind a wall.

After weeks on the trail it's almost too much. Too warm, too loud, too alive.

LIV
(low, to Harlan)
When's the last time you saw this many people smiling?

HARLAN
(quiet)
Can't remember.

MIRA
An actual, real inn.

ROBERT
Feels good, doesn't it?

MIRA
Feels good.

The fire popping - a log settling in the hearth, sparks.

She walks over to the bar. A huge man is pouring drinks behind it, sliding them to a waitress.

BORIS - (he/him, 50s), the Russian owner of The Last Pint - pours drinks, rents rooms, and reserves the trout for people he likes.

BORIS
Here, these go to table five.

SARAH
Got it.

She picks them up, dashes off.

BORIS
And tell 'em we're out of the trout! It's venison or nothing!

SARAH
(Across the room)
Got it!

MIRA
(to the innkeeper)
Hi. We're new in town, looking for rooms. The gate captain sent us.

BORIS
(busy)
How many?

MIRA
Five. And a dog.

Pouring drinks.

BORIS

Two rooms upstairs. Dinner's downstairs if you can pay for it.

ROBERT

What counts as paying?

BORIS

Coin, trade goods, skill. No charity, no credit.

Mira sets coins on the bar. The clink of metal on wood.

BORIS (CONT'D)

One night?

MIRA

One. Maybe two.

Someone dropping a bowl - the clatter, a beat, then laughter from the nearest table.

BORIS

Rooms are up the stairs, end of the hall. Number 3 and 4.

LIV

Thanks.

Footsteps on wooden stairs. A door opening - the creak of hinges, the quieter sound of a room above the noise. The muffled roar of the inn below.

Gear being set down.

The scrabble of claws on the floor, a running leap, and the creak of bed springs. Keeper has claimed a bed.

LIV (CONT'D)

(laughing)

Keeper, no - that's -

HARLAN

Looks like he claimed his bed.

ROBERT

Alright. This is a big town. I suggest we split up, learn what we can, and meet back here for dinner.

MIRA

(Setting down her pack)

Yeah, good idea. I'm going to the clinic.

ROBERT

I want a map. Someone in this market has to know the road west to Seattle.

CALLOWAY

I'll go with you.

ROBERT

I don't need a chaperone.

CALLOWAY

And yet.

ROBERT

Liv, you should-

LIV

I'll go with Harlan.

HARLAN

Sure.

MIRA

Alright, we've got a plan.

LIV

Come on, Keeper.

Keeper is already curled on the bed in the corner. The thump of his tail once, twice, then nothing. Out.

HARLAN

Ha, he's not going anywhere. Let him rest up.

A door closing. Footsteps on stairs, sounds of the inn louder, then the front door - street noise floods in.

SCENE 4 - "EXPLORING SPOKANE"

EXT. THE MARKETPLACE - EVENING

Liv and Harlan walk the Marketplace. The sound is layered and dense: a blacksmith hammering somewhere close, the ring of it carrying over the crowd. Someone sharpening a blade on a grinding wheel, the high whine of metal on stone.

A TOWN CRIER's voice cuts through the noise - practiced, carrying, the kind of voice that's done this every day for years.

CRIER

(Rings bell twice)

North bridge closes at sundown,
reopens at dawn! Salt caravan from
the west is trading at the river
dock through tomorrow - salt, dried
kelp, wool! South wall repair needs
hands, half-day's credit per shift!
River's running high, no washing
below the falls until further
notice!

LIV

(to Harlan)

What is he doing?

HARLAN

Town crier. No electricity, no
radio. Word of mouth is all they've
got.

VENDOR 1

(calling out)

Smoked trout! River trout, smoked
this morning!

LIV

(to Harlan)

There's so much stuff here.

HARLAN

Place like this on a river - they'd
have fish, trade routes, probably
salt coming in from the ocean.
That's an economy.

A barber calling out from a chair set right on the street."

VENDOR 2

Alright, there you go. Next! Who's
next?

Two kids chasing each other between stalls, nearly tripping
over a dog that isn't Keeper.

Sounds of a smithy working nearby. Bellows, hammer, metal on
anvil.

VENDOR 3

Tools! Hand tools, cleaned and
oiled! Wrenches, pliers, files...

Someone playing a fiddle, badly, around a corner. The sound drifts in and out - someone has time to play music, which means life here isn't just survival.

LIV

(to a vendor)

What is that? What are you cooking?

VENDOR 4

Elk stew. River onion, carrots, salt from the ocean. Bowl for a half-coin or two candles.

LIV

We don't have any candles.

VENDOR 4

Then you better find some work, sweetheart.

A BOY bumps into Liv - shoulder to shoulder, careless, running somewhere.

BOY

Sorry!

Gone. Just a kid, running. Normal. Ordinary. She'd forgotten ordinary.

Then they hear it.

A crowd gathered in a small square ahead - not cheering, not jeering. Speaking, but hushed. Watching. Liv and Harlan slow down, then stop at the edge of the crowd.

HARLAN

Hm, something's drawing a crowd.

LIV

(quiet)

What's going on? Why is that man tied to a post?

BYSTANDER 1

Who is it this time?

BYSTANDER 2

Jackson. Got caught stealing food from the storehouse.

BYSTANDER 1

Again? Need to just banish his ass.

HARLAN

(low)

Believe there's about to be a
public flogging.

LIV

For stealing?

HARLAN

Doesn't matter what he did. This is
what they do about it.

MARSHAL

(clear, loud)

Alright, settle down. Settle down.
You all know why we're here.

The crowd quiets. Footsteps on wood - someone stepping up
onto a platform.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

Parish.

PARISH - (she/her, 50s), Spokane's civilian leader - calm,
clear-eyed, and not afraid to order twenty strokes before
breakfast.

PARISH

(calm, clear - a voice
used to addressing rooms)

Good morning, everyone. So...
Thomas Jackson. Theft of rations
from the North Ward storehouse.
This is his second offense. He was
given latrine duty last month and a
chance to make things right. He
chose not to. The sentence is
twenty strokes, witnessed. After
this, the debt is paid. He's one of
us again.

A beat.

PARISH (CONT'D)

Marshal, carry on.

She steps down. The marshal steps up.

The crack of leather on skin. The man's breath punches out of
him. He doesn't scream.

LIV

(gasps)

Another crack. The marshal counting aloud - "Two." Another.
"Three."

HARLAN

(low)

Come on. We don't need to see this.

He steers Liv away. The cracks continue behind them - fainter with each step, swallowed by the market noise coming back. Vendors calling again. Life filling in around the edges.

LIV

(quiet, walking)

Twenty strokes. And then he's one of them again.

HARLAN

That's how they keep it together here. Could be a lot worse.

They walk in silence after that. The Marketplace isn't ordinary anymore.

They keep walking - cross a bridge without thinking about it.

LIV

The river is beautiful.

HARLAN

It is. Wouldn't want to swim in it now, though.

The sound world changes. The market noise drops away behind them. The town crier can be heard in the distance, repeating the day's news.

On this side: everything quieter. A door closing softly. Someone sweeping a step - the bristles on stone, rhythmic, unhurried.

A baby crying, then settling - a mother's voice, low, the creak of a rocking chair on a porch.

MOTHER

Shh... There you go...

A woman singing low while she works, something without words, just melody drifting from an open window.

Children's voices from inside a building - not running wild like the market kids, but the contained sound of a classroom.

A man's voice, patient, repeating something. A lesson.

TEACHER
 (from inside, patient, mid-
 lesson)
 - so if you have twelve bushels
 and you trade four for salt, how
 many are left? Come on. Anybody.

A pause. A child's voice, uncertain.

YOUNG CHILD
 Eight?

TEACHER
 Eight. Good. Now - your neighbor
 needs two, but he won't have grain
 until fall. What do you do?

LIV
 (low)
 Is that a school?

HARLAN
 Sounds like it.

They walk further. A garden somewhere - the scrape of a hoe
 on dirt, someone turning soil. A rooster crows from a
 backyard pen.

Two old men sitting somewhere close, talking low, one of them
 laughing at his own joke.

OLD MAN 1
 (low, mid-story)
 - so he says, "That's not my goat."
 And I say, "Well it's in your
 house, Earl."

He laughs at his own joke. The other man doesn't.

OLD MAN 2
 That's not how it happened.

OLD MAN 1
 It's how I remember it. And I'm the
 one telling it.

LIV
 It's like a different city over
 here, across the river.

HARLAN
 It is a different city. This is
 where people live. The other side
 is where people trade.

A WOMAN stops them from a doorway.

HEARTH WOMAN

Don't know you two. Come over from the Marketplace?

HARLAN

Yes ma'am. We just arrived. Exploring your city.

HEARTH WOMAN

Well met, then. But this is the Hearth. If you don't live here, best to head back across the bridge.

LIV

We're not allowed here?

HARLAN

It's alright, we'll turn back.

HEARTH WOMAN

Unless you're here to visit someone, or for the clinic, it's best to stick to the public areas.

LIV

Okay, but- is that a school? Back there?

The woman's voice shifts - just slightly. Pride, maybe.

HEARTH WOMAN

It is. Thirty-two children, two teachers. Parish started it the second year. Said if we don't teach the kids, we're just surviving. Teaching them means we're building something.

LIV

That's... I haven't seen a school since I was little.

(beat)

Okay, we'll go now. Thank you.

They turn to go but the woman stops them.

HEARTH WOMAN

Oh, just wait a second.

A long beat...

HEARTH WOMAN

Any minute now.

The school bell - a single clear ring, then the burst of children's voices pouring out a door.

Liv laughs at the happy chaos of the rush of kids going home.

HEARTH WOMAN (CONT'D)

(warmer)

Well. Now you've seen one. But you should still head back across.

HARLAN

Yes ma'am. Thank you.

They turn back toward the bridge. Liv is quiet for a few steps.

LIV

Thirty-two kids.

HARLAN

Mm hm.

LIV

That's a future.

SCENE 5 - "THE MARKET"

EXT. THE MARKETPLACE - DAY

Robert and Calloway in the market. The noise of commerce around them - vendors, foot traffic, the ring of a blacksmith.

VENDOR 3

Elk stew here, made fresh this morning.

Robert is scanning the stalls, looking for something specific.

ROBERT

We need a map of the road west. The plateau, water sources, anything between here and the Cascades.

CALLOWAY

And who's going to have that?

ROBERT
Someone who trades in information.
Every market has one.

They walk. Past the smithy, past the food stalls. Then a different sound - the rustle of paper. Pages turning. Not a vendor shouting, just a man sitting quietly behind his table.

CALLOWAY
There we go. The stall with the
maps pinned up.

ROBERT
That's the one.

COLTER - (he/him), the man with the maps - unhurried, amused, and sitting quietly while everyone else shouts.

COLTER
(from behind the stall -
unhurried, amused)
You two look like you've been on
the road a while.

ROBERT
That's true. We need a map. The
Columbia Plateau, west to the
Cascades. Water sources,
settlements, anything current.

COLTER
I've got that. Hey, Colter's the
name. John Colter.

ROBERT
Robert.

They shake hands.

COLTER
Let's see...

Shuffles through his papers.

COLTER (CONT'D)
Yeah, here. Traced from a pre-
Collapse map, updated last fall
from a trader who came through from
Ellensburg. Water sources marked,
dead zones noted, two settlements
along the way. It's good.

ROBERT
What do you want for it?

COLTER
What do you have?

ROBERT
Coin.

COLTER
Coin works.

ROBERT
Here you go.

Robert pays in coin.

COLTER
OK. Let's take a look.

Colter unrolls the map on the table. The sound of paper spreading flat.

COLTER (CONT'D)
Plateau starts west of the city.
Huge, open land. People call it the
Wheat Sea. The wheat's mostly gone
now, wild grass took over, but the
name stuck. And it earned it.
Shoulder-high grass, far as you can
see, and when the wind hits it, it
moves like ocean waves. You can
hear it from a mile away. This low,
rolling hiss, like surf.

ROBERT
Sounds kind of beautiful.

COLTER
It is. It's also two hundred miles
of nothing. No trees, no cover, no
landmarks. Just tall grass, rolling
hills, and sky and wind. You lose
the road, you're in trouble -
everything looks the same in every
direction. Water here, here, and
here. Nothing in between. Small
settlement at Sprague, another near
Vantage at the Columbia River
crossing - that's a big crossing,
by the way, the river's wide there.
After that, you're climbing into
the Cascades.

ROBERT
Great. What else do you trade?

COLTER

Whatever comes through. Books, tools, mechanical parts. People bring me things, I find them new homes.

ROBERT

What about the nannies? On the plateau - how active are they?

COLTER

More than usual, lately. Travelers coming in from the west say they're running low, making second passes. Something's got them stirred up. We've seen more than our share around here lately.

ROBERT

Anyone here know anything about their patterns?

COLTER

(a beat)

There's a man on the island, in the river. Calls himself the Listener. Lives in the river dam spillway, surrounded by these metal plates he calls 'tone boards'. Taps them with a stick, listens to the hum, tells you what the nannies are thinking. Half the city swears by him. The other half thinks he's out of his mind.

ROBERT

Which half are you?

COLTER

I'm the half that notices the city's still here after ten years, and he's been doing his thing the whole time. Draw your own conclusions. His wife handles the door - you don't get in without her say-so.

CALLOWAY

Thanks for the info.

ROBERT

Yeah, Thanks, Colter. You've been very helpful.

Robert folds the map and puts it in his coat. They keep walking.

SCENE 6 - "THE CLINIC"

INT. THE HEARTH - CLINIC - EVENING

A door opens. The sound of a small, busy room - someone coughing, a child fussing, the creak of a cot. Not a hospital. A room with beds in it and someone doing their best.

DOCTOR - (he/him), Spokane's overworked medic - tired, unhurried, and doing what he can with what he has.

DOCTOR

One-ten over seventy. That's pretty good, Frank. Keep it up.

MIRA

(to someone at the door)
Oh, hello. I'm just looking for the doctor. I'm a healer - came in through the gate an hour ago.

A beat. Footsteps approaching - tired, unhurried.

DOCTOR

You're the one from Montana?

MIRA

Word travels fast. I'm Mira.

He shakes her hand.

DOCTOR

David. Come on in. You any good?

MIRA

I was an ER nurse. Twelve years at St. Vincent's in Billings. I run a small settlement now.

A beat. The doctor weighing that.

DOCTOR

Well. I've got fourteen patients, no antibiotics, and a woman due in a few weeks. I could use the help. What do you know?

MIRA

Infections, breaks, sutures, field surgery, childbirth. I don't have equipment but I have hands.

DOCTOR

That's more than I had five minutes ago.

MIRA

I was hoping I could barter for some medical supplies for the road.

DOCTOR

You help me here, I'm sure we can work something out. Wash up. The water basin's in the corner.

The sound of water - Mira washing her hands. Rolling up sleeves. Then she's working.

MIRA

(to a patient)

OK, hi, I'm Mira. Let's take a look... How long has this been infected?

PATIENT 1

Week, maybe. Didn't think it was that bad.

MIRA

It is that bad. Hold still. This is going to sting.

She applies something to the wound. The patient hisses. Mira works.

Time passes - the sounds of the clinic continuing, patients coming and going.

MIRA (CONT'D)

Yeah, that needs some stitches. Here, have a seat, let's get it cleaned up.

Applying iodine to the wound, Mira is stitching a wound now. The pull of thread through skin, the patient breathing through it.

PATIENT 1

(In pain)

Mmmm, that's... Damn...

MIRA

Almost done. Three more.

The door opens. Footsteps - deliberate, unhurried. The sound of someone who enters rooms and expects them to notice.

David steps over to Mira.

DOCTOR

(low, to Mira)

That's Parish. She runs the town.

PARISH

Don't stop on my account. I heard we had a visiting healer. Wanted to see for myself.

MIRA

Here I am, in all my glory. Name's Mira.

PARISH

Parish.

A beat. Parish watches Mira work. The sound of the stitch. The patient's breathing.

PARISH (CONT'D)

You're good.

MIRA

I've had practice.

PARISH

Where?

MIRA

Settlement called Belle Creek. I run it, and have a small clinic there.

(to patient)

OK, that should do it. Your doctor will want to check it in a few days.

PATIENT 1

ok. Thanks.

The patient exits.

MIRA

So, you're... what? The Mayor?

Parish is quiet for a moment. When she speaks again, the tone has shifted - this isn't small talk anymore. This is one leader talking to another. She sits down with Mira.

PARISH

Takes a lot to be in charge.

I was a principal. Before. High school. Nine hundred kids, forty teachers, a building that was falling apart. You learn to keep things running with nothing - no budget, no support, just systems and willpower.

MIRA

That sounds about right. How'd you transition to this?

PARISH

When everything fell apart, I just... kept doing it. Made the lists. Counted the people. Assigned the jobs. Everybody thought someone was in charge, so I kept acting like I was, and eventually it was true.

MIRA

That's how it works. One fix after the other until it's all your responsibility. From what little I've seen, you've done a hell of a job. This is a major operation.

PARISH

Kind of you to say. Spokane has survived because I've kept it boring. No electricity. No hoarding old tech. Two thousand people are alive because boring works.

MIRA

I understand.

PARISH

If you've kept your settlement going this whole time, I bet you do.

(then)

Imagine it helps that you were a healer already. Easier to keep people alive when you know how something kills them.

MIRA
That's true.

She pauses.

MIRA (CONT'D)
But if I'm honest? I'd give
anything to turn the power back on.
You know what I'd do first? The
clinic. Lights, heat,
sterilization.

PARISH
(quiet)
I think about that every day. And
every day I don't do it, because
I've seen what happens when someone
decides they're the exception.

Mira is quiet. She knows exactly what Parish means. She
carries 118 reasons to know.

MIRA
(softly)
Yes.

PARISH
But lately something's changed. The
nannies are lingering over the
city. More passes. Circling back at
night. People are scared and I
don't blame them.

MIRA
What do you think is causing it?

PARISH
Someone's breaking the rules.
Stockpiling tech somewhere in the
city - I'm sure of it. The nannies
can sense it even if nothing's been
powered on. The presence is enough.

MIRA
You've investigated?

PARISH
I've looked. Haven't found it. But
I will.

I've banished seventeen people so
far.

(MORE)

PARISH (CONT'D)

It was for the good of the city,
but I know it's likely a death
sentence. Still... Better than what
the nannies can do.

SCENE 7 - "THE LISTENER"

EXT. THE FALLS - EVENING

The sound of the falls growing louder as Robert and Calloway
cross the bridge to the island.

CALLOWAY

You sure visiting this Listener guy
is a smart idea? We weren't
invited, and apparently that's the
way it works here.

ROBERT

Colter said the nannies have been
worse lately. If this Listener has
been tracking them for ten years,
he might know something useful.

CALLOWAY

Or he's a con man who hits metal
with sticks.

ROBERT

Then we'll know that in five
minutes and leave.
(quiet, almost to himself)
There's the dam.

The roar builds - not like a river, like a wall of sound. You
have to raise your voice to be heard.

CALLOWAY

What?

ROBERT

(louder)

That's a hydroelectric dam. See,
the turbine housing is right there -
you can see the intake gates. This
thing powered the whole city before
the collapse.

A beat. The falls roaring.

ROBERT (CONT'D)
It's still working. The water's
still moving through it. The
turbines are probably intact. You'd
just have to reconnect the -

He stops himself. The sentence dies in his mouth. Calloway is watching him.

CALLOWAY
Don't finish that thought.

ROBERT
(a beat)
Yeah.

They reach the structure built into the old dam spillway.

ROBERT (CONT'D)
Ok, let's see what he has to say.

They knock on the steel door.

A woman opens it.

ANNA - (she/her), the gatekeeper to the Listener's chamber -
careful, watchful, deciding who gets through.

ANNA
Can I help you?

ROBERT
We'd like to speak with the
Listener. About the nanny activity.

ANNA
About what specifically?

ROBERT
The increased patrols. The second
passes. We're travelers - we need
to know what we're riding into when
we leave.

Anna studies them. A long beat - the falls roaring, the mist drifting. She's deciding something.

ANNA
I assume you've brought a tribute?

ROBERT
A... tribute. Yes. Of course. Coin
is ok?

ANNA
Coin is acceptable.

Fishes in his pocket.

ROBERT
Here you go.

ANNA
Wait here.

She disappears inside. A moment. Voices, muffled by the falls
- Anna and someone else, too low to hear. She comes back.

ANNA (CONT'D)
Come in.

SCENE 8 - "AUDIENCE WITH THE LISTENER"

INT. THE FALLS - DACE'S CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

DACE - (he/him), the Listener - a man who reads nanny patrol patterns through sound and vibration, equal parts scientist and showman.

The falls muffled to a low, constant rumble. He sits surrounded by tone boards - flat stones and pieces of metal arranged in careful patterns on the floor and walls. He taps one with a wooden striker. A resonant hum. He listens, head tilted.

DACE
Hm. Yes...

Taps another. And another.

DACE (CONT'D)
I see...

The performance is deliberate, theatrical.

DACE (CONT'D)
Travelers from the east. Five
riders. Lost one on the trail.

ROBERT
Word does travel fast here.

DACE
(measured, cryptic)
Sound travels faster than people.
That's what I listen to.

ROBERT
I'm Robert. This is Calloway.

Dace taps a board. Another tone. Listens.

DACE
My given name is Dace. But the town
calls me the Listener.

The machines have been restless.
More passes this month than all
winter. Something has them out of
balance.

ROBERT
Um, we're just passing through.

DACE
No one passes through. Everyone
brings something in and takes
something out. The question is
whether the watchers notice.

The tone boards hum. The falls rumble behind the walls.

DACE (CONT'D)
You're carrying weight. I can feel
it. Something pulling you west -
something you haven't told this
city.

ROBERT
(tight)
We told the gate captain everything
he needed to know.

DACE
The gate captain hears words. I
hear what's underneath them. You're
not traders. You're not running.
You're heading toward something.

ROBERT
You don't know anything about us.

DACE
I know fear when it walks through
my door. And you stink of it.

ROBERT

(annoyed)

Alright - enough. You sit here playing your steel drums and speaking in riddles and the whole city lines up for it. Fine. But I didn't come here for a fortune reading. I came because the nannies are escalating and I need to know if it's safe to ride west. Can you tell me that, or are you just garden-variety nuts?

DACE

(cold)

Careful.

CALLOWAY

Robert...

ROBERT

Tell me something real. One real thing.

DACE

You wouldn't know what to do with it.

ROBERT

Try me.

DACE

Men like you don't listen. You just wait for your turn to talk -

ROBERT

Men like me? You don't know the first thing about men like me.

DACE

I know you're the kind who breaks things and calls it progress. The machines smite men like you, and-

ROBERT

And you're the kind who hides behind nonsense while people die waiting for answers! Coward.

CALLOWAY

Damnit, Robert, not again-

DACE

(erupting)

You want something real? Fine.
They're not escalating - they're
iterating. They've been running the
same search pattern for three
weeks, tightening the grid, and
they're not going to stop until
they either find what they're
looking for or the behavior tree
prunes that branch and moves on -

He stops. The room goes dead quiet.

CALLOWAY

(sharp, to Robert)

We're leaving. Now.

The sound of Calloway moving - hand on Robert's arm, pulling
him toward the door.

ROBERT

(stopping)

Wait. What did you just say?

CALLOWAY

Robert. We need to go. One burned
bridge is enough.

ROBERT

(to Dace)

Behavior tree. You said behavior
tree.

DACE

(a beat - he knows what he
did)

I... Um. What of it?

Robert begins to laugh.

ROBERT

Oh. My. God.

His laughter is bright, nearly joyful.

CALLOWAY

Clearly, I missed something here.

ROBERT

He's not nuts. He's just... a
software developer.

(laughing)

I want my tribute back.

CALLOWAY
(double take)
He... What?

DACE
Well, shit.

ROBERT
This is amazing.

ANNA
(firm)
Alright. No one's leaving. Not
until we talk. Come sit down,
please.

She crosses the room, locks the door.

And the performance drops.

Dace's posture changes. He sits down heavily - a tired man,
not a mystic. His voice changes - the measured cadence gone,
replaced by something sharp and exhausted.

DACE
(fast, frustrated)
The nannies aren't shifting their
pattern - they don't have a
pattern, they have a behavior tree.
Anyone who thinks you can predict
that by banging on steel is an
idiot. But here I am, banging on
steel, because this city needs
someone offering answers or they'll
find someone who actually believes
it, and that person would get
people killed -

ROBERT
"Behavior tree". That's not a
phrase you pick up doing regular
programming. That's something you
learn writing autonomous systems.
AI software.

Silence.

DACE
(a beat)
I wrote code. Twenty-two years.
Seattle, then Spokane.

ROBERT
What kind of code?

DACE

The kind that makes decisions without you. Machine learning, behavioral modeling, adaptive systems. The kind of work that - in retrospect - looks a lot like building the thing that ended the world.

ANNA

Dace, you didn't build the nannies.

DACE

No. But I understood the architecture. Enough to fake it.

ROBERT

Fake what?

ANNA

(calm, matter-of-fact)

When the collapse happened and the nannies started patrolling, people were terrified. They needed someone who could explain it. Dace understood enough to sound credible.

DACE

And I realized - if I didn't become that person, someone else would. We've all seen that guy in the movies, right? The religious fanatic who believes their own bullshit. Who uses fear to control people instead of protect them.

A beat.

DACE (CONT'D)

I'd rather be the guy with the tone boards than live under the guy with the tone boards.

ROBERT

So - all of it -

DACE

Some of it's real. I do listen to the nanny tones. My instincts about their behavior aren't bad. But the mysticism? Pure theater. It gives the city a way to feel like someone understands the nannies.

(MORE)

DACE (CONT'D)

And it keeps that power in the hands of someone who knows it's nonsense.

A beat.

DACE (CONT'D)

The waterfront property is nice, too.

ANNA

I manage the access. Filter who gets through. Make sure he doesn't break character in front of the wrong people. We've been doing this since the Collapse.

CALLOWAY

Does Parish know?

DACE

Parish suspects. She doesn't ask. She needs the Listener to be real - not for herself, but for the city. If she finds out I'm a fraud, she has to deal with that. If she doesn't ask, she doesn't have to.

Robert is quiet. Looking at Dace differently now - not as a con man, but as someone who made a choice Robert understands. He built a system. It's a lie. But it works.

ROBERT

The nanny activity - the increased passes. Is that real?

DACE

(dead serious)

That's real. Something changed a few weeks ago. I don't need the boards to tell me that. They're running a search pattern - tightening radius, increasing frequency. I've written enough search algorithms to recognize one.

ROBERT

What are they searching for?

DACE

I don't know. Probably someone hoarding forbidden tech. But they haven't found it, because they haven't stopped looking.

ROBERT

And that someone isn't you?

DACE

Hell no. I may be a fraud, but I'd never put this town at risk.

ROBERT

I... don't even know what to say.
It's brilliant.

DACE

(Grateful)

An actor does enjoy being appreciated.

A long beat. The falls, muffled through the walls. Nobody speaks.

Then Dace laughs. Quiet at first - almost disbelief. Then real. The laugh of a man who's been holding something alone for ten years and just set it down in front of strangers.

DACE (CONT'D)

Feels good to finally tell someone.

ANNA

(to Robert and Calloway)

You understand what happens if this gets out.

CALLOWAY

Yes ma'am. They won't hear it from us.

DACE

(composing himself)

You know what the craziest part is? I'm actually pretty good at it. The listening. I've gotten better at reading their patterns than I have any right to be. Ten years of pretending to do something - turns out you just start doing it.

ROBERT

That's not pretending. That's learning.

DACE

(quiet)

Yeah. Maybe.

A beat.

DACE (CONT'D)

Robert. One thing. On the plateau - stay near the river valleys where you can. The nannies seem to focus on ridgelines and open ground. Something about elevation, line of sight - I'm not sure if they're scanning for movement or heat signatures or something else entirely.

ROBERT

Is that from the tone boards or from you?

DACE

(grinning)

Both, obviously.

He holds out his hand.

DACE (CONT'D)

Good luck out there.

Robert shakes his hand.

ROBERT

And to you, Listener.

Anna unlocks the door, opens it. The roar of the falls floods back in.

ANNA

Here. Your coin.

ROBERT

No way. The show was well worth it.

They leave. Out through the spillway chamber, past the tone boards - still and silent now, just metal and stone.

Across the bridge. The city on the other side, warm and noisy and ordinary.

CALLOWAY

That... was not what I expected.

ROBERT

Not even a little.

CALLOWAY

You trust him?

ROBERT
More than anyone else we've met on
this road.

CALLOWAY
That's a low bar, Robert.

ROBERT
Yeah. But he cleared it.

SCENE 9 - "DINNER AT THE LAST PINT"

INT. THE LAST PINT - EVENING

The inn is full. The sound of a room working - voices layered over each other, a chair scraping back, the clatter of bowls being set down, the kitchen behind the wall banging and hissing. Someone laughs too loud at a far table. A dog under a bench growls at passing boots - not Keeper, a local mutt.

Chairs pulled out. The group settling in at a corner table.

LIV
Is Mira coming?

ROBERT
She's still at the clinic. She'll
be here soon.

HARLAN
That woman doesn't stop.

CALLOWAY
Not since I've known her.

The barmaid comes over.

SARAH
Hey, I'm Sarah, what can I get you
folks?

ROBERT
What do you have?

SARAH
Elk stew, venison stew, bread, and
the trout. The trout is amazing, by
the way. He does it in butter and
garlic. Pulled from the river this
morning.

LIV

I thought the innkeeper told
someone you were out of trout.

SARAH

(laughing)

Yeah, he does that. That guy owed
him for a broken chair.

You're fine. What'll you have?

ROBERT

(asking the table)

How about three trout? And two elk
stews?

CALLOWAY

Great.

LIV

Mm hm.

HARLAN

Yep.

ROBERT

One of us is still out but she'll
be here. We'll all share. And bread
for the table.

HARLAN

And whatever you're pouring.

SARAH

Cider or mead. The cider's better.

HARLAN

Five ciders. They watered down?

ROBERT

Maybe just four.

LIV

Five.

SARAH

We don't water anything down.
Life's thin enough already.

ROBERT

(going along)

Five ciders.

SARAH

Back in a minute.

She walks off. The sounds of the kitchen picking up - a pan on iron, something sizzling.

LIV

I've never had cider.

HARLAN

Then tonight's a good night.

The door opens. Street noise floods in, then cuts off. Footsteps - tired, deliberate. Mira crosses the room.

MIRA

Hey, guys!

She sets a bundle on the table. The thud of it - solid, wrapped in cloth.

MIRA (CONT'D)

Bandages. Suture kit. A real scalpel. Dried herbs - yarrow, comfrey, willow bark, and poppy tea. And a bottle of triple distilled alcohol.

CALLOWAY

Sounds like you had a good day.

MIRA

Payment for the day's work. Their doctor hadn't had help in months. I think he would've given me the building if I'd asked.

She sits down.

MIRA (CONT'D)

My feet are tired. Oh - Harlan. I want to stitch Keeper up tonight. I've got a second suture kit now, and the tea to put him under. That gash has been open since the stampede. If I don't close it before the plateau, it's not going to close.

HARLAN

Tonight?

MIRA

After dinner. I'll need you to hold him while I work.

HARLAN

Yeah. Of course.

ROBERT

How was it? The clinic?

MIRA

Fourteen patients. No antibiotics.
One doctor doing everything
himself. A woman due any week now.
(a beat)
It's what every clinic looks like
when there's no supply chain.

From the bar, the innkeeper is dealing with a customer.

BORIS

(to someone)

I said we're out of the trout! It's
venison or nothing for you!

The barmaid returns. Mugs of cider, the thunk of ceramic on wood. Five mugs, one after another.

SARAH

Here you go. Food's coming.
Kitchen's having a day.

MIRA

Oh, cider? Hell, yes.

LIV

The innkeeper - he's not from
around here?

SARAH

Boris? Yeah, he's Russian. Flew six
thousand miles for a first date.
Three days later the world ended.

LIV

Wait - a first date? With who?

SARAH

(already walking away)
Who do you think?

Liv takes a drink.

LIV
(first sip)
Oh. That's...

HARLAN
Good, right?

LIV
That's really good.

ROBERT
Drink it slow.

LIV
I know, Dad.

A beat. The fire popping - a log settling in the hearth, sparks.

MIRA
Alright. What did we learn?

Robert unfolds Colter's map on the table. The crinkle of paper.

ROBERT
We bought a good map. The road west. Columbia Plateau - two hundred miles of open grassland. No trees, no cover. Crazy strong winds. After that, our last major hurdle: the Cascade mountain range.

CALLOWAY
Two hundred miles of open ground. That's ten days if we push, two weeks if we don't. And the nannies are active.

MIRA
How active?

ROBERT
More than usual. Traders coming in from the west say they're making second passes. The... Listener on the island says they've been escalating for about three weeks. Some kind of search pattern.

MIRA
That matches what Parish told me. She's like the mayor here.
(MORE)

MIRA (CONT'D)

She thinks someone in the city is stockpiling tech. The nannies are hunting for it.

(a beat)

Wait. You went to see this Listener? The crazy prophet guy on the island?

ROBERT

We did.

MIRA

A hermit who lives in a dam, claiming he can read the nannies - and you just walked in there?

CALLOWAY

It was Robert's idea.

LIV

(chastising)

Dad.

MIRA

(to Calloway)

And you let him? Because things went so well with the Gatekeeper?

CALLOWAY

He was going whether I went or not.

MIRA

(low, controlled)

Robert. We talked about this. You and people like that are oil and water.

HARLAN

(mutters)

More like gasoline and fire.

ROBERT

This was different.

MIRA

How? How was it different?

Robert and Calloway exchange a look. A beat.

ROBERT

(carefully)

Well... we actually got along quite well.

The table does not believe this.

MIRA

You. And a religious zealot.

ROBERT

Me and the zealot. Nice guy. His name's Dace.

MIRA

OK...

ROBERT

He's not what he seems. I can't say more than that. But he's not dangerous. And the information is real.

MIRA

Robert, I swear to God, if you get us thrown out of another settlement.

CALLOWAY

Mira, peas in a pod, they were.

MIRA

I'm-I'm just leaving that alone.

The barmaid arrives with the food.

SARAH

Alright, three trout... And two elk stews.

Bowls and plates set down, one after another.

HARLAN

Oh yeah.

SARAH

And some loaves.

Bread torn from a loaf - the crust cracking.

LIV

Mmm

SARAH

Need anything else?

ROBERT

We're good. Thank you.

LIV

Fresh bread. And it's not made of cattail flour!

HARLAN

And this trout. Damn.

ROBERT

Eat slow. Your stomachs have been living on jerky for weeks. They won't know what to do with this.

CALLOWAY

Good luck with that.

Everyone ignores the advice. The sound of people eating like they mean it. For a moment, nobody talks. They just eat.

A beat. The inn noise around them - someone at the next table arguing about a trade.

INN PATRON 1

That's not worth three candles and you know it. Be serious.

LIV

The marker post at the gate. They've banished seventeen people from here.

CALLOWAY

You saw that?

LIV

Hard to miss. Births on one side. Banishments on the other.

MIRA

A city that posts its count wants you to know it keeps order.

LIV

We saw a flogging today. In the square.

MIRA

What?

LIV

A man tied to a post. Twenty strokes. Parish was there - she announced the sentence herself.

HARLAN

Theft from the storehouse. Second offense.

LIV

They also have a school. In the Hearth. Thirty-two kids, two teachers. A woman over there told us - Parish said if they don't teach the kids, they're just surviving.

MIRA

(quiet)

That sounds like her. You can take the principal out of the school...

A log shifts in the fire. Someone drops a bowl across the room - the clatter, a beat, then laughter from the nearest table.

HARLAN

So. Supplies. Where are we?

MIRA

Medical kit is covered. What I brought back tonight, plus what we had - we're in good shape.

ROBERT

Map is covered. We know the route.

SARAH

Coming through, coming through...

CALLOWAY

We need rope. Ours went in the creek with the saddlebags. And ammunition - I've got six arrows left and Harlan's down to maybe twenty rounds.

HARLAN

Cinch strap on Liv's saddle is fraying too. One hard ride and it snaps.

A cat meows, jumps off a shelf behind the bar - the thud, bottles rattling.

LIV

I can fix that myself with a piece of leather. But we need food. Two weeks' worth, right?

CALLOWAY

We can trade for most of that in the Marketplace tomorrow.

MIRA

I'll go back to the clinic. The doctor wants me there anyway. I can trade labor for whatever else we need.

ROBERT

One more day. We resupply, rest the horses, and leave the morning after.

LIV

(quiet)

Can I say something?

ROBERT

Of course.

LIV

This is the first time since Belle Creek that I've felt... normal. Just sitting in a room with food and people laughing. I know we have to leave. I just want to remember what this feels like.

Nobody answers right away. Because they all feel it.

The fire pops. The inn hums around them.

INN PATRON 2

Well, I'm asking for another room. There's a draft coming through my wall you could fly a bird through.

SARAH

Hey! You break it, you buy it. That's your second mug this week, Davies.

HARLAN

(quiet)

Yeah, kid. Me too.

SCENE 10 - "MEETING BORIS"

INT. LAST PINT INN - LATER

The group starts to break up. Chairs pushing back. Mira heading upstairs. Robert folding the map. Liv yawning.

MIRA
That was fantastic.

ROBERT
Yeah, we needed that.

HARLAN
You guys hit the sack. I'm going to get one more drink, and check on the horses. Be up in a bit.

MIRA
Sounds good, goodnight.

LIV
'Night, Harlan

Footsteps to the bar.

BORIS
Sarah, where are the... Never mind.

A stool pulled out. Harlan sits.

HARLAN
One more cider.

The pour. The slide of a mug across the bar.

BORIS
Montana.

HARLAN
We have a sign on us?

BORIS
I notice things.

HARLAN
Sarah tells us you're from Russia.

BORIS
Stalingrad. I came to visit a girl I met on the internet. You remember the internet?

HARLAN
Barely.

BORIS

I flew from Stalingrad to Spokane.
Longest trip of my life. Three days
later - no more planes. No more
internet. No more Stalingrad, for
all I know.

HARLAN

Stalingrad held the line against
the Nazis. I bet it's doing
alright.

BORIS

Hm. Yes.

HARLAN

So, you just... stayed here?

BORIS

Where was I going to go? She was
here. The building was empty -
previous owner ran away, left the
door unlocked. So we cleaned it up,
started pouring drinks.

A beat. Boris wiping down the bar - the squeak of a cloth on
wood.

BORIS (CONT'D)

Everybody who walks through that
door has a story. I don't ask. You
want to tell me, wait till your
second drink.

HARLAN

(lifting his mug)
This is my third.

BORIS

Then I am listening.

A beat. The fire. The room thinning out. The falls, faint
through the walls.

HARLAN

Maybe another time.

BORIS

Another time.

Harlan finishes his cider.

Pushes off the stool - the wince, the ribs. Walks toward the
back door to check on the horses.

The door opens - night air, the sound of horses shifting in stalls - then closes.

SCENE 11 - "BREAKFAST"

INT. THE LAST PINT - MORNING

A rooster crows.

Footsteps on the stairs. The creak of old wood. The group coming down into the inn.

The morning is a different animal from last night. A few early risers at tables. Sarah sweeping up.

INN PATRON 3

(low, at a nearby table)
I told him, you can't plant that
early. Ground's still frozen.

INN PATRON 4

He never listens. Remember last
year?

INN PATRON 3

I try not to.

LIV

(stretching, yawning)
I slept eight hours. I forgot what
eight straight hours of sleep feels
like.

HARLAN

Keeper slept ten. I had to push him
off the bed.

Keeper's claws on the stairs behind them, trotting down, nose already working.

SARAH

(from across the room)
Morning. You folks want breakfast?
Boris is doing eggs.

ROBERT

(to the group)
We have time?

MIRA
We have time.

INT. THE LAST PINT - MORNING

The sizzle of eggs on a pan. Boris behind the bar, cooking.

BORIS
(calling out)
Five eggs, five bread, five milk.

Sarah lays the plates out.

SARAH
There you go. Enjoy.

LIV
(to Mira)
I could get used to this.

MIRA
Ha! Don't.

But she's smiling when she says it.

They eat. The simple sounds of breakfast - forks on plates, bread being torn, the crunch of crust. Keeper under the table, gnawing on something Boris tossed him.

ROBERT
Alright. Last day. Calloway, you're trading for rope and arrows in the market. Harlan, the cinch strap and dried food. Mira -

MIRA
Clinic. I told Parish I'd be back, she's a good friend to have here. And there's a woman close to her due date - I want to check on her before we go.

ROBERT
Liv?

LIV
I'll go with Mira today. You can teach me a little more?

MIRA
I'd like that.

ROBERT

Okay. We meet back here by midday.
Pack up, and we ride out tomorrow
at dawn.

Chairs pushing back. The group splitting up again. The door opening - the market noise now fuller, the city waking up properly.

Outside on the street. The group starting to split up. Robert already walking, studying the map.

From a porch nearby - a woman's voice, warm and exasperated.

SPOKANE MOTHER

Hold still. You're making it worse.

SPOKANE GIRL

You're pulling too hard!

SPOKANE MOTHER

Because you won't hold still. Come here. Turn around.

The girl groans. The mother laughs. The sound of hair being gathered, pulled back, tied off. Ordinary. Practiced. A thing they've done a thousand mornings.

Liv's footsteps stop.

Mira's stop a step later.

Robert's keep going. Five steps. Six. Then he notices.

ROBERT

(from ahead)

You two coming?

A beat. The mother on the porch is humming now. Finishing the braid.

LIV

(quiet, to Mira)

She hums while she does it.

Mira doesn't answer right away. The humming drifts from the porch.

MIRA

Yeah.

That's all. Mira puts her hand on Liv's shoulder - just for a second - and they start walking.

MIRA (CONT'D)

Come on.

SCENE 12 - "REMOVAL"

EXT. THE MARKETPLACE - MIDDAY

The Marketplace at its busiest. The full noise of a working city.

A BUTCHER chopping on a block - the heavy thwack of a cleaver, the scrape of meat being pushed aside.

BUTCHER

Venison! Elk! Rabbit if you've got
the coin!

A TINKER at a table, hammering dents out of a pot - the ring of it, tinny and musical.

The town crier making his rounds, bell ringing.

CRIER

North bridge open! Salt caravan
departing at noon - last chance for
salt, kelp, wool! Work detail for
the south wall - half-day's credit!

Two men loading a cart with firewood, counting splits aloud.

VENDOR 1

- Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen -

A goat on a rope bleating at passersby.

A child feeding chickens in a pen between two stalls, the birds pecking and clucking.

The smithy going full blast now - the bellows pumping, the hiss of hot metal dropped in water.

Liv and Mira walking together through it all, carrying supplies from the clinic - the clink of bundled goods, the rustle of cloth sacks.

LIV

Last night was the best night I've
had since we left home.

MIRA
The cider helped.

LIV
The cider helped a lot.

A FARRIER shoeing a horse nearby - the rasp of the file on hoof, the horse stamping once.

LIV (CONT'D)
You like it here.

MIRA
I like the clinic. I like that there's a school. And that someone figured out how to keep two thousand people alive without electricity.

LIV
And you like Parish.

MIRA
(a beat)
I like Parish.

They walk. The market noise around them - a vendor haggling with a customer, a child calling for her mother, the blacksmith's hammer steady and rhythmic.

LIV
Do you think we could ever -

The sound comes first.

Not a siren. Not an alarm. A tone. Deep, layered, harmonic - almost choral, but metallic. It vibrates in the chest before the ears register it. It doesn't start. It arrives. As if it was always there and someone just turned up the volume.

The vendors go quiet, one by one. The butcher stops mid-call. The tinker's hammer stops. The conversations drop away like someone's turning them off in sequence. Until there's nothing but the tone.

LIV (CONT'D)
(whisper)
A nanny.

MIRA
(grabbing Liv's arm,
sharp)
Get behind the stall. Now. Move.

The scrape of their boots as Mira pulls Liv behind a market stall. Their backs against the wood. Mira's breathing controlled, deliberate. Liv's is not.

Around them: the sound of the city clearing. Doors slamming. Footsteps running – but organized, rehearsed. A mother's voice, urgent but not screaming.

MOTHER

Inside, inside, now.

A stall cover being yanked down. The clatter of tools swept off a table. Someone hustling away.

LIV

Everyone's hiding. They've done this before.

MIRA

(whisper)

Don't move.

The tone deepens. A pressure drop – Liv's ears pop.

LIV

(gasping)

I can feel it. In my chest. Like it's pushing on my ribs.

MIRA

I know. Breathe slow.

A scanning pulse sweeps across the square. Low, rhythmic, alien. It passes over them – the wood of the stall vibrating against their backs. Holds. Moves on.

Then the tone shifts. Narrows. Focuses into a single point.

LIV

(whispering)

There's someone still out there. He's just standing in the middle of the square.

MIRA

(barely audible)

Oh no...

LIV

Why isn't he running?

MIRA

Because he knows.

BYSTANDER 1
(a horrified whisper, from
a doorway nearby)
Jesus, that's Colter. He's the one?

The focused tone holds on him. Then - his breathing. Audible. Slow. Controlled. The breathing of a man who's decided something.

JESS
Colter! What's happening? What did
you do?!

COLTER
(quiet, steady)
Jess. I'm so sorry, darling.

A low rumble. An electronic whip-like crack, as the beam locks on.

The sound of small stones scraping across cobblestone. Dust hissing as it lifts. A low rumble, like an earthquake. Something creaking - fabric pulled taut.

LIV
He's - oh god. His feet. He's off
the ground. Mira, he's... floating.

MIRA
(hand on Liv's shoulder,
iron grip)
I see it.

LIV
He's not fighting it. He's not even
-

JESS
Colter!!

A high-frequency whine building. Birds exploding off the rooftops - the clatter of a hundred wings, panicked, filling the air above them.

LIV
(voice breaking)
He's just floating up in that beam
of light. Like - levitating...

A gust of displaced air slams downward - canvas ripping, crates toppling, the stall they're hiding behind shuddering.

Then a sound like thunder in reverse. An implosion - air rushing inward to fill a space that just emptied. A crack that isn't a crack.

Silence rushing in to fill it.

LIV (CONT'D)
(barely a breath)
He's... gone.

The scanning pulse resumes. Neutral. Methodical. As if nothing happened. It sweeps the square again. Passes over them. Holds on them - two seconds, three.

Liv stops breathing.

It moves on.

The tone fades. The pressure lifts. The thing rises and drifts north. Gone.

Silence. The deepest silence Liv has ever heard in a place with two thousand people.

Then: a door creaking open. One set of footsteps, tentative, on cobblestone. A child crying behind a wall. Someone picks up a dropped basket - the scrape of it. A man coughs.

Slowly, painfully, the city starts to move again. A vendor begins to call out, stops, tries again.

The smithy hammer resumes - one strike, then nothing, then another. The fiddle player from yesterday is silent.

LIV (CONT'D)
(shaking)
He didn't fight.

MIRA
No.

LIV
Could he have?

MIRA
No.

LIV
Then why did he stay? He could have run.

MIRA
Where?

A long beat. The market reassembling around them, but wrong. Quieter. People moving with their heads down.

LIV

It didn't - it didn't seem like it hurt him. But one second he was floating, and then he was just... gone. To where?

MIRA

Nobody knows. Noone's ever come back to say. Honestly, I didn't believe the rumors.

(barely audible)

But we just saw a removal.

The town crier's bell. The city marking what happened.

Just the bell, three times, slow.

TOWN CRIER

John Colter. Removed.

The bell rings three more times.