KAELITHRA

THE ARCHIVIST OF THE UNREMEMBERED

A READING SAMPLE

CHAPTER ONE · THE LAST MEMORY

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Chapter One

The Last Memory

Tomas Edrin had forgotten his mother's face.

He knew this because, on certain mornings, he still tried to remember it. He would close his eyes and search for the woman who had once leaned over his bed when thunder shook the windows, whose hands had smelled of flour and lavender, whose voice had called his name from somewhere beyond the garden wall. There should have been a face attached to those things.

There wasn't anymore.

Tomas opened his eyes. Rain whispered against the glass, and the small room was dark except for the amber glow of the fire and the single candle burning beside his bed. Beyond the window, evening had settled over the hills, turning the distant trees into black shapes against a colorless sky. Someone had opened the window earlier—his granddaughter, perhaps. He couldn't remember. Cold air moved through the room, carrying the smell of wet earth.

Tomas drew the blanket higher against his chest. Ninety-three years. That was what they told him. He found the number amusing. It sounded far too large to belong to him. There were days he felt every one of those years in his bones. Other days, if he kept his eyes closed, he was seven again and running barefoot down a road that no longer existed.

That road he remembered perfectly.

"Oakhaven," Tomas whispered.

Nobody answered. He hadn't expected anyone to. His family had heard the stories often enough: Oakhaven, the village beside the river; Oakhaven and its little stone bridge; Oakhaven and the mill; Oakhaven and the bakery where Mara Bell baked honey cakes every Friday morning and always pretended not to notice when children stole pieces while they cooled beside the window.

And the crooked bell tower.

Tomas smiled at the thought of it. The tower had leaned so badly to the east that every winter the villagers wagered on whether the weight of the snow would finally bring it down. It never did. Not while Tomas lived there.

He wondered if it had fallen afterward.

No.

Of course it hadn't.

There had been no afterward.

His eyes drifted toward the ceiling as the rain continued its soft rhythm against the window. He could still see the village, not as ruins, not as charcoal and broken stone, but alive. That was the strange cruelty of memory. Everyone else spoke of Oakhaven as though it were a tragedy.

Tomas remembered it as home.

He remembered the river shining beneath the morning sun and old Berrin sitting outside the smithy with his boots propped on an overturned barrel. He remembered racing his brother through the market.

His brother.

Tomas frowned.

The name did not come.

He searched for it, reaching through the fog that had slowly consumed more of his past with each passing year. Nothing. For a moment, panic fluttered somewhere inside him, but then it passed. So much had already passed.

Names first. Faces later. Voices after that.

But Oakhaven remained.

Always Oakhaven.

His granddaughter had once brought a historian to see him, a young man from Veyr with ink stains on his fingers and too many questions. Where exactly had the village stood? How many people lived there? Was there a chapel? Who governed it? Were there records?

Tomas had answered as best he could.

The historian had written everything down. Weeks later he returned with maps, but none showed Oakhaven. The provincial records contained no mention of it. The tax ledgers had been destroyed in a fire nearly seventy years earlier. The old northern road had been abandoned, and even the river had changed course.

The historian had apologized. Tomas remembered that clearly, and even now the memory almost made him laugh. As though Tomas needed an apology for having lived somewhere the world had misplaced.

The young man had promised to return.

He never did.

Perhaps he is dead now too.

Tomas found that possibility increasingly common.

He turned his head toward the window and, for a moment, thought someone was standing outside. A woman. Pale and motionless beneath the rain.

Tomas blinked. There was nobody there. Only his own reflection in the dark glass.

"Fool," he whispered.

His reflection looked very old.

He closed his eyes again, and Oakhaven returned.

Summer sunlight warmed his face. He was running, his legs small and quick beneath him, bare feet striking packed earth. Someone was chasing him—a boy, his brother.

What was his name?

Tomas could hear him laughing. He tried again to remember, but the name refused to come.

Then he heard the bell.

That ridiculous crooked tower.

Three chimes.

No.

Four.

The memory shifted, and Tomas felt something inside him loosen. Not painfully. More like a knot finally giving way. The room seemed farther away. The rain softened until it was almost gone.

He could smell bread.

Not the bread his granddaughter baked.

Mara Bell's bread. Honey and cinnamon. He hadn't smelled that in eighty-six years.

Tomas smiled.

There you are.

Oakhaven stood before him. Children ran between market stalls. His mother was somewhere nearby. He knew she was. If he could just turn around—

Something white moved through the memory.

Tomas opened his eyes. A moth rested upon his blanket.

He stared at it. Its wings were almost transparent, delicate veins of silver running through them and catching the candlelight whenever they moved. It should not have been there. Not in winter. Not with the rain.

Yet its presence did not frighten him.

Quite the opposite.

For reasons he could not explain, Tomas suddenly felt less alone.

"Have you come for something?" he asked.

The moth opened its wings and closed them again.

Tomas smiled. "There's not much left."

The moth remained.

His breathing had become shallow, and he knew what was happening. He had watched his wife die many years ago, his eldest son after that, then friends and neighbors and people whose names he could no longer recall. Death did not seem particularly mysterious anymore.

Only inconveniently final.

Tomas looked toward the window one last time.

"Oakhaven," he whispered.

He wanted someone to hear it. Someone had to.

"Oakhaven."

The moth lifted from the blanket and circled once above him.

In the final moment of Tomas Edrin's life, he remembered everything.

The stone bridge. The mill. The crooked tower. Mara Bell. Berrin. His brother—Edric. His name had been Edric. And then his mother. Tomas saw her face. He had thought it was lost.

She was beautiful. Not because she had been beautiful, but because she was his mother.

She turned toward him in the sunlight, her mouth forming his name.

Tomas reached for her. His fingers moved once against the blanket and then stopped.

The white moth landed upon his shoulder.

And Oakhaven disappeared from the living world.



Far beyond that world, something awakened.

There was no sound. Sound behaved strangely in the Vault. Silence did not mean the absence of noise there; silence was substance. It gathered between shelves, pooled beneath staircases, and drifted through corridors older than kingdoms.

The Vault of Vacancy had no known boundaries. Shelves rose into darkness without reaching a ceiling. Corridors extended farther than mortal sight. Stairways climbed toward floors that could not be seen and descended toward depths for which no map existed.

Millions of books rested upon those shelves.

Perhaps billions.

Kaelithra had stopped counting long ago.

Most were closed. Some were blank. Others contained histories no living tongue could pronounce.

At a small table beneath a silver lamp, Kaelithra lifted her head.

Knock.

Kaelithra stopped.

Knock.

She looked toward the shelves.

Knock.

Silence.

Nothing knocked in the Vault.

Kaelithra listened.

Nothing came again.

She had been reading about a woman whose name had vanished from the world four hundred and eleven years earlier. The woman had lived seventy-two years, raised five children, buried two, loved one man, and hated another. She had once spent an entire afternoon searching for a blue ribbon she'd been wearing around her wrist.

History had not recorded her. History recorded kings, wars, famines and treaties.

History had no use for blue ribbons.

Kaelithra did.

Her pale fingers rested against the page.

Somewhere in the Vault, a book opened.

Kaelithra listened. The sound could not have reached her through any ordinary distance, but distance meant little here. She knew immediately where it had occurred.

She closed the book before her, and the silver lamp dimmed.

Kaelithra stood. Her robes fell around her in pale layers, their fabric catching hints of silver and pearl beneath the lamplight. At her side stood a staff fashioned from ancient petrified wood, twisted as though it had spent centuries beneath running water.

She extended her hand.

The Silt-Staff of Lethe moved into it. Above its crooked crown floated a single iridescent pearl. Whispers stirred within it. Thousands. Millions. Fragments of things no one else remembered.

I never told him.

The door was red.

Her name was—

We buried them beneath the—

Please.

Kaelithra closed her fingers around the staff, and the voices faded.

She began to walk, and the Vault shifted around her as though anticipating her destination. Endless shelves passed silently on either side, their dark surfaces untouched by dust. There had never been dust here. Dust belonged to things abandoned by time, and nothing entrusted to the Vault was ever abandoned.

Kaelithra passed beneath an archway, turned left, and descended thirteen steps before entering a corridor lined with books belonging to forgotten dynasties. The journey should have taken hours.

It took less than a minute.

The Vault knew where she intended to go.

A book waited upon a shelf.

Its cover was gray. There was nothing remarkable about it—no gold lettering, no ornamentation, no jeweled clasp.

Kaelithra stopped before it.

The book had not existed moments earlier.

She removed it from the shelf.

Warm.

New arrivals often were.

A life—or a history—entered its shelves when the last continuous living memory of it was lost… Stories were not memories. Records were not memories. A name carved into stone was not a memory. Memory required a witness. And once that final chain of living memory had been broken, the forgotten belonged to the Vault.

Kaelithra opened the cover. The first page was blank, but as she watched, a black dot appeared on the vellum, followed by another. Ink spread outward in thin curling lines. Letters formed. Words followed.

A name appeared.

Oakhaven.

Kaelithra's eyes remained upon the word as more ink appeared. A road. A river. A bakery. A stone bridge. A crooked bell tower. Names flowed across the pages—Mara Bell, Berrin Hale, Edric Edrin, and hundreds more.

Lives returned in ink at the precise moment they vanished from memory.

Kaelithra turned a page, then another.

The village had been destroyed eighty-six years earlier. Fire. Raiders. Thirty-seven survivors. Twenty-two died within the following decade, nine within the decade after. The remainder scattered, carrying Oakhaven with them into distant towns, marriages, children and graves.

One by one, the memories disappeared.

Until Tomas.

The final witness.

The last living mind in which Oakhaven still existed.

Now he too is gone.

Kaelithra touched the name with one finger.

"Tomas Edrin."

The Vault accepted the words.

Somewhere among the endless shelves, a space closed.

Oakhaven had been forgotten.

Therefore, Oakhaven belonged to her.

Kaelithra closed the book. For a moment she stood motionless, considering the ordinary weight of it in her hands. A village had disappeared from the living world, yet here it remained, reduced to ink and vellum and waiting memory.

She opened the book again.

Not to read.

To remember.

The pearl above the Silt-Staff brightened. Silver light flowed across the vellum, and the ink lifted from the page in thin strands like smoke.

Kaelithra placed one hand upon the book.

The Vault disappeared.



Sunlight touched her face.

Kaelithra stood in the middle of a road as a cart passed directly through her. Horse, wheels, driver, and cargo moved across her body as though she were made of mist.

She did not react.

She had experienced the sensation too many times.

Around her, Oakhaven lived.

The village was smaller than Tomas remembered. Memories often did that. Childhood made everything enormous. The crooked bell tower stood near the center of the settlement, leaning noticeably eastward.

Kaelithra regarded it for a moment.

So Tomas had remembered that correctly.

A woman passed carrying a basket of apples. She did not see Kaelithra. Nobody did. Children ran along the road while a dog barked after them. A blacksmith hammered iron beneath an awning. Smoke rose from chimneys into an impossibly blue sky.

Kaelithra inhaled.

Bread.

Honey.

Cinnamon.

Mara Bell.

She turned toward the bakery.

She could have remained within Tomas's memory, confined to what he had seen and understood. She didn't need to. The memory was merely the door. Once she crossed its threshold, the forgotten world was preserved around her. She could witness what had been preserved there, but she could not become part of it. The people within could neither see nor hear her. She could not touch them, nor could anything she did alter what had already occurred.

Kaelithra walked.

Mortals passed through her as their voices filled the street with arguments, laughter, gossip, complaints, and plans for tomorrow. None of them knew tomorrow had already happened. None knew their homes would burn or that their names would disappear.

Kaelithra knew.

She always knew.

A boy raced past her, seven years old and barefoot, laughing as another boy chased him.

"Tomas!"

The first boy looked back.

Edric caught him and shoved him into a stack of empty baskets. Both collapsed laughing.

Kaelithra stopped and watched them.

Tomas.

Young.

Alive.

His entire life, still ahead of him.

The old man who had died moments earlier existed here only as a possibility. Kaelithra had witnessed this contradiction countless times. Mortals found time difficult because they experienced it in one direction.

Kaelithra did not have that luxury.

She had seen infants after attending their funerals. She had watched weddings after preserving memories of divorces and listened to soldiers promise their mothers they would return home after cataloging the places where their bones would eventually be found.

The dead were rarely dead inside the Vault.

They were merely elsewhere.

Tomas scrambled to his feet. Edric ran, and Tomas chased him.

Kaelithra watched until both disappeared around the corner.

Then she turned toward the bell tower.

Three chimes sounded.

She paused.

Tomas had remembered four.

A trivial difference.

Nothing more.

Memory was imperfect.

Kaelithra continued walking.

The village existed around her in extraordinary detail. A woman argued over the price of onions. A carpenter cursed at a warped board. A young couple stood behind the chapel pretending they weren't holding hands. Beneath an oak tree, a man slept while his sheep wandered steadily toward someone else's field.

All of it is gone.

All of it hers.

Kaelithra reached the bridge. The river moved beneath it, sunlight breaking across its surface. She rested one hand upon the stone railing.

Her fingers passed through.

She looked down at the water.

She could see it. Hear it. Smell it.

But she could not feel its coldness.

That was the price of witnessing.

Kaelithra had never considered it a price.

"Tomas!"

She turned toward the voice.

A woman stood at the end of the bridge. Dark hair. Blue dress. Flour dusted across one cheek.

Tomas's mother.

The boy appeared from between two buildings, and his mother placed her hands upon her hips. Tomas slowed. Even from this distance, Kaelithra could see him calculating whether running away would improve his situation.

It apparently would not.

He approached.

His mother said something Kaelithra could not hear, then reached down and wiped dirt from his face. Tomas protested. She kissed his forehead. For one brief moment, Kaelithra remembered an old man's final breath.

She was beautiful.

Kaelithra watched them walk away together.

Then she looked toward the bell tower.

Four chimes rang.

Kaelithra's head tilted slightly.

She waited.

Nothing happened.

The village continued around her. A breeze moved through the trees. Somewhere a child laughed.

Three chimes before.

Four now.

Kaelithra studied the tower.

Memory was imperfect. She knew this. The Vault did not preserve perfect truth. It preserved what had been remembered.

There was a difference. Contradictions within memory were nothing unusual; two people could carry different versions of the same moment, and the Vault preserved both.

Still, Kaelithra stared at the bell tower longer than necessary before finally turning away.

Behind her, high above the village, the bell moved once.

No sound followed.

Kaelithra did not see it.

She walked toward the road where Tomas and his mother had disappeared.

And somewhere impossibly far away, within the endless silence of the Vault of Vacancy, a single word vanished from a page.

Then returned.

No one noticed.

Not even the goddess who remembered everything.



THE ARCHIVE AWAITS

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