

The Doctrine of Masks — Sample

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The Doctrine of Masks

Book One

by E.V. Marren

Sample — First Three Chapters

Copyright

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First edition.

This is a preview sample. Not for resale.

Dedication

For everyone who has organized their silence into a filing system and is waiting for someone to read the margins.

Epigraph

The filing system for that kind of cost does not exist in any archive I have ever catalogued.

Content Warnings

This book contains themes and depictions that some readers may find distressing:

- **Institutional homophobia** depicted as systemic erasure through bureaucratic classification of same-sex desire as “spiritual misalignment” treatable by cognitive restructuring. The oppression is structural and administrative, not depicted as individual cruelty.
- **Cognitive restructuring** as an analog for conversion therapy. The process is shown through its aftermath, not in graphic procedural detail. Characters return from restructuring with targeted memories and personality traits removed.
- **Body horror** in the form of Dissolution, a brief and visceral depiction of a body folding along inhuman geometry. One scene shows a post-Dissolution body. The horror is in the specificity, not the duration.
- **Psychological manipulation** through institutional surveillance, behavioral monitoring, and the sustained pressure of concealment under threat.
- **Anxiety and hypervigilance** as lived conditions of the protagonist, depicted through his internal monologue and compulsive cataloguing behaviors.
- **Grief and loss** of close relationships through state action.

The author has endeavored to treat these themes with care, specificity, and respect for the lived experiences they reflect.

Chapter 1

Edric Ashgrove

The Censor was standing at the east gate when I arrived, and my first thought was: *they found the dead drop.*

He was not looking at me. He was checking identity seals on the morning queue, a routine procedure that happened perhaps once a month and meant nothing, and I knew it meant nothing, and the knowledge did not stop my fingers from closing around the brass key in my pocket with a grip that would leave marks on my palm for the next hour. The key opened nothing. It fit no lock in the building. But it was the one object on my person that connected Edric Ashgrove, junior archivist, to a network of people the man at the gate was paid to find.

I reached the gate. I pressed my identity seal against the ward-plate. The tingle of verification magic ran through my hand and I did not flinch, because flinching was data, and data was currency, and I could not afford to spend currency in a building where every transaction was observed.

“Proceed,” the Censor said, without looking at my face.

I proceeded. The stone corridor swallowed me. The Cathedral Axis hummed in my sternum, the way it hummed every morning, a vibration that lived in the bones and had lived there for seven years and would live there until I was dead or restructured, whichever the Ministry arranged first. The lamps burned cold. Everything in the Ministry of Seals burned cold. I unclenched my jaw. I walked to Archive Hall 7.

The hall smelled of classification ink and old paper and the chemical sweetness of thoughtfire leaking from the gas-lines. I hung my coat on the third peg. Always the third.

“Morning, Ashgrove.”

“Morning, Gannon.”

Gannon was fifty-three, red-faced, possessed of a laugh that suggested a man with no secrets, which in the Ministry of Seals meant either he genuinely had none or he was better at this than I was. Filed under *colleague, ambient, maintenance-level social engagement required*.

“Rough night?” he said, without looking up from his ledger.

“The usual. Couldn’t sleep.”

This was true. I rarely lied to Gannon. The trick was that truth and performance were not mutually exclusive. I could tell him the truth about my insomnia and he would hear a clerk with a restless disposition. He would not hear the hours between midnight and four spent navigating flooded tunnels beneath the seventh ring, ensuring that a network of forbidden-knowledge couriers continued to operate despite the best efforts of the institution that employed us both.

I sat. The desk was iron and oak, bolted to the floor. My chair was iron and discomfort, also bolted to the floor, because the Ministry of Seals did not trust its employees with mobile furniture. The ouroboros of bureaucratic paranoia. I kept my theory about this in the same mental drawer where I kept jokes that would get me restructured if I said them aloud.

Truth was a filing system. You didn’t destroy the dangerous documents. You misfiled them, slipped them between pages so mundane that no one would think to look.

The morning’s first document was a trade manifest from the Anvils district. Factory over-reporting thoughtfire consumption by eleven percent, either an accounting error or a siphoning attempt. I noted the discrepancy, cross-referenced against previous flags, classified it grey-restricted in forty seconds. The second document was a census amendment from the fifth ring. The third, a cargo requisition with a seal that had been reapplied, the wax still bearing the ghost-ridge of an earlier imprint beneath the fresh one, which I noted without indicating that I had noted it.

My desk held a classification ledger, ink-pot, three pens of graduated nib width, a seal-press for restricted documents, and a brass ruler that had never measured anything. The documents arrived in the tray with colored tags indicating their preliminary grade: white for open, grey for restricted, red for sealed and vaulted. I processed them with the mechanical fluency of a man who had made blandness into a career and a career into a disguise. I was, by all metrics the Ministry cared to measure, an excellent archivist.

A half-masked enforcement officer entered the hall mid-morning. He had no routine business in Archive Hall 7. He walked the aisle between the desks with a slow, cataloguing gait. I kept my eyes on my document. But I was aware of him the way the body is aware of weather changes, in the skin before the mind can intervene.

When he passed my desk, he paused. Two seconds. Three. I felt his attention on the back of my neck like a thumb pressing into the base of my skull. My hand rested steady on the document, because I had trained it to be steady.

I did not look up. But in the peripheral space where discipline loosened its grip, I caught the width of his shoulders beneath the uniform coat. The line of his jaw below the mask's edge, clean-shaved, the skin there catching the cold light from the gas-lines. The way his hand rested on his belt — fingers slightly curled, the posture of a body trained for controlled force — and the architecture of his forearm where the sleeve had been pushed back a quarter-inch.

The observation lasted less than a second. I buried it with the efficiency of a man sealing a document before the ink is dry. I did not look. I did not catalogue. I refused the inventory. The inventory persisted anyway, in the peripheral register where the body kept records the mind was not authorized to review — the shape of him, the heat of proximity, the weight of another man's presence occupying the air behind my chair. I set my jaw. I held my pen steady. The body was a subordinate system that could be overruled by seven years of practice, and I overruled it with the blunt force of a man stamping *classified* on a document he wished he had never read.

He moved on. Walked to the service door. Left without speaking to anyone.

I picked up the next document. The hum in my sternum shifted. A quarter-tone lower. The Cathedral Axis, a mile-high spire of black iron and prayer-etched stone visible from every point in the city, changed its pitch with the weather, the season, and occasionally for no reason the Ministry could explain. No one discussed the shifts. No one questioned the Axis.

The crate arrived at half past ten.

The Ministry received crates from the other six Ministries on a rotating schedule, each containing documents or materials requiring classification before storage. This crate had been tagged with a seal I recognized but had never seen applied to a Hall 7 delivery. A Seventh Seal, the inverted key glyph, stamped in wax the color of dried blood. Seventh Seal meant *contents classified above the clearance of all personnel in the receiving hall. Do not open. Transfer to Vault Twenty-One upon receipt.*

Vault Twenty-One was a number I had heard exactly twice in seven years. Both times in whispers. Both times followed by a silence that suggested the speaker regretted the whisper.

I signed the receipt ledger. I did not open the crate. Three hand-spans by two, heavy for its size, no rattle when I lifted it. Origin stamp: Ministry of Lenses, which was unusual. Lenses dealt in observation, the permissible edges of scientific inquiry. They did not generate Seventh Seal material. Or they had not, until now.

The smell reached me through the seal joints. Chemical, familiar — the sweet-burning undertone of concentrated thoughtfire — but beneath it, something else. Organic. Almost meaty. Warm, the way living things are warm. It pressed against my sinuses and the back of my throat and my stomach clenched with a recognition my mind could not yet articulate.

I lifted the crate. As I turned toward the vault corridor, the wax seal cracked along a hairline fault, the lid separating a quarter-inch from the body. Light escaped through the gap.

Warmer than lamplight. Warmer than thoughtfire.

Something warmer. Something that pulsed once against my palm like a heartbeat conducted through wood, and heat bloomed across my skin — the sudden, intimate warmth of pressing your hand against living tissue, against something that wanted to be found. The light was amber-gold and it breathed. My pulse matched its rhythm for one staggering second, locked into synchrony with something inside a sealed crate that should have contained nothing alive, nothing warm, nothing capable of rhythm, and the smell thickened, the organic undertone blooming into something that bypassed my sinuses and registered directly in the gut, the deep animal certainty that whatever was inside this crate was not an artifact or a document or any category I had been trained to classify.

I pressed the lid shut and held it there. My palm burned. Gently. The heat of a fever, the heat of blood close to the surface, as if the wood had become skin.

Gannon was three desks away, bent over his ledger. He did not look up. No one looked up. I walked to the Vault Twenty-One holding area with the crate sealed against my chest and the lid held shut with both hands and the light pressing against the crack like something bewildered by its own confinement, and my heartbeat was loud in my ears and the catalogue of questions forming in my skull was the kind that did not want to be filed — the kind that wanted to be answered.

I filed the encounter under *investigate, later, carefully* and returned to my desk with hands that performed steadiness and a mind that was already reclassifying its understanding of what the Ministry of Lenses had been doing in its restricted laboratories.

By noon, I had classified another thirty documents and exchanged the correct amount of collegial conversation with Gannon. The weather. The tram delays. A carefully neutral opinion about the new regulation requiring all Ministry employees to submit weekly dietary logs for the Department of Roots' nutritional surveillance program. I sighed about the dietary logs. A small rebellion. Gannon sighed with me. We bonded, briefly, over the shared inconvenience of institutional overreach.

Lunch I ate at my desk, a habit that read as dedication but served as armor against a communal dining hall where forty-three colleagues might observe the rigid deliberation with which I managed the act of appearing unremarkable. Afterward, Overseer Voss visited the hall. Calren Voss. Silver-haired, thin as a blade turned sideways, possessed of a smile that performed warmth the way a gas lamp performed sunlight. Technically luminous. Thermally void. His hands were behind his back, which was the inspection walk. I exhaled. Marginally.

"Ashgrove. Status on the Kriel acquisition archives?"

"Sealed and indexed, sir. Vault Fourteen, subsection nine through twelve. Cross-referenced against the original Tongues disposition and the Anvils material survey."

"Efficient."

"Thank you, sir."

He moved on. I had given him exactly what he needed: precision, deference, no evidence of an interior life. Voss did not want employees with interior lives. He wanted mechanisms. I performed mechanism with a fluency that should have disturbed me more than it did, but self-awareness without behavioral change was something of a specialty.

I did, however, allow myself to wonder whether Voss had noticed the Seventh Seal crate. Whether he had authorized its delivery to Hall 7 or whether someone above him had sent it through channels he did not control. The Ministry of Lenses did not report to the Ministry of Seals. The Seventh Seal was

a classification that transcended individual Ministry jurisdictions. Whatever was inside that crate had been living and warm and its pulse had synchronized with mine, and I could not determine whether this concerned me more as an archivist who did not understand what he had handled or as a man whose body had responded to the crate's warmth with a recognition his mind could not yet name.

At half past three, Gannon mentioned the Silt.

"Heard there's been trouble down in seven," he said, meaning the seventh ring, the half-drowned district that clung to the city's outer edge like silt to a riverbank, which was, in fact, how it had gotten its name. "Something about disturbances. The Roots sent a medical team last week and they came back." He paused. Reconsidered. "Well. They came back."

"Disturbances?" I kept my voice at the calibrated level of *mild professional curiosity, insufficient to pursue*.

"Structural, supposedly. The undercrofts flooding again. You know how it gets when the river rises." He shrugged. "I'm sure it's nothing."

I filed his certainty under *things people say when they are not certain*. The Silt's undercrofts happened to contain the operational heart of an organization I had built from nothing over five years, and *disturbances* was not a word I could shelve without examination.

"Probably nothing," I agreed.

The Ministry released its workers at six. I cleaned my pen nibs with the care of a man who understood that the difference between a suspected dissident and a reliable clerk often came down to whether his ink-pot was capped at the end of the day. I stood.

My hand went to my pocket. It did this without instruction, the way a tongue finds a chipped tooth. The brass key was there. It opened nothing. It fit no lock I had ever tested. But I could still feel the shape of a name in my mouth even though the Ministry had removed it from every record, every census, every document that might have confirmed she had existed.

The key opened nothing. I carried it anyway.

I pulled my coat from the third peg. Outside, the air hit me: cold, damp, tinged with the industrial exhale of the Anvils district. The Cathedral Axis rose above the rooftops, black iron against grey sky, humming its eternal hum. I did not look up at it. You learned not to. The same way you learned not to stare at the sun, through a knowledge that bypassed instruction and settled directly into the body.

I walked east through the rings. Through the second ring gate, identity seal pressed against the ward-plate. Through the upper rings, where the townhouses grew narrower and the streetlamps closer together and the smell of thoughtfire thickened, because the wealthy burned it for status the way people burn perfume. Through the fourth ring. The third. Each one a step down the gradient: stone giving way to brick, brick giving way to wood patched with tar, the streetlamps spacing wider, the darkness between them deepening like water filling a well. The air grew denser. Wetter. The river was close.

The Silt had no formal gates, because formal gates implied the Ministry acknowledged it as a district worth protecting. I descended through a gap between two leaning tenements, down a set of stone steps worn concave by a century of feet, into the seventh ring where the streets were more water than stone and the buildings leaned against each other like drunks sharing the load of staying upright.

The Silt at dusk was a different country. Thoughtfire lamps here were stolen or jury-rigged, their pale cold light guttering in the damp air. The smell changed: brackish water, rust, tar, the sweet chemical bite of impure thoughtfire cooked in basement distilleries. Shadows pooled in doorways. People moved through them with the economy of those who had learned that visibility was a tax they could not pay.

I understood them. I had always understood them, in a way that had nothing to do with politics and everything to do with knowing what it cost to be seen.

The shift happened in the body. Not dramatic, but total. My spine straightened. My hand left my pocket. The archivist — the careful, bland, ink-stained creature who said *yes, sir* and filed things in the correct order and never possessed a dangerous opinion — peeled away like dead skin. The posture changed, the gaze sharpened, the internal catalogue reorganized itself around a different set of priorities: routes, risks, dead-drop locations, the temperature of the air in the tunnels ahead and what it meant about water levels and passage viability.

I was not an archivist.

I had never been only an archivist.

The key in my pocket was cold and the tunnels were dark and somewhere beneath the city, in a flooded cellar lit by stolen light, people I had sworn to protect were waiting for instructions from a man they had never seen and knew only by the name I had given myself, a name that was, I understood, as much a mask as the one I wore in Archive Hall 7, but at least it was a mask I had chosen, which made it, in the impoverished arithmetic of a life lived in hiding, closer to something real.

I descended into the dark. Down here, in the tunnels the Ministries had erased from every official map, I ran a network that smuggled forbidden knowledge — banned texts, suppressed research, medical data the Ministries had classified as heretical — to the people who needed it. The Covenant of Wicks. Twelve members. None of whom knew my face. All of whom would be restructured if we were caught, their memories carved out with surgical precision, their bodies returned to the city wearing the same skin and a different mind.

The hum of the Cathedral Axis followed me down, vibrating in my bones, indifferent to the man I was becoming, indifferent to the man I had been.

Somewhere above me, the Ministry was closing its gates.

Somewhere below me, the Lamplighter was opening his.

Chapter 2

Edric Ashgrove

The water was knee-deep by the third turning, and by the fifth, it was trying to kill me.

I had mapped the undercroft tunnels years ago, and the map was wrong tonight. Rain two days prior had redirected the eastern channels. The northern fork, my fallback, ran with a ceiling so low I walked bent at the waist, one hand trailing the stone for orientation and the other held above the waterline to protect the oilskin packet strapped to my forearm.

Three documents inside. An atmospheric alchemy treatise banned by the Ministry of Anvils. A cartographic fragment showing water-table depths beneath the Silt, classified and buried by the Ministry of Lenses. A hand-copied medical text on the cognitive effects of prolonged thoughtfire exposure, which

the Ministry of Roots had declared heretical, bureaucratic for *we would prefer people did not know what the fuel does to them.*

Each one a crime punishable by restructuring.

The water climbed from knee to mid-thigh. The current shifted, no longer drifting but pushing, with the muscular insistence of a river reclaiming its tunnels. My boot caught something submerged — iron, angled, the edge of a collapsed grate — and I pitched forward. My hand slapped the tunnel wall and the oilskin packet swung toward the waterline and for two seconds the documents hung at the surface, the paper inside one failed strap from disintegrating into evidence that could never testify and knowledge that could never teach.

I caught my balance. Pulled the packet tight against my ribs. The water was at my waist now, cold enough to register as a separate kind of dark, the cold that erases the boundary between body and environment, that turns your legs into extensions of the tunnel itself. The passage behind me would be impassable within minutes.

I pressed forward. You cannot run in waist-deep water in a stone tunnel with no light. You can only move with the grim efficiency of a man who understands that the river does not care about his mission and will drown his documents with the same indifference it drowns rats.

The tunnel opened into a junction I recognized by the taste of the air. Cleaner here, less mineral, with the faint acrid bite of stolen thoughtfire. I turned left, descended stairs submerged to the fifth step, and waded through the lock-channel to the iron door.

Three, pause, two, pause, one. The knock pattern changed weekly. This week's had been set by Flint, who had a preference for descending sequences that I had noted and never mentioned, because correcting the operational security habits of my own people required revealing that I paid closer attention to their patterns than a relay should.

A slot opened at eye level. Candlelight. Dark eyes.

"Word?"

"Undermargin."

The bolt drew back. The door opened.

The Candlewell.

I had named it myself, five years ago, when the space was a flooded cellar and I was a twenty-two-year-old with a stolen candle and an idea that would either save lives or get everyone I recruited killed. Now the cellar was drained to ankle-depth, shored up with salvaged timber, and lit by a ring of twenty-three candles in iron holders bolted to the circular wall. Their arrangement was the Covenant's primary communication system: which candles were lit, which dark, which angled. Each configuration a coded message readable only by the twelve people who knew the cipher.

Tonight: seventeen lit, three dark, three angled. Normal operations, one new contact pending verification, one dead drop confirmed compromised. I read it in the time it took me to cross the threshold.

Then I read it again. The ninth candle, nearest the water-lock, was angled left, which was correct, but the wax pooling at its base had hardened in a direction suggesting it had recently been angled right. Someone had changed it. I filed this under *discrepancies, critical, do not mention yet* and kept walking.

Eleven people in the Candlewell tonight. Two at the eastern bench, copying documents by candlelight. One at the water-lock, on guard. Three in the alcove, sorting contraband into distribution packets. And five in the center, seated on overturned crates around the low table where Maren Duskhollow was holding court.

Maren. Code name Flint. Thirty-four, broad-shouldered, burn scar crawling up the left side of her neck from years of factory work in the Anvils before the accident. She had joined the Covenant three years ago, after the Ministries restructured her partner. The charge had been *subversive inquiry, category: social destabilization*, which was Ministry language for asking a question about subsidized grain at a public forum. Her partner came back six weeks later with the same face and a different person behind it.

Maren did not join the Covenant for ideology. She joined because she wanted to hurt the people who had hurt her, and she stayed because the work mattered, and the distance between those two motivations was the geography of her grief.

She saw me enter and nodded. Not warmth, not suspicion. Recognition.

"You're late."

"Water in the eastern fork. Nearly lost the packet."

"I told Harren to clear that channel last week."

"Harren has a newborn. His priorities have shifted."

"Harren's priorities will get him drowned." She jerked her chin toward the far table. "New one's here. Nervous as a cat in a Censor's office."

The young woman was sitting apart from the others. Mid-twenties, dark-skinned, hands clasped tight in her lap, eyes scanning the room with the rapid flicker of someone cataloguing exits. I recognized the reflex. I had invented it in myself at roughly her age.

"Sable?" I said.

"That's the name I'm using." Her voice was low, controlled, with the faint accent of the lower fourth ring. Educated enough to read Ministry documents. Working-class enough to know why they needed to be stolen. She was taller than I had estimated from across the room, with the lean build of someone who had been eating irregularly for long enough that the body had adapted to scarcity rather than fighting it. Her hands were steady now. I noted this. People who could stop their hands from shaking on command were either very brave or very practiced at concealment, and in the Silt, those two things were often the same.

I led her to the far alcove, where the candlelight was weakest and the sound of dripping water provided a natural screen against eavesdroppers. We sat on the stone bench. The cold seeped through my trousers immediately. I catalogued the sensation and set it aside.

"Why are you here?"

"I want to help."

I waited. That was never the whole answer, and anyone who believed it was had not spent enough time in the company of desperate people. Helping was the top layer. Beneath it was always something with teeth.

She exhaled. "I'm a junior translator at the Ministry of Tongues. I've been there two years. Six months ago, I started noticing discrepancies in the suppression logs. Words being added to the restricted list with no doctrinal justification. Phrases that were ordinary a year ago, classified as seditious now. I started tracking the pattern. When I brought it to my supervisor." She paused. Her jaw tightened. "My supervisor filed a report. About me."

"And you weren't restructured."

"The report hasn't been processed yet. Tongues is behind on internal reviews by four months. I have a window. When it closes, I either disappear into the Covenant or I disappear into a restructuring facility."

I studied her face. The copper taste in the back of my throat was absent, which meant she was telling the truth, or she believed she was, which was the same thing as far as my senses were concerned. My ability to detect lies was tied to a Discipline I was not supposed to possess, and discussing the mechanism would require explaining how a junior archivist had acquired abilities the Ministries classified as controlled and heretical.

Her knowledge of Tongues' internal structure was granular in the way that only genuine access produced. You could not fake the frustration of a person who had spent two years translating propaganda and had finally noticed that the words were designed to make thoughts impossible.

Then she pushed her hair behind her ear — index finger, not thumb — and something inside my chest folded in on itself. The gesture was wrong. It belonged to someone else. Someone whose hands had moved with the same unconscious specificity before the Ministry removed her capacity for unconscious anything. The resemblance was coincidental. It was irrelevant. I catalogued it anyway, because the filing system I had built to manage human connection did not include a protocol for what to do when a stranger's gesture reached into the archives of grief and pulled a drawer open.

I blinked. Set my face. Continued.

"The documents you have access to. Describe them."

She described them. I listened, cross-referenced against what I knew of Tongues' internal structure. No inconsistencies.

"I'll pass your case to the Lamplighter. You'll have an answer within four days."

"And if the answer is no?"

"Then you were never here, and neither was I, and neither is any of this."

She nodded. She did not look reassured. Reassurance was a commodity the Covenant could not afford to stock. I left her in the alcove and returned to the main chamber, where the candles threw their coded light against the damp walls and the sound of scratching quills mixed with the drip of water and the low murmur of people who had learned to conduct their lives at a volume the city could not hear.

Maren fell into step beside me.

"What do you think?"

"She's real. The Lamplighter will decide."

“The Lamplighter.” Maren’s voice carried a weight I recognized, faith and frustration in equal measure, the gravity of someone who trusted a leader she had never met. “You ever wonder if he knows what it’s like down here? The actual weight of it?”

I had a response prepared. “He knows.”

“Does he, though? He sends his decisions through you, through dead drops, through candles. Has anyone ever seen him? Does he sit in a room somewhere giving orders while we wade through filth and flood?”

“He’s here, Maren. In a way that matters.”

She stopped walking. The Candlewell had quieted, the copiers finished, the guard at the water-lock yawning into his sleeve. The candlelight moved against the walls in patterns that almost meant something and never quite did.

“You know what I think?” She turned to face me, and the burn scar along her neck pulled taut in the light, the ridged tissue a mask of its own, earned rather than worn. Her voice dropped. “I think the Lamplighter asks too much of you. I think he puts you in the water night after night and you come back looking like you’ve been carrying this alone for years, because you have been, and he either doesn’t see it or doesn’t care.”

She was standing close. Closer than operational distance. I could feel the warmth of her through the damp between us, body heat, tallow, iron, the faint chemical trace of factory work that never entirely left her skin.

Her hand came up and rested on my forearm. A brief pressure. Callused fingers through the wet fabric of my sleeve.

The contact lasted perhaps three seconds. I felt every one of them the way a man who has not eaten feels the smell of bread — with a hunger so old it had become architectural, load-bearing, a part of the structure I had built to survive. No one touched me. No one had reason to. The archivist kept the world at arm’s length and the Lamplighter could not afford closeness and Edric Ashgrove had arranged his life so that the absence of human warmth was a wall, and Maren’s hand on my arm pressed against that wall and for three seconds I did not know if it would hold.

It held.

“Tell him we lost a cache last week,” she said, withdrawing her hand. Business again. The transition was seamless, the way all transitions were seamless for people who had learned to keep their tenderness on a short leash. “Eastern undercroft, near the old canal. The water came up too fast. Three months of collected texts, gone.”

“Gone.”

“And the new kid, Harren’s recruit, he heard something while he was clearing the passage. Something moving. In the deeper tunnels, where nobody goes.”

“Something moving?”

“His words. He said the water sounded wrong. Like it was being displaced by something big.”

I filed this alongside the disturbances Gannon had mentioned. Two independent reports from unconnected sources. The Silt flooding was ordinary. Things moving in the deep tunnels was not.

“I’ll report it.”

“To the Lamplighter.”

“To the Lamplighter.”

She walked away. I stood in the center of the Candlewell, surrounded by people I had sworn to protect and who had never seen my face and did not know that the voice relaying the Lamplighter’s instructions was the Lamplighter’s own voice, and the coded candles threw their light across the water at my feet, and the tunnel walls pressed in, and somewhere in the deep architecture of the undercrofts, the sound of water was wrong.

I left at half past one.

The first stretch of the return journey was quiet, water settling into its new paths, the only sound the persistent drip from the ceiling and the wet echo of my footsteps. I moved through the dark with the economy of long practice, counting paces, reading the tunnel by temperature and taste.

Then the sound changed.

At the junction where the northern fork met the main drain, the water’s voice shifted. Not louder — deeper. The usual high-frequency drip-and-echo dropped into a register I felt in my teeth before my ears could name it. The water at my thighs was moving again, but the current was wrong, flowing laterally instead of toward the river outfall, as if something in the deep tunnels had displaced a volume large enough to redirect every connecting passage.

I stopped. Stood in the dark and listened with my whole body.

The Cathedral Axis hummed in my sternum. Constant, familiar. Beneath it, a different vibration. Lower. Arrhythmic. The stones in the tunnel wall were conducting something that had no business being conducted through stone, a pulse that pressed against my palm where it rested on the wall, irregular, organic, like a heartbeat heard through a closed door.

Then it stopped. The water resumed its normal flow. The sound returned to drip and echo. The vibration vanished so completely that I could have convinced myself I had imagined it, except that I had spent seven years training myself against comfortable explanations.

I moved. Faster now. The tunnels had been mine for five years, my routes, my infrastructure, my hidden country beneath the city’s skin. I had mapped every passage, memorized every junction, learned the water’s rhythms the way a sailor learns the tides. And in five years, I had never felt the tunnels feel back.

Whatever was down there, in the deep passages where nobody went, did not belong to my map. And the map was the only thing standing between the Covenant of Wicks and the blind, indifferent geography of a city that had been built on top of something it did not understand.

I surfaced through the gap between tenements and walked back through the rings, avoiding Censor patrols the way water avoids stone, by flowing around them so naturally that the deviation appeared to be the intended path. The night air was cold after the tunnels. The Axis hum was louder up here, or I was more attuned to it after whatever I had felt in the stone, and it pressed against my sternum with a persistence that felt less like vibration and more like attention.

My lodgings were in the third ring. A room above a Chandler’s shop, rented under my own name, containing the bare minimum of furniture and nothing that could connect Edric Ashgrove to the Lamp-

lighter, the Covenant of Wicks, or any act of defiance against the institutions that paid his salary and classified his loyalty as *satisfactory, subcategory: unremarkable*.

I locked the door. Checked the tell-tales I had placed that morning: human hairs at precise angles on the wardrobe and the window latch, a pencil lead balanced on the desk drawer's lip. All intact. No one had entered.

I sat on the bed. The mattress was thin and the springs complained and the room smelled of tallow and for a moment I allowed myself the luxury of not performing anything for anyone.

The luxury lasted approximately eleven seconds.

The brass key sat in my pocket. I took it out. Held it in my palm. The metal was warm from my body heat and the weight of it was the exact weight of a thing you carry when you have nothing else left of someone.

I turned out the lamp. In the dark, the Axis hum was louder. Or I was quieter. The hum pressed against my sternum and I lay there listening to a sound I had heard so long I had forgotten it was a sound and not a part of me.

The tunnels were changing. The water was wrong. And somewhere in the deep architecture of the undercrofts, something I could not classify was moving in the dark, patient, arrhythmic, waiting, and the not-knowing sat in my chest alongside the hum like a second heartbeat that did not belong to me.

Chapter 3

Edric Ashgrove

I dreamed of Lira and woke with her name between my teeth.

The room was dark. The tallow smell from the chandler's shop below had thickened overnight, and the Cathedral Axis hum pressed against my sternum like a hand holding me to the mattress. I lay still and waited for the name to dissolve into the more manageable register of fact. Lira Cassavane. Junior analyst. Ministry of Roots. The first person in my life who looked at me and saw all three versions and did not flinch.

I had known her for four years before they took her. She was not a dissident. She had no interest in forbidden knowledge. She was observant, her mind calibrated for discrepancies the way mine was calibrated for classification, and she had noticed the seams in my performance the way only someone who also performed their own normalcy could notice. Not because she was looking. Because she could not stop seeing.

She had once said to me, across a lunch table, with the casual precision of a woman accustomed to diagnostic thinking: "You're hiding something enormous, and I don't need to know what it is, but I need you to know that I see it, because pretending you're invisible when you're not is going to break something in you that you'll need later."

I had not responded. I had filed the moment under *threat assessment, elevated*. And then, over the following months, I had slowly reclassified it. From *threat* to *anomaly*. From *anomaly* to *contact*. From *contact* to something I did not have a category for, because the filing system I had built to manage human connection did not include a drawer labeled *person who knows you are three people and does not consider this a problem*.

She never asked what I was hiding. She never pushed. She let the seeing exist between us like a document neither of us needed to open because we both knew what it said.

Then, because she had written a note in the margin of a government document, a statistical correlation between thoughtfire exposure and neurological symptoms that the Ministry of Roots had classified as coincidental, they took her apart.

The dream had been the bad one. The one I could not file. The one that replayed the same twelve minutes with the precision of a Ministry dictation machine.

Two years ago. The Ministry of Roots' lobby.

She had walked past me.

I recognized her body first. The walk, the posture, the way her left shoulder dropped a quarter-inch lower than the right because of an old gymnastics injury she used to complain about on cold mornings. That was Lira. Her skeleton, her musculature, her skin. The face was correct. The hair was correct. Even the way she pushed it behind her ear with her index finger rather than her thumb was correct.

She looked at me. I waited for the recognition, for the flicker behind the eyes that would confirm she was still in there, the woman who had eaten lunch with me three times a week, who had told me I organized my emotions like a card catalogue and she could hear the drawers sliding shut when I didn't want to feel something.

The flicker did not come.

"Excuse me," she said, and her voice was right and the inflection was wrong and the word *excuse* landed on a different syllable than the one Lira would have chosen, and I stood there in the lobby while a woman wearing my friend's body walked past me like a stranger navigating a crowded corridor.

I did not move for forty seconds. I counted. Counting was what I did when the other option was something the Ministry might classify as a reaction.

I went to see her once more, three weeks later. I told myself it was reconnaissance. I was lying to myself with the fluency I usually reserved for lying to others.

I found her in the Roots canteen during her lunch break. She was eating alone, which was new. The old Lira had eaten with Dace, or with colleagues, or with me. This Lira sat by the window with grain porridge and bark-tea and the settled posture of a person comfortable with solitude because solitude was the only state she remembered. She was reading a medical bulletin. Her pen lay parallel to her plate. Uncapped. She had not written a single note in the margin.

I sat across from her. "I'm Edric. Ministry of Seals. We used to eat lunch together sometimes."

She looked at me. The eyes were the same color. The depth behind them was different. Shallower. As if someone had drained a well and left the stones visible at the bottom.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't remember."

"That's all right."

I sat with her for eleven minutes. She was polite. She asked about my work. She responded to my questions with the generic pleasantries of someone constructing a social interaction from first

principles rather than drawing on a history. At one point she smiled, and the smile was technically correct and emotionally vacant and I had to look away because the alternative was to feel something that would have cracked the mask I was wearing, and I could not afford a cracked mask in a Ministry canteen where anyone might be watching.

The thing about restructuring that the Ministry did not advertise — the thing that made it the most efficient tool of control ever devised — was that it was quiet. There was no violence. No screaming. No visible injury. The person came back. They smiled. They worked. They filed their documents and ate their meals and responded to their names, and if you hadn't known them before, you would never have known that something was missing.

I did not visit her again. Making her unknowing hospitality into my grief ritual was a cruelty I would not commit against someone the Ministry had already been cruel enough to.

Dace, Lira's partner, the woman who had spent three years learning to read the silences that meant Lira was upset, had gone to the facility to collect her. Lira had looked at Dace the way she had looked at me. Politely. Blankly. Dace left the city a month later.

Four months after the lobby, I lit the first candle in a flooded cellar, and the Covenant of Wicks began.

I sat at my desk in Archive Hall 7 and stared at the document in front of me without reading it. The dream had left a residue, a weight in the sternum, adjacent to but distinct from the Axis hum.

The morning's work steadied me. Classification was a ritual and rituals were the scaffolding that held the performance upright on days when the structure wanted to collapse.

A census report from the fifth ring. Household discrepancy, a dependent struck from the records. The Unrecorded, they were called, when called anything at all. People who existed in the Silt and nowhere else, their names extracted from the bureaucratic machinery with the same precision the Veils used to extract memories.

I classified it. Filed it. Reached for the next document.

The next document was not in the tray. It was in the hands of Colleague Therin, two desks away, who was reading it with a frown.

My pulse did not change. I did not allow it to change.

The Kriel acquisition supplement, the one I had deliberately misrouted to grey-restricted three days ago because its shipping manifests, if cross-referenced with Silt cargo movements, would reveal a pattern uncomfortably close to our courier schedules. Therin should not have had access to it. Someone on the Fifth Floor had mis-tagged the copy, or his clearance had changed without my knowledge.

I stood. Collected a requisition form I did not need signed. Walked to Therin's desk with the measured gait of a man on a mundane errand, twelve paces across the hall, each one calibrated to communicate nothing more urgent than interdepartmental paperwork.

"Therin. Countersign on this Lenses transfer?"

He set the manifest down to take my form. I noted the page. Third. The shipping data was on the fifth. He had not reached it. But Therin was a thorough reader, and thorough readers did not stop at page three, and the clock in my chest was counting the minutes until he picked the document back up

and turned two more pages and saw the cargo routes that would make a pattern visible to anyone who knew what they were looking at.

“Sure.” He signed. I took the form. I did not look at the manifest. Looking would be data.

Back at my desk, I drafted a reclassification order, one of eleven I would submit today, the other ten genuine, the one that mattered buried among them like a dangerous document misfiled between mundane pages. The supplement would be back in grey-restricted by evening. The pattern would remain hidden.

But the question remained: who had changed the clearance tag? A Fifth Floor error was manageable. Anything more deliberate was not.

Gannon arrived late, which was unusual. He sat with the careful deliberation of a man who had been awake since four.

“You look tired,” I said, because the performance of mild concern was part of the script.

“My daughter. She’s not sleeping. Something about the hum. Says it’s louder at night.”

The Axis hum. Through the ears of a child who had not yet learned to classify it as background. I thought of the vibration I had felt in the tunnel walls the previous night, the low, arrhythmic pulse that had no business being conducted through stone. Two phenomena, possibly connected. Two data points in two days made a line, and lines pointed somewhere.

“Children hear things differently,” I offered.

“She hears things that aren’t there,” Gannon said, and his voice carried the tight frequency of a man who suspects his child is not imagining things but cannot afford to pursue the suspicion.

Then he paused. His pen stopped.

“You know,” he said, in the slow tone of a man thinking out loud and deciding too late to stop, “you come in here some mornings looking like you’ve been swimming. Your trouser cuffs, Ashgrove. They’ve had watermarks on them three times this month.”

He was still looking at his ledger. Not at me. But his pen had not moved.

“Don’t tell me the third ring’s flooding too.”

“The pipes in my building,” I said. “The landlord’s been promising repairs since autumn.”

A silence. Two seconds. Three. The hall around us continued its performance, pens scratching, pages turning, the ambient hum of forty-three people generating an appropriate volume of productive noise. Inside the silence, I recalculated. The implications of a fifty-three-year-old man with no operational interest in the Covenant noticing that his colleague’s trouser cuffs were wet on mornings after nights spent wading through flooded tunnels.

“Hmm.” Gannon grunted. His pen resumed. He did not look up.

Something had shifted in the air between us. The faint pressure of a man who had noticed a discrepancy and chosen, for now, to shelve it. But Gannon was an archivist. Archivists did not discard discrepancies. They accumulated data points until a pattern emerged, and facts in the Ministry of Seals had consequences.

Three mornings of visible watermarks. Three data points. Enough for a line.

I made a note to change my trousers before leaving the lodgings. Every morning. Regardless. And I made a second note, quieter: the walls I had built around my double life were developing cracks, and the cracks were not in the places I had been watching.

The morning continued. I classified forty-three documents before lunch. The hum persisted. The brass key pressed against my thigh.

I found myself thinking about the man on the street.

Not deliberately. The way you find yourself standing in a room and cannot remember walking there. Before dawn, on the walk from my lodgings, the city empty enough that individual bodies registered, a man had been walking the opposite direction. Collar turned up, breath fogging the cold air, and something in the line of his neck, the way his shoulders moved beneath his coat, the economy of a body that knew how much space it occupied. I had looked.

For two seconds. The archivist's careful blankness had thinned enough for the thing beneath it to press against the surface like a hand against frosted glass. Heat behind the sternum. Awareness traveling down the spine to a place where awareness had no business traveling on a public street at half past five. The body's mutinous insistence on wanting, despite seven years of administration designed to ensure it wanted nothing that could leave a record.

I had looked away. The drawer closed. The lock engaged.

The Ministry of Veils had a term for what I was. *Spiritual misalignment, category: treatable*. Not criminal. Not persecuted. Diagnosed. The distinction was the cruelest part, because it reframed the thing you were as a thing you suffered from, and it offered a cure identical to what they had done to Lira — the surgical removal of desire, filed under *compassionate intervention, subcategory: restoration of spiritual coherence* — and the document describing the protocol used words like *realignment* and *kindness* and described a process that would leave me standing and smiling and empty of every want that made me human.

I knew the protocol. I had classified a copy of it. I had filed it in grey-restricted, Vault Fourteen, subsection six. I had memorized its location the way a soldier memorizes the position of a landmine.

Somewhere in that document, I was a diagnosis. Somewhere in the city, the cure was waiting.

I picked up the next document. I classified it. I moved on.

The archivist always moved on. The man inside the archivist sat very still, in a drawer he had built for himself at the bottom of the filing system, and waited for the end of the working day when he could descend into the dark and be someone closer to real.

At half past four, Overseer Voss entered Archive Hall 7.

His hands were at his sides.

I saw them before I saw his face. At his sides. I had catalogued the taxonomy of his walks years ago: behind the back meant inspection, clasped at front meant bad news. At his sides was the configuration I had observed exactly once before, four years ago, on the day a senior archivist was escorted from the building by two Censors who did not explain where they were taking him.

At his sides meant something had already been decided.

He did not stop at individual desks. He walked to the center of the hall and addressed us all.

“A brief announcement.” His voice filled the room the way thoughtfire fills a gas-line, cold, even, reaching every corner with identical pressure. “As you are aware, the Ministry has been conducting an expanded review of classification protocols in response to recent concerns about document security across the upper rings.”

I was aware. The swept dead drops. The systematic search pattern. The Censor patrols increasing in frequency and method. I had attributed this to standard escalation. Voss’s hands at his sides suggested I had miscalculated.

“Effective tomorrow morning, a Senior Censor will be permanently assigned to Archive Hall 7 to conduct a comprehensive internal audit of documents, processes, and personnel. This is a routine measure designed to strengthen our institutional safeguards.”

Routine. The word sat in the room like a stone dropped into still water. No measure involving a permanently embedded Senior Censor was routine, and every person in the hall knew it, and Voss knew they knew it, and the performance of mutual pretense was so thick I could taste it, copper and ash and the chemical sweetness of a lie formulated at a level of authority where lies were indistinguishable from policy.

“The Censor will occupy the available desk in the eastern section.” Voss’s gaze did not move to me. It did not need to. The available desk in the eastern section was the desk facing mine, Aldren’s desk, empty for three months, two feet of aisle between his chair and mine. “Please extend full cooperation. That is all.”

He left. His hands remained at his sides.

The hall resumed its performance. Pens scratching. Pages turning. The sounds of forty-three people pretending they had not been told that a hunter was being installed in their midst.

I sat at my desk. I looked at the empty desk across from mine. Two feet. Tomorrow, a person whose profession was the detection of false identities and forged classifications and the behavioral signatures of people hiding something would sit there. Every morning. Every day. Close enough to hear the rhythm of my breathing, to catalogue the steadiness of my hands, to notice the watermarks on my trouser cuffs on mornings when I had been careless, to smell the mineral damp of the tunnels if I had not scrubbed it from my skin thoroughly enough.

The brass key pressed against my thigh. The hum pressed against my sternum. The afternoon light through the hall’s high windows was grey and cold and the shadows of the iron lattice fell across the floor in a pattern that looked, from where I sat, like bars.

Three masks. None of them a face. And now, someone whose entire training was the art of looking through masks would sit two feet away from mine, and I would have to perform the most convincing version of nothing I had ever been.

I touched the brass key in my pocket. It opened nothing. It fit no lock. But for the first time in seven years, I was afraid it wouldn’t be enough.

Continue Reading?

You have reached the end of this sample.

The candle has been lit. The mask has been lifted, if only at the edges. What lies beneath — the flooding tunnels, the coded networks, the devastating gravity between two men who see through each other's disguises — is waiting for you in the full manuscript.

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