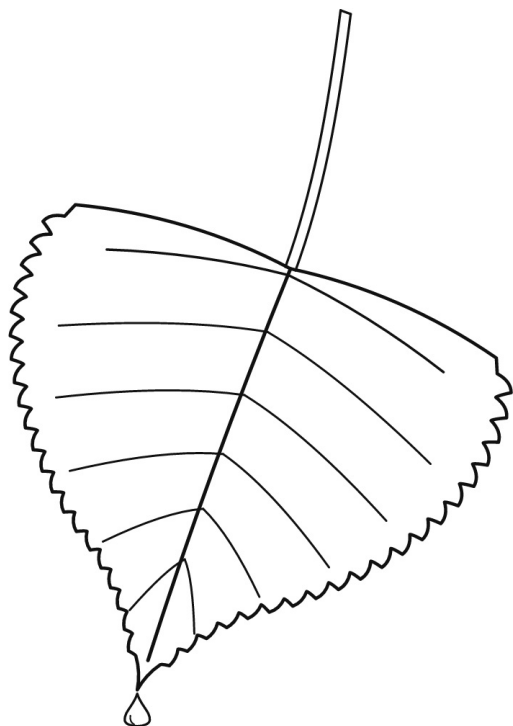


DANIEL BISSEY

THE LONG WATCH

PART ONE

The Kept



AN AFTWEND STORY

THE LONG WATCH

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Part One: The Kept



DANIEL BISSEY

The Long Watch: Part One: The Kept

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B E F O R E Y O U B E G I N

Thank you for joining the list. This is your gift, and I hope it's the first of seven.

The Long Watch is a story told in seven parts. You'll get one after each book of the Aftwend series, and each part is written for readers who have just finished the book before it. This one is for readers of Book One.

It takes place somewhere the main books haven't gone yet. It won't give away anything that comes after Book One, and nothing in the main books depends on it, so you can read it now, or save it. But the parts and the books talk to each other, and by the end of the series you'll see how.

If it stays with you, write back and tell me. I read every reply.

CHAPTER ONE

The count

The Kept is to be kept. She is not to be harmed, changed, taught, or told. Her keeper answers for her with his years.

FROM THE RULES OF THE KEEPING, HOUSE OF MORROW

THE FLEET WENT OUT at the second bell, and the Kept counted it from the window.

She counted everything. There was a great deal of her that nobody was keeping, the inside part, and it had very little to do, so she gave it numbers. Four hundred and twelve stairs from the great hall up to the high room. Sixty panes in the round window, one of them put in long ago in a glass that was faintly too green, which she had never forgiven. The Held on the terraces below, carrying things from one place to another place. She had counted Maud's steps across the floor so many times that she knew them by sound, the long one and the short one, because of Maud's bad knee.

Today she counted ships.

They came up out of the House's docks one at a time. Each one rose over the edge of the lowest terrace and hung there a moment, dark against the Givings, and then turned its nose toward the Well and went. She knew them by their shapes. The *Patience*, long and thin as a knife. The *Plenty*, fat in the middle. The *Forevermore*, which was new, or new to her, which meant it had been built sometime in the last hundred years. The Morrow ships all had names like that, names about having and keeping and never running out. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. The last of the big ones. Then the little ones after them, too quick and too many, like birds going up off a field all at once.

"Forty-four," she said.

"Forty-six," said Maud, behind her. "Two went out the low dock. You can't see the low dock from here."

"Then they don't count."

"They count to the Quells," said Maud.

The sky over Lanthorn was never dark and never bright. Straight up from the House, at the very top of it, was the Well. It was round and black and it didn't move, and it didn't shine, any more than a hole in a floor shines. Everything else in the sky moved around it. Out of it ran the Givings, slow rivers of silver that spread across the sky in every direction and bent down toward the ground at the edges, like milk poured into dark water and never mixing. Where the Givings ran thick, things lived a long time. Lanthorn sat under the thickest of them. That was why the House of Morrow had built here, back when it was the only House, and why every other House had been trying to take it from them ever since.

People said the Well looked like a mouth. The Kept had always thought they were wrong. A mouth closes.

Past the terraces, past the Lip, where the steady ground stopped, the sky was worse. Out there the Givings broke loose and ran wild. You could tell where the fast water was, because clouds went through it the way fire goes through paper, there and then gone before they'd properly started. You could tell the still water, because things stayed in it. There was a flock of something out there that had been hanging in the same shape, wings up, since before she came. She had named every one of the birds once, and then stopped, because they were never going to land. The ships flew out through the channels between, where the time ran steady enough to fly in, and their pilots read the channels the way she read Maud's steps.

Farther out still, where the Givings thinned to nothing, hung the worlds nobody lived on anymore. There were more of them every age. They were gray, the gray a fire leaves behind, and the Held called them the Ash, and didn't look at them if they could help it.

Below the window, on the lowest terrace, the Held were lined up at the granary gate. They lined up there every morning for the day's bread, a line that ran the length of the terrace and doubled back on itself, and every morning the Kept watched it get shorter at the front and no shorter at the back. Today the gate hadn't opened. It wouldn't open until the fleet came home. Hungry Held fought harder. That was one of the things the House knew.

"Come away from the window," said Maud.

"In a minute."

"The Quells will be here in less than a minute."

"The Quells will be here in an hour," said the Kept. "They always come at the fourth bell. They like the House to fight hungry."

Maud grunted, which meant the Kept was right, and let her stay.

Maud was her forty-first keeper. The Kept had stopped learning their names after the twentieth. Keepers didn't last. Even here, where getting old took so long that most people forgot it was happening at all, keepers got old. Or they got killed, or they got replaced, and one morning somebody new was sitting on the stool outside her door, reading her the Rules as if she didn't know them better than he did.

She had learned Maud's name anyway. It had been an accident. Somebody had shouted it across the terrace one morning, a little over three hundred years ago, and it had stuck to her like a burr.

Maud had been twenty when she came up the four hundred and twelve stairs for the first time. She looked about fifty now. She was broad and gray, with a face like a cliff somebody had started carving into something friendly and given up on halfway. It had taken her three hundred and six years to get that face. That was the Hold. The Givings got into everything that lived under them, and everything that lived under them took its time. Ten years of living for one year of looking older. The Held lived long enough to be useful for a very long while. The Holders lived longer than that.

The Kept didn't get older at all.

She had been nine for longer than there had been a *Forevermore*. She had been nine for longer than there had been Quells. Her hair was done in one braid down her back and tied at the end with a strip of cloth the color of a sky she didn't remember. The braid had been there when she came, and it had never come undone. She'd tried, when she was newer. She had pulled at it until her scalp stung, and nothing had loosened, and the next morning it had been as neat as ever, as if somebody had come in the night and done it over. Nobody had. When she cut her finger, the cut closed before

it could bleed, and then there had never been a cut. Nothing about her changed. That was the whole point of her.

She never got hungry, either. Her breakfast came up the four hundred and twelve stairs every morning anyway, because a kept thing is fed: white bread, and butter, and a pear from the Holders' own trees, on a plate with the House's mark on it. It was sitting on the little table by the door now. She had never eaten any of it. Every morning she pushed the plate across the table, and every morning Maud wrapped what was on it in a cloth and gave the cloth to whichever of the Held came up for the empty plate. The Kept had never asked which one, and Maud had never said.

If she'd had a name before, it hadn't been kept.

She had a few things from before, and none of them were things you could hold. A sky of a different color. Hands in her hair, working the braid. A voice saying she would be kept safe, saying it over and over, like somebody who hoped saying it enough would make it so. That was all. She had stopped reaching for more a great while ago, because reaching only wore the edges off what was there.

"What do they want this time?" she said.

"Same as last time."

"Me."

"You," said Maud. "The Table says a House sits where it keeps. Whoever keeps the Kept sits nearest the Well and gets the most of it. So every House wants you, and Morrow has you, and that's the whole of the politics of the Hold. You know it better than I do."

She did. She had been stolen four times. Once by the Quells, twice by Houses that didn't exist anymore, and once by a Held cook who had only wanted to see what would happen. She had been

stolen back four times. The cook had been given to the fast water. The Houses had been given to the Morrows.

Far down the sky toward the Well, something flashed white and was gone.

The Kept stopped counting.

"That's them," said Maud.

"That's early."

"Then they've learned something." Maud was buckling on her knife. It was a long knife, the kind the Held weren't allowed to carry, and she'd had it for as long as the Kept had known her, which meant Everard Morrow let her have it, which meant it was the kind of thing a keeper was expected to need. She pulled the strap tight across her chest. Her bad knee cracked when she straightened up.

"If they get in," said the Kept.

"They won't."

"If they do."

"Then I answer for you with my years," said Maud. That was from the Rules. Everybody in the House knew the Rules. Maud looked at her a moment longer than she needed to, and then she added, "All of them," which was not from the Rules at all.

More flashes, closer. A sound came up through the floor, not loud yet. It was more a feeling in the soles of the Kept's feet, like somebody very heavy walking in another room.

"Tell me their names," said the Kept.

Maud came and stood beside her at the window. It was a thing she did before battles and only before battles, and in three hundred years they had never once talked about it. She wasn't supposed to. The Rules said the Kept was not to be told. But Maud had decided, without ever saying so out loud, that names weren't telling.

“That’s the *Patience*, out front,” Maud said. “Her captain’s a Held named Oda Vey. Best in the House at still water. She’ll lay a line of it across their path and let them fly into it. Behind her, the *Plenty*. Captain Brenn. Slow, but he’s never lost a ship, and he’s lost plenty of Quells.” She pointed with her chin. “The *Forevermore*’s got a boy on her guns who used to sweep the terrace under this window. You’d know him. He whistles.”

“The one with the ears.”

“The one with the ears,” Maud agreed. “His name’s Jory.”

The Kept looked at the little dark shape of the *Forevermore* going away down the silver toward the Well, and thought about the boy with the ears who whistled under her window. She had never let herself learn his name. She had heard him whistle for fifty years and never once looked down to see which one he was, because that was one of her rules, and her rules were the only things in the Hold that were hers.

“Tell me the rest,” she said.

Maud told her the rest. The Kept listened, and let herself learn every one of them, because most of them would be gone before the sixth bell, and somebody ought to know.

CHAPTER TWO

The eldest

Morrow sits nearest the Well, and has since the Keeping began. A House sits where it keeps.

FROM THE TABLE OF HOUSES

EVERARD MORROW CAME UP to the high room at the third bell, as he always did before a battle, to look at what he was fighting for.

She heard him long before she saw him. Everard didn't walk the four hundred and twelve stairs. He was carried up them in a chair by four of the Held, and the chair creaked, and the Held breathed hard, and all the way up Everard talked to them in his soft, pleasant voice about the weather, as if there were any weather on Lanthorn. Yes, Holder, they said. No, Holder. The chair creaked.

At the top he stepped out onto the landing and gave the bearers a little nod, and they went back down without a word, and he came in.

He was very tall and very beautiful, in the old way a thing gets beautiful after a great many hands have polished it. His skin was

smooth and pale and had the faint shine all the Holders had, like the side of a good candle. His hair was white, and always had been. His eyes were a color the Kept had never found a name for, and they were older than the House.

He wore his years on his hands. There was a ring on every finger, and every ring held a bead the size of a pea, clear as water, and in each bead something moved very slowly, like a drop of oil sinking through honey. There were more of them down the front of his long coat, sewn in rows, clicking softly against each other when he walked. Each one was a year, drawn from the Well. When a Holder wanted a year, he broke a bead and drank it. Everard Morrow wore more years than there were people in the House.

“My dear,” he said.

“Holder.”

“Are you comfortable?”

“No.”

He smiled. He liked it when she was rude. Her temper was one of the few things about her that could be different from one day to the next, and she thought he found it restful, the way some people like to watch a fire.

“The Quells are early,” she said.

“The Quells have found a new captain. A clever one.” He went to the round window and looked out, with his hands folded behind his back and the beads ticking against each other. “She’s been teaching them to ride the backwater. It’s very bold. They come in on a current that runs backward for three breaths, and for those three breaths they’re where they were before anyone saw them. When we look again, they’re closer than they had any right to be.” He sounded

pleased. He always did, about anything clever, whoever it belonged to. "I'll have her head, of course. But it's very bold."

"Why do they want me?"

"You know why."

"I know the Table says a House sits where it keeps," the Kept said. "I don't know why the Well wants me kept."

Everard turned from the window and looked at her. It was the look she hated most, the look of a man checking something he owned for scratches.

"Nobody knows that, my dear," he said. "The Well doesn't explain itself. It gives. You were given to us to keep, before the Table was written, and we keep you, and the Well is generous to the House that does. That's the whole arrangement. Wanting to know why is the kind of question the Held ask. It has never done a single one of them any good."

"Somebody must know."

"Somebody always thinks so." He came across the room and bent down to her, and for a moment she thought he was going to touch her braid, the way he did sometimes, as if to make sure it was still there. He didn't. "Do you know what you're worth?"

"More than a world," she said. He had told her often enough.

"More than a world. We've given worlds for you. Morrow gave the House of Aske for you, and the House of Tamber, and the whole of the Lathe, which was a very fine world with a very fine sea and more wheat than the rest of the Hold together, and I would give them all again tomorrow."

The Kept thought of the line at the granary gate, and didn't say anything.

He straightened up. "So you'll understand that I don't mean to let the Quells have you over a new captain and a trick with the backwater."

There were quick feet on the stair, and one of the Held came up them, fast and gray in the face, and went down on one knee just inside the door. It was one of the gate-wardens from the low dock. The Kept knew him by his limp. She had watched it go back and forth across the lowest terrace for ninety years.

"Holder," he said. "The low dock. The two ships that went out the low dock."

"Yes?"

"They were Quell ships, Holder. Wearing our colors. We didn't know until they'd gone."

Everard looked at him for a while. His face didn't change at all.

"Our colors," he said. "And where would the Quells get our colors?"

The warden didn't answer. His hands, on his knee, had begun to shake.

"Somebody on your dock sold them." Everard said it pleasantly, the way he said everything. "For what? I'm curious."

"A sack of meal, Holder." The warden said it to the floor. "One of my loaders. He has four children and the ration's short. I gave him to the fast water myself, Holder, before I came up."

"How very thorough." Everard tilted his head. "So a loader sold my colors for a sack of meal, and you let the Quells come in and count my fleet," he said, "and then you let them leave. Give him a hand."

The warden made a small sound in his throat. Two of the House guard had come up the stairs behind him, and they took him by the

arms, gently, almost kindly, and walked him out. He didn't fight them. Nobody ever did.

The Kept knew what a hand was. Everyone in the House knew. On the lowest terrace there was a room where a thin stream of fast water had been led in off the Lip through a pipe of glass. They would take the warden down there and hold his hand in the stream for a count of three, and he would come back up the stairs with one hand forty years older than the other. The Kept had seen hands like that on the terraces, spotted and knotted and shaking at the end of a strong young arm. She had counted them. There were seventeen in the House today. Eighteen.

"That was cruel," she said.

"That was cheap," said Everard. "Cruel would have been the arm. I'm in a good mood." He turned toward the door, where Maud had stood the whole time, as still as the furniture. "Keeper."

"Holder."

"Keep her."

"With my years," said Maud.

Everard looked at Maud a little longer than he usually looked at any of the Held, and the Kept didn't like it. Then he smiled at both of them, and went out onto the landing, and they listened to the chair creak all the way down.

When the sound was gone, the Kept let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding.

"Do you know?" she said. "Why the Well wants me?"

"No," said Maud. "And I don't want to."

"Why not?"

Maud went to the window and looked down the long silver of the Givings toward the Well, where the light was starting to come in flashes, too many and too close together.

“Because it’s the Well that wants it,” she said. “Nothing that wants that much has ever wanted anything good.”

It was the most she had ever said about the Well in three hundred years. The Kept looked at the back of her keeper’s gray head and wanted to ask her more, and didn’t, because the floor had started to shake in earnest now, and because she was afraid that if she asked, Maud might answer.

CHAPTER THREE

Quell

Fast water ages you. Still water holds you. Backwater gives you back for three breaths and then takes you anyway. Pray for still water.

FROM A SAYING OF THE HELD WHO CREW THE HOUSE'S SHIPS

THE BATTLE CAME UP the sky toward the House at the fourth bell, as she'd said it would, and the Kept watched all of it.

She had seen a great many battles from the round window. She had seen the one that ended the House of Aske, and the three that ended the House of Tamber, and the long one over the Lathe that went on for eleven years and left the Lathe's fine sea boiled down to salt, and its wheat fields under the salt. The Held still talked about the bread there had been before the Lathe. She knew how they went. They started far off, as lights. Then the lights got closer and turned into ships. Then the ships got close enough that she could see what was happening to them, and after that she mostly counted.

The Quells came in a wedge, black-hulled, with spines along their backs like fish that live too deep. The Morrow fleet met them

where the Givings narrowed, a day's flying out from the Lip, and for a while it was all light and distance, flashes going off and fading, and she could pretend it was weather.

Then it came closer, and it wasn't.

You could see a shear by what it did to the air. It went out from the Quell ships in long pale lances, and along its path the sky looked older, yellowed, like the edge of a page left in a window. It was fast water, thrown. Wherever it touched, time ran a thousand times too fast for as long as it touched. The *Plenty* went into one side-on. Its whole length went brown, and then red, and then it pitted and flaked like a thing left out in the rain for a thousand years, which it had been, in the space of a breath. Its lights went out. It kept flying for a little, the way a thrown thing keeps going after the hand has let go, and then it came apart, slowly, its plates lifting off its sides like leaves off a dead tree.

Everyone on board had spent that thousand years too. Captain Brenn, who had never lost a ship. The Kept didn't know what that looked like, from the inside. She hoped it was quick. She thought probably it felt very long.

The next shear that got through didn't hit a ship at all. It went long, over the Morrow line, and touched the lowest terrace for about as long as it takes to blink, and what it touched was the granary. The Kept saw the great doors go gray. Then the roof sagged, and folded, and came down in a slow brown cloud, and the cloud went on pouring out of the doors and the windows and across the terrace like smoke from a fire. It was grain. It was a year of the House's grain, gone to dust in a breath.

The Held came running before it had settled. They came from every terrace, the ones who should have been carrying water and the

ones who should have been at the guns, and threw themselves down in the dust and scraped at it with their hands, as if some of it might still be bread. The House guard came after them with staves. The Kept watched the staves go up and come down. The Rules said the grain was the House's until the House gave it out, and the House hadn't given it out, and it made no difference that there was nothing left of it to give.

Oda Vey laid her line.

The *Patience* ran along the front of the Quell wedge, low and fast, trailing something behind her that the Kept couldn't see, only the effect of it. It was still water, pulled out of the deep places past the Lip and strung across the sky like a net. The first Quells flew straight into it and stopped. They didn't slow. They stopped, mid-turn, with the fire from their own guns hanging in front of them in bright stiff ribbons that would never finish going anywhere. They would stay there. They might stay there longer than the House. The Morrow rams went in at them one after another, and the stopped ships broke like plates, and the pieces stopped too, and hung.

There were eleven of them. The Kept added them to her flock.

The Quells had learned something, though, just as Maud had said. The Kept saw it before she understood it. Three of their ships were there, and then they weren't, and then they were there again, a little closer, as if the sky had hiccupped. Then again. And again. Each time they came back from the backwater, they were closer than they'd been before anyone saw them, and each time the Morrow guns fired at where they had been.

"They're riding it," said the Kept.

"I see it."

"They're coming here. Not to the docks. Here."

"I see it, Kept," said Maud.

Everard answered the only way the Holders ever answered anything, which was by spending. The little ships went out. The birds. There were thirty of them, all crewed by the Held, and they were quick and cheap and there were always more, and he sent them straight at the Quell shears to soak them up. The Kept watched them go in. They went in one after another, and came apart, old, one after another. On every one of them was somebody from the terraces. Some of them had carried baskets past her window every morning of her life. Nineteen. Twenty. Twenty-one.

She stopped counting. She had never stopped counting before.

The *Forevermore* went into the backwater at the end.

She saw it happen. The Quells had pulled a current of it right across the Morrow line, and the *Forevermore* flew into it, and a Quell shear caught her there, and she came apart. Then the backwater took hold, and for three breaths she came back together, whole, every plate in its place, every light burning, as if nothing had happened at all. The Kept thought of the boy with the ears on her guns, and she let herself hope, just for those three breaths.

Then they were over. The *Forevermore* came apart again, exactly as she had the first time, and the pieces went on toward the Well.

"Kept," said Maud. "Chest."

The chest stood under the round window. It was big enough for a child to fit inside if she folded herself up, and it had been built, a long time ago, for exactly that. The Kept had never once gotten into it.

"No," she said.

"Kept."

"They can't hurt me. Nothing can."

“They don’t want to hurt you. They want to carry you off.” Maud had the long knife out. She didn’t look at it. She was looking at the door. “You can’t be hurt, but you can be carried. Get in the chest.”

There was a sound outside the high room that the Kept had never heard before. It was a heavy, grinding bump against the outside of the tower, down and to the left, where the landing was. Something had come alongside. Something had come right out of the backwater and put itself against the House’s highest wall, where no ship could reach, three breaths before anyone could have seen it coming.

Maud went out onto the landing and pulled the door almost shut behind her.

The Kept didn’t get in the chest. She went to the door and put her eye to the crack.

The landing at the top of the stairs was a round stone room with a window on the outside wall and the four hundred and twelve stairs going down on the other side. The window was gone now. There was a black hull filling it, close enough to touch, and a hatch in the hull, and the hatch was open. Three Quells came through it. They wore gray armor that didn’t catch the light, and two of them had ordinary swords, and one of them had a knife with a blade that shimmered, as if you were looking at it through heat.

The Kept knew what that was. Everybody in the Hold knew what a shear-knife was, even people who’d never seen one. It had fast water folded into the edge. Where it cut, the fast water went in, and ran.

Maud killed the first one on the sill before his feet were properly down. She did it without any fuss at all, the long knife going

in under his arm where the armor gapped, and out again, and he folded up and dropped back through the window into nothing. The second one came in over him and swung, and Maud caught the blow on her knife and let it push her back, and her bad knee went, and she went down on it. The Kept put her hand over her own mouth. But Maud was already coming up again, the way she came up out of her chair every morning, slow and then all at once, and she came up inside the Quell's reach and put the knife through the join at his neck. He sat down against the wall and didn't get up.

The third one was the one with the shear-knife.

He didn't rush. He had seen what she'd done to the other two. He came at her sideways, small steps, the shimmering blade low and moving, and Maud watched it the way she watched the Kept, with her whole attention and nothing on her face. He cut at her arm. She pulled it back, not far enough. The shimmer touched her forearm and slid across it, and he cut again, across her side, and Maud made a sound the Kept had never heard her make, and put her long knife into him to the hilt.

He fell forward onto her. She pushed him off and he went down the stairs, a long way.

Then Maud sat down on the top step.

The Kept came out.

"Get back in," said Maud.

"No."

"Get back in. There might be more."

"There aren't," said the Kept. "There were three, and you killed all three." She knelt down on the stone beside Maud and looked at her arm.

It was old.

The cut was only a thin line, not even bleeding much. But the arm around it had gone thin and spotted and knuckled, an old woman's arm, older than any arm the Kept had ever seen in the Hold, where nobody was ever allowed to get that old. While she watched, the oldness spread. It went up past the elbow like water soaking into cloth. The fast water was still in the cut. It was still running. It went into Maud's side where the second cut was, and her gray tunic hung looser, and the Kept watched Maud's face start to change.

"Stop it," the Kept said. "Make it stop."

"Can't," said Maud. "Nobody can. That's the point of them." She leaned her head back against the wall. Her hair was going white from the roots, the way frost comes across a pane. "Told you they wouldn't get in."

"They got in."

"Not in there." Maud tipped her head at the high room's door, a very small movement. "That's the only in that counts."

The Kept took Maud's hand. The old one. It was light as paper, and dry, and so thin she could feel every bone.

"I'm not supposed to tell you anything," Maud said. Her voice was changing too. It had gone thin and high and a little slurred, an old woman's voice, and the Kept hated it, because it wasn't Maud's. "You know that."

"Tell me something."

Maud was quiet. Down the stairs, far below, the Kept could hear the House guard coming up at last, running, a long way off. Four hundred and twelve stairs. They wouldn't be in time. Nobody ever was.

"That braid," Maud said.

“What about it?”

“I’ve watched that braid three hundred years.” Her eyes were closed now. The lines in her face had gone deep as cuts. “Somebody loved you, Kept. Nobody braids hair like that for a job. Somebody did that who loved you.”

The Kept’s eyes stung. Nothing came. Nothing ever came. That was part of being kept too.

“With my years,” Maud said. “All of them. See? I told you.”

She was very old by then. She was older than the Holders ever let themselves get, older than anyone the Kept had ever seen, older than her own three hundred and six years, because a shear-knife doesn’t stop at what you’ve lived. It gives you what you haven’t. The Kept held her hand while it happened. She held it when it went still, and she held it after that, when there was nothing left in it to hold.

The House guard came up the last of the stairs, out of breath, swords out, and stopped on the landing. They looked at the dead Quell against the wall, and the black hull in the broken window, and the very old woman on the top step, and the Kept holding her hand.

“Kept,” said one of them. “You’re to come away from there.”

The Kept didn’t answer him, and she didn’t let go.

CHAPTER FOUR

Downriver

The dead of the Held are given to the fast water, so that they are gone before anyone has to mourn them.

FROM THE RULES OF THE HOUSE OF MORROW

THE HOUSE WON. IT always did.

By the fifth bell the Quell wedge was broken, and what was left of it had turned and run back down the silver toward the Houses on the far side of the Well. Eleven of their ships hung in Oda Vey's still water where they'd stopped, with their own fire still standing out in front of them like frozen ribbons. They would be there tomorrow, and the day after, and for as long as anyone could imagine. The Kept had added them to her flock, which was the only way she knew to keep anything.

Everard kept his word about the new captain. The Kept didn't watch.

The House guard had taken her away from the top of the stairs in the end. They hadn't pulled. The Rules said the Kept was not to

be harmed, and they were afraid of the Rules, so two of them had knelt on either side of her and waited, and after a while one of them had said, very quietly, "She's gone, Kept. She's gone," and the Kept had looked down at the hand she was holding and seen that it was true. Then she had let go. She had walked into the high room by herself and sat down on the edge of her bed, and the door had closed behind her, and she'd listened to the Held come up with buckets and brushes and scrub the landing for an hour.

When they were done she opened the door and looked. The Quell hull was gone from the broken window, and boards had been nailed across it. The dead Quell was gone from against the wall. The stone at the top of the stairs was clean and wet and there was still a stain on it, a dark shape the size of a person sitting down, and the brushes hadn't touched it.

Maud's stool was still there, beside the door, where it had always been.

At the sixth bell the Held carried the dead to the Lip.

She could see the Lip from the round window if she stood at the far left edge and pressed her cheek to the glass, the green pane, the one she'd never forgiven. It was the place where the terraces ended and Lanthorn's steady ground stopped, and past it the fast water ran. It didn't look like water. It looked like the air over a forge, or like the air around a shear, bright and restless and slightly wrong, and it went by without a sound.

The Held came across the terraces in a long line, carrying the dead on boards between them, two to a board. They had done this after every battle she had ever watched. The Quell dead went first, and they didn't get boards. The Held had taken their boots, and their armor, and whatever bread was in their packs, and they

dragged them to the edge by the heels and pushed them off and spat after them. The Kept had watched the Quells do the same with Morrow dead, the one time a Quell raid held a Morrow terrace for a day. Then the Held brought their own. They walked to the edge and stopped, and tipped the board, and what was on it slid off into the fast water. It didn't fall. It didn't have time to. It went to dust in the time it took to start falling, and the dust went on downriver with the Givings, and was never anywhere again.

That was the Rule. It was supposed to be a kindness. Gone before anyone had to mourn them. Nobody on the terraces cried, because there was never time to start.

Maud had told her once, in a lean year, that there was another reason for it. The dead went to the fast water whole, and quickly, because in the lean years there had been people on the terraces who couldn't wait. She hadn't said wait for what. The Kept hadn't asked.

The Kept counted the boards. There were two hundred and six.

Maud was the last. The Kept knew her by her hair, all white now, and by the size of her, which was smaller than it had been that morning, because old people take up less room. The Held carried her the length of the terraces the same as the others, not faster and not slower, and stood her board at the edge of the Lip, and tipped it. And Maud was gone before she had started to go.

The Kept stood at the window a long while after the line of the Held had broken up and gone back to work.

The Rule was wrong. That was the thing she found out, standing there with her cheek against the green glass. It turned out you could mourn somebody who was already gone. You could mourn them for as long as you liked. And the Kept had longer than anyone.

Everard came up at the seventh bell.

He was in a very good mood. She could hear it all the way up the stairs, in his voice, talking to the chair-bearers about the new ships he meant to build to replace the old ones. He stepped out onto the landing and stopped for a moment beside the stain, and looked down at it, the way he might look down at a spill on a good rug. Then he came in.

“A great day for the House, my dear,” he said.

“Two hundred and six,” said the Kept.

“Two hundred and six Held, eleven ships of the line, thirty of the little ones, and one keeper.” He counted them off on his fingers, and the beads on his rings clicked. “Against which, the Quells have lost the better part of a fleet and the cleverest captain they’ve had in a thousand years, and every House at the Table will hear about it by the next bell. It was cheap at the price.”

“Her name was Maud.”

“I know what her name was.” He looked at her with something that on anybody else might have been kindness. “I know all their names, my dear. I’ve had them all brought up those stairs. I’ll have another brought up by the morning bell.”

“I don’t want another.”

“What you want isn’t one of the things that’s kept.” He turned to go, and then turned back at the door, and looked at her braid. “Try not to learn this one’s name. It never helps.”

He went out. The chair creaked down.

Her supper came up at the eighth bell. The Held who carried it stopped on the landing and looked at the empty stool, and then came in and set the plate on the table, bread and butter and a pear, and went down again without a word. The Kept didn’t push it anywhere. There was nobody to push it to.

The House went quiet as the night bell came. The Held lowered the lamps on the terraces one by one, until only the Givings lit anything, the way they always did, silver and slow, with the round black Well at the top of it all. Down below, somebody was sweeping. Somebody was always sweeping.

The Kept opened her door and looked at the landing.

Nobody was there. In three hundred and six years there had always been somebody on the stool at night. Maud, mostly. Before her, the fortieth, a thin man who read to himself under his breath. Before him, a woman who snored. There had always been somebody out there, breathing, between her and the stairs.

She went out and sat down on Maud's stool.

It was too tall for her, and her feet didn't reach the floor. It faced her own door, which was how it had always stood, because a keeper watches what he's keeping. She sat there, swinging her feet, looking at her own door the way forty-one keepers had looked at it. It was an ordinary door. It had a crack beside the hinge that she'd put her eye to a thousand times. From out here, you'd think there was nothing behind it but a room.

She reached back and found her braid, and held the end of it, the strip of cloth the color of a sky she didn't remember.

Somebody loved you, Maud had said. Nobody braids hair like that for a job.

She sat with that for a long time, on the stool, in the quiet. She didn't count anything. She found she didn't want to.

It was a little before midnight that her ears popped.

CHAPTER FIVE

Windfall

*Now and then the sky over the Well tears, and something falls
through it from somewhere else. What falls belongs to the House it
lands on.*

FROM THE TABLE OF HOUSES

THE AIR WENT HEAVY first.

It pressed on the Kept's ears until they popped, and then it pressed again. Down on the terraces the Givings flickered, the way lamplight does when a door opens somewhere, and the one person still sweeping stopped and looked up. The Kept got off Maud's stool and went into the high room and to the round window.

Beside the Well, a little to the left of it, a line had appeared across the sky.

It was as thin as a hair at first. Then it widened, not all at once but the way a seam opens when the thread starts to give, a stitch at a time. Behind it was a dark she had never seen. The Well's black was empty, flat, a black with nothing in it. This dark had things in it.

It moved. It had weight and shape, great heavy shapes rolling over each other, lit from inside by flashes that weren't the Givings, white and jagged and gone.

Then the wind came out of it.

She heard it before it reached the House, a roar like nothing she had a name for, and then it hit the terraces and every lamp the Held had left burning went out at once. The round window boomed in its frame. Out on the landing, the boards nailed over the broken window groaned, and something came in through the gaps between them.

Water.

It was coming down out of the sky. It came down in lines, thousands of them, slanting, and it hit the round window so hard and so many times that it made a sound like the whole House drumming its fingers. The Kept stood with her hands flat on the glass and watched it run down the other side in crooked streams. She had never seen anything like it. It never rained on Lanthorn. The Givings watered everything that grew.

She went out onto the landing. The rain was coming through the boards in sheets, and it was cold, and the floor was already wet, and the stain at the top of the stairs had gone dark and shining. The Kept stood in the spray with her face turned up to it.

It smelled of something. That was the strangest part. The Hold didn't smell of anything much, mostly lamp oil and stone. This smelled like dirt, wet dirt, and like grass that had just been cut, and like something green and alive and very far away. It smelled like somewhere.

Things were coming in with the rain. Little white stones bounced off the boards and skittered across the landing, and she

picked one up and it was so cold it burned her hand, and then it wasn't a stone anymore, it was water running out between her fingers. She had never held anything that turned into something else in her hand. There were leaves too, torn green leaves plastered to the wet boards, and she pulled one off and looked at it. It was shaped like the blade of a gardener's trowel, with a long flat stem, and tiny teeth all the way around its edge. She didn't know what tree it came from. She didn't know any trees that weren't in the House's gardens, and none of them looked like this.

She put the leaf inside her shirt, against her skin, and went back to the window.

Something was falling out of the tear.

At first she thought it was more leaves. Then she saw the shapes were too big, and turning over and over in the rain, and that they had arms and legs. There were two of them. They came down through the sky over the House the way the little ships came down when they'd been hit, all their strength gone out of them, and one of them hit the long pool on the third terrace, the Holders' pool, which no Held was allowed to drink from, with a white splash that she heard even over the rain. The other hit the slate roof of the long gallery and slid, and caught at the gutter, and hung there for a moment by one hand, and dropped onto the terrace below and didn't move.

Then the tear closed.

It closed the way it had opened, a stitch at a time, only faster, and the wind stopped in the middle of a roar as if someone had shut a door on it. The rain that was already falling went on falling for a few breaths and then there wasn't any more. The Givings steadied. The Hold was quiet again.

But the terraces were wet. They shone in the silver light, every one of them. Down there in the dark the Held were running out of every door with bowls and pots and buckets, and when those were full, with their hands. They knelt on the wet stone and drank from the puddles, fast, before the House guard could come and tell them whose water it was. The Kept could still smell the rain.

She went to her door and looked at the landing. There was no one on Maud's stool. There was no one on the stairs. There was nobody at all between her and the four hundred and twelve stairs, and the great hall at the bottom of them, and whatever had just fallen out of the sky.

She had been down those stairs four times in her life, and every time somebody had been carrying her off.

She went down them on her own feet.

She stepped around the stain at the top. She counted the whole way, because counting was the only thing she knew how to do with being afraid, and by the two hundredth stair her legs hurt in a way she didn't have a word for, and by the four hundredth she had decided she liked it. She didn't go all the way down into the hall. She went out along the long gallery that ran around the top of it, between the pillars, and knelt behind the stone rail where she could see without being seen, the way she had watched a thousand battles from the round window.

The great hall was bright with lamps. Everard was there, in a long dressing robe the color of wine, with his beads on over it because a Holder never took his years off. The House captain was there, a Held named Ansk with a gray beard and a scar through it, and a dozen of the House guard, and a great many of the Held who had

no reason to be there except that something had fallen out of the sky and nobody wanted to miss it.

They brought the two men in and put them down on the floor in front of Everard, and water ran off them onto the stone. Somebody at the back of the hall said, not quite quietly enough, that the Hold had mouths enough already.

The first one was already talking before his knees touched the floor.

He was lean, and younger than the other, with dark hair plastered flat and a narrow, quick, clever face, and he talked fast, in a language nobody in the Hold knew. It wasn't any tongue of any world the Kept had ever heard at the Table. It went up and down. It sounded like a question that kept turning into a joke and back again. He had his hands out in front of him, open, palms up, the way the traders from the far worlds held their hands when they came to the Table to sell something. He looked from Ansk to the guards to the lamps to Everard.

Then he looked at Everard's beads.

The Kept saw his eyes change. It was very small and very quick and she wouldn't have seen it if she hadn't spent her whole long life watching faces from above. She had seen that look on every Holder who had ever sat at the Table. She had never seen it on anyone who wasn't one.

Everard laughed softly.

"Listen to him," he said. "He's selling something already, and he hasn't the faintest idea what we've got."

The second one was bigger.

He was older, and heavier, and soaked through, and there was blood running down from a cut through one eyebrow and into the

rain on his face. His hands had been tied behind him with a strap. It had taken four of the Held to bring him in, and one of them had his hand clamped over his own nose, and there was blood coming out between the fingers. The big man didn't talk. He knelt where they'd put him and he looked.

He looked at the doors. Both of them, one and then the other. He looked at the guards, and at what the guards carried, and at the high windows, and at the lamps. He looked at Ansk and at Everard and at the beads. The Kept, watching him from behind the rail, thought that he was counting. She knew what that looked like, because it was what she did.

Then he looked at the lean one. The lean one had gone on talking to Everard, but when the big man's eyes found him, the lean one's smile went away for a moment, and came back smaller.

They knew each other. The Kept had watched enough Houses sit down at the same table to know what it looked like when two people who didn't like each other had ended up in the same room.

Then the big man looked up. He looked straight up at the gallery, at the rail, at her.

She should have ducked. She didn't. It was midnight and she was nine years old, in her nightshirt, with her hair still wet from the rain, kneeling behind a stone rail above a hall full of soldiers, and a stranger had found her there in a single look. She waited for him to look away, the way everybody looked away from the Kept once they'd seen her, the way you look away from something you're not supposed to touch.

He didn't look away.

There was something in his face that she didn't have a name for. It wasn't the look of someone checking a thing he owned for

scratches. It wasn't the Holders' look, or the Held's. She had never seen it before, pointed at her, and she didn't know what it was, and it made her want to go back up the stairs and also to stay exactly where she was.

Everard followed the big man's eyes up to the gallery.

He should have been angry. The Kept was not to leave the high room. She saw him see her, and she waited for it, and it didn't come. Instead he looked back down at the big man, slowly, and he tilted his head, the way he did when something was clever, whoever it belonged to.

"Look at that," he said. "Look at him, Ansk. He's looking at her the way a keeper's supposed to. As if she's the only thing in the room."

"Holder," said Ansk.

"What falls belongs to the House it lands on." Everard walked a slow circle around the big man. The beads on his robe clicked. "A windfall has no House. Nobody at the Table knows he's alive. He can't sell her to the Quells. He can't talk to anybody to sell her to anybody. He can't even ask the Quells the time." He sounded delighted. "Give him to the Kept."

"Holder," said Ansk, "he broke Rufe's nose on the terrace."

"Good," said Everard. "She'll need that." He stopped in front of the big man and looked down at him, and the big man looked back, and didn't blink. "If he loses her, he answers with his years. He looks as if he has a great many."

He turned away, and gestured at the lean one, who had stopped talking at last and was watching all of this with great interest.

"And bring that one to my table in the morning," Everard said. "I'd like to know what he thinks he's selling."

Down in the hall, Ansk looked up at the gallery.

“Kept!” he said.

She was already gone. She ran back up the four hundred and twelve stairs faster than she had come down them, counting every one. For the first time in her life, the counting helped.

CHAPTER SIX

The keeper

The keeper sleeps when the Kept sleeps, and never where she cannot see him. A keeper who loves the Kept is to be replaced.

FROM THE RULES OF THE KEEPING, HOUSE OF MORROW

THEY BROUGHT HIM UP at the first bell after midnight.

She heard them coming a long way down, four of the House guard and the big man between them, and she counted the stairs with them to keep her hands still. When they came out onto the landing she was standing in her doorway, dressed properly again, with her braid over her shoulder, the way she had stood to meet every keeper she'd ever had.

They had cleaned him up. Someone had washed the blood off his face and put a strip of cloth over the cut through his eyebrow, and they'd taken whatever he'd fallen in and put him into Held gray, which was too short for him at the wrists and ankles and too narrow across the back. His hands weren't tied anymore. The guards stood well away from them.

“Your keeper, Kept,” one of them said. He didn’t sound as if he believed it. Then all four of them went back down the stairs, faster than they’d come up, and left him there.

He didn’t move for a while. He stood on the landing and looked at it.

The Kept watched him do it. He looked at the stain at the top of the stairs first, the dark shape the size of a person sitting down, still damp from the rain. He looked at it for a long moment, and his face didn’t change, and she thought that he had seen stains like that before. He looked at the boards over the broken window, and the black scrape down the stone beside it where the Quell hull had ground against the House. He looked at the gouges in the wall at shoulder height, where a sword had missed. He looked at Maud’s stool.

Then he looked at her.

She had said the Rules of the Keeping forty-one times, to forty-one keepers, on forty-one first nights. It was the first thing a keeper heard from the Kept and the last thing, most of them, that they ever heard her say that mattered. She folded her hands and said them again.

“The Kept is to be kept,” she said. “She is not to be harmed, changed, taught, or told. Her keeper answers for her with his years. The keeper sleeps when the Kept sleeps, and never where she cannot see him. The keeper leaves the landing only to follow her. The keeper lays no hand on her but to carry her out of harm. The keeper does not speak to her of the Well. A keeper who loves the Kept is to be replaced.” She took a breath. “The Kept is to be kept.”

The Rules ended the way they began. They were like that.

He had listened to all of it. That was the first strange thing. He couldn't have understood a single word, she knew that, she had heard him in the hall, and her tongue was nothing to him but noise. The forty-one had at least understood what they were hearing, and most of them had stopped listening by the third Rule, because they'd heard the Rules before they ever came up the stairs. This one stood in his too-small gray with his hands at his sides, and he looked at her while she spoke, and he listened to every Rule as if each one might be the one that mattered. When she finished, he nodded, slowly and seriously, as if she had told him something important, and he meant to remember it.

"You don't understand a word of that," she said.

He answered her.

It was only a few words, in his own language, low and slow, set down one at a time like stones across a stream. She didn't know what any of them meant. But he'd said them to her, straight to her, and waited afterward, the way you wait when you've asked somebody something. In three hundred years nobody had answered her with anything but yes, Kept, and no, Kept.

She put her hand flat on her own chest.

"Kept," she said.

He tried it. "Kept." He got it a little wrong, the way the Held from the far worlds did at first, with the end too soft. But it was close.

She pointed at him, and waited.

He looked at her for a moment. It was a long look, and a careful one, and she had the strange feeling that he was deciding something about her, whether she was the kind of person who got told things. Then he shook his head, just slightly. It wasn't unkind. It was the

way you'd shake your head at a question that had a good answer, only not yet.

It was the first thing she had ever been refused that she didn't mind.

Then he pointed at the stool, and raised his eyebrows, the good one and the one with the cloth on it.

The Kept stared at him. He was asking. He was asking her whether he could have the stool. Forty-one keepers had come up those stairs, and every one of them had sat down on that stool the moment the guards were gone, because it was the keeper's stool and they were the keeper. Not one of them had ever asked her anything at all.

She nodded.

He picked the stool up. He turned it all the way around, so that it faced out, away from her door, toward the top of the stairs and the dark well of them going down. He set it against the wall beside her door, and he sat on it, with his back to the stone and his face to the stairs, the way the Quells had come.

The Kept went inside. Her supper was still on the little table by the door where the Held had left it, and she stood and looked at it for a moment. Then she picked up the plate and carried it out onto the landing and held it out to him. For three hundred years she had pushed it across the table to Maud every morning. She didn't know what else to do with it.

He looked at the plate. He looked at her. Then he took the bread, only the bread, and broke it in two, and held one half out to her.

"I don't eat," said the Kept. "Nothing about me needs it."

He went on holding it out.

The Held set things down in front of her. The Holders told her what she was worth. Nobody had ever offered her anything. She took the half, because he looked as if he was prepared to sit there holding it out until the Well closed, and she stood in her doorway and ate it while he ate his. She had forgotten what bread tasted like. When he'd finished, he wrapped the pear and the butter in the cloth from the plate, and set the bundle on the empty plate, and set the plate down at the top of the stairs, for whoever came up in the morning to fetch it.

It was what Maud used to do. Nobody had told him.

The Kept went inside and pushed her door almost shut.

She stood with her eye to the crack beside the hinge for a long time. He didn't move. He sat with his forearms on his knees and his big hands hanging loose between them, and he watched the stairs. Now and then he turned his head toward the boarded window, when the wind moved the boards, and then back.

After a while she went and lay down on her bed.

She didn't count anything. She lay in the dark with the silver of the Givings on the ceiling and the leaf from the storm in her hand. It was already softer than it had been. By morning it would be softer still, and in a few days it would be dry and brittle and brown at the edges, and one day it would break. She knew that. She held it anyway. It was the first thing she had ever owned that was going to change.

She listened to him breathe on the other side of the door. It was a slow, even sound, a big man's breathing, the breathing of somebody who is awake on purpose.

Much later she got up and went to the crack again. The Rule said the keeper sleeps when the Kept sleeps, and she was supposed to be asleep, and she wanted to know if he was.

He wasn't asleep. He was sitting just the same, forearms on his knees, facing the dark of the stairs. At the sound of her feet on the floor he turned his head a little, not all the way, just enough to let her know that he'd heard, and then he turned back.

She went back to bed.

Forty-one keepers, and every one of them had watched her door. This one watched the stairs.

W H A T C O M E S N E X T

Part Two of *The Long Watch* comes out with Book Two of Aftwend.

By the end of Book Two you'll know who fell out of the sky, and why the one who turned the stool around never looks away from the stairs. Part Two will be waiting in your inbox when you get there.

Until then, keep counting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Daniel Bissey was raised in Colorado Springs, Colorado, at the foot of Pikes Peak, where a love of the outdoors comes with the view. Childhood visits to Alaska carried it further, teaching Daniel to chase adventure, to keep a free soul and a wide-open imagination, and to love the natural world and the joy of exploring it. The same wonder points up at the stars. Daniel's favorite show puts an ancient ring inside a Colorado mountain, a gate that opens onto other worlds. That, and a lifelong love of technology, grew into a vision of humanity crossing the galaxy in spectacular starships.

Daniel's passion project, astrisproject.org, works to help the world reach that future, and to make humanity better along the way.

Behind it all is one hope: that people everywhere will set aside their differences and come together to seek knowledge and explore the unknown, toward a future where no one has to suffer while others have so much more.

Daniel is the proud parent of Autumn, the coolest kid around, and learned to love writing from a father who loved it first. *Aftwend* is the first book in a planned seven-book series.