

RIVEN KADE



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Before the Spire Knew His Name

An Iron Ascension prequel story

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BEFORE THE SPIRE KNEW HIS NAME

The rain came hard enough to make the Grinders look clean.

It was a lie, but Cael appreciated the effort.

Water ran down the tenement walls in black ribbons, carrying soot into the canal and turning the market stones slick beneath his boots. Vendors had packed away anything that would rot, rust, or float. The guild patrols had retreated beneath the covered walk near the first lock, which was the only reason Cael was still outside.

At seventeen, rain was useful.

It emptied streets. It softened footsteps. It made people look down instead of around.

It also made the roof over Mira Doss's kitchen leak in six places.

Cael stood inside the converted workshop with a dented bucket in one hand and watched a seventh drop form above the flour shelves.

"Don't," Mira said.

He looked at her.

"Whatever you're thinking, don't climb the rafters. I don't need another hole in the roof and I definitely don't need you breaking your neck over a sack of barley."

"I wasn't going to climb the rafters."

"You were looking at them."

"Looking isn't climbing."

"With you, looking is usually the first half of climbing."

Cael put the bucket beneath the leak.

The kitchen smelled of boiled grain, wet stone, and the onions Mira had managed to buy cheap because half the crate was soft. It was not a guild kitchen. The guild did not run kitchens in the Grinders unless someone important was visiting and needed to be photographed pretending the district existed.

Mira ran this one because children got hungry whether the city ledger acknowledged them or not.

Cael had eaten here enough times as a kid to know which bowls had cracks that pinched your fingers and which corner of the stove stayed warm longest after the fire went out. He had stopped coming for food once he could usually find his own. Usually mattered. Pride did not fill a stomach, but it could make you stupid enough to pretend it did.

Tonight he had come because Mira had sent a boy to find him.

The boy was sitting on the flour counter now, feet swinging above the floor. Nine years old, maybe ten. Thin in the Grinders way. A public projection had been pulled up beside him when Cael arrived, because the child had not yet learned when not to display it.

CITIZEN PROJECTION

JOSS // CLASS: NONE

STRENGTH 1 ENDURANCE 2 SPEED 2

RANK: FODDER

Cael had dismissed his own projection before entering.

He knew the numbers without looking.

Strength 2. Endurance 3. Speed 3. Class none. Rank Fodder.

They were not impressive enough to deserve light.

Mira slid a cup across the counter. "Drink."

"What's in it?"

"Hot water."

"Generous."

"There's a leaf in there somewhere."

Cael drank. The leaf had lost whatever argument it had once made with the water.

Mira waited until Joss was watching the rain rather than them.

Then she said, "The guild took the ration chits."

Cael lowered the cup.

"Which ration chits?"

"All of them."

That changed the room.

The kitchen did not have money in any meaningful sense. It had favors, donations, scraps, and a packet of stamped chits issued by the district office each month for grain that was technically allocated to registered dependents. The chits were not enough. They were still the difference between thin soup and no soup.

"Why?"

"Requisition adjustment."

"That's not a reason."

"It's the phrase on the paper."

Mira pulled a folded notice from beneath a stack of bowls and handed it to him.

The guild seal was stamped at the bottom in dark blue ink. Cael read the notice once, then again.

The district had exceeded its "unregistered consumption variance." The Grinders' communal aid sites would therefore surrender forty percent of the next allocation cycle for ranked logistical priorities.

Forty percent had apparently meant one hundred when the collection wagon arrived.

"They took next month's too," Mira said.

Cael looked up.

"That's not in the notice."

"The officer said the ledger would correct itself later."

"The ledger doesn't correct anything later."

"I know."

Joss's feet had stopped swinging.

Cael glanced at him. "What happened?"

The boy looked at Mira.

Mira's mouth tightened.

"Tell him."

Joss swallowed. "I took one back."

"One chit?"

"A packet."

"How big a packet?"

The boy held his hands apart.

Cael stared.

"That's not a packet. That's most of what they took."

"I was fast."

Speed 2.

The system had opinions about that.

"Where is it?"

Joss's eyes went toward the pantry.

Cael closed his own for a moment.

"You stole a guild requisition packet from a collection wagon and brought it back to the place they collected it from."

"It belongs here."

"That's not the part I'm arguing with."

Mira folded her arms. "The patrol came back twenty minutes ago. They know something is missing. They don't know who took it yet."

"Yet."

"Yet."

Outside, rain hammered the shutters.

Cael put the cup down.

"How long until the wagon reaches the district post?"

"It left south."

"Then it has to cross the Crack."

"Everything going south crosses the Crack."

"Not everything. Heavy wagons do."

Mira watched him in the way she always did when she realized his looking had become planning.

"No."

"I haven't said anything."

"Your face did."

"My face barely does anything."

"Your face is extremely loud when you're about to make my evening worse."

Cael turned toward the door.

Joss jumped off the counter. "Where are you going?"

"To make sure you didn't steal anything."

The boy looked confused.

Mira did not.

"Cael."

He paused.

Her expression softened by a fraction. "You don't owe this place."

He looked at the stove. The shelves. The bowls. The patch of floor where he had once slept because winter had frozen the roof access lock solid and the canal underpass was full.

"I know."

He opened the door.

Rain struck his face like thrown gravel.

The Crack had been splitting down the center for longer than Cael had been alive.

Nobody fixed it because the eastern half belonged to municipal transport and the western half belonged to canal works, and each office had spent three decades documenting why the other office should pay.

The Grinders solved the problem the way the Grinders solved most things.

People stepped over the crack.

Wagons could not.

They had to take the narrow reinforced lane on the bridge's eastern edge, where two iron plates had been bolted over the worst of the damage. One wagon at a time. Slow enough that Cael could walk beside one without running.

The requisition wagon was easy to find.

Guild gray. Iron-rimmed wheels. Canvas cover. Two draft animals. One driver. Two officers walking behind it because someone had taken something from the load and the guild considered theft from the poor much more serious when the poor did it back.

Cael followed from the canal stairs.

The rain helped. It blurred faces and flattened sound. He kept twenty meters back, moving whenever the wagon moved, stopping whenever it stopped.

The public projections above the bridge pylons glowed through the storm.

A Steel Rank shipping supervisor had cleared the southern checkpoint. An Iron patrol had logged a disturbance in Ashmarket. Three Fodder registrations had expired.

The system knew all of that.

It did not know Cael was walking beneath it.

Or if it knew, it did not care.

He preferred that.

For now.

The wagon reached the bridge.

Cael dropped down a service stair and ducked beneath the stone arch.

The underside of the Crack was a history of bad repairs. Iron brackets sat beside newer iron brackets, which had been fixed to older iron brackets because removing the first set would require admitting someone had installed them wrong. Drain pipes ran down both pylons. One had broken years ago, leaving a narrow gap where runoff poured directly into the canal.

Cael climbed onto the maintenance ledge.

The ledge was slick. The canal churned four meters below.

Strength 2.

Endurance 3.

Speed 3.

He had no class ability that made wet stone less wet.

He moved anyway.

Above him, the wagon's wheels clattered onto the reinforced plates.

Cael reached the old service bell line.

Nobody used the bell anymore. The canal workers had switched to system alerts years ago, which meant the rope had rotted in place while the iron bell remained bolted to the western pylon. But the rope still connected to the counterweight assembly beneath the bridge.

Cael had noticed it two winters ago while hiding from a patrol.

Looking, Mira would have said.

First half of climbing.

He wrapped the rope around his forearm and pulled.

Nothing.

He pulled harder.

Strength 2 had opinions.

The rope shifted a centimeter.

Above, the wagon continued forward.

He planted one boot against the wall and leaned his weight backward.

The old pulley screamed.

The bell did not ring.

The counterweight moved.

That was what he wanted.

A rusted maintenance gate beneath the eastern plate lifted three inches.

Canal runoff that had been backing behind it all afternoon found somewhere new to go.

Water burst across the reinforced lane.

The wagon's lead animal shied.

The driver swore.

One wheel hit the edge of the plate at an angle and dropped into the narrow drainage channel beside it.

The wagon stopped.

Cael let go of the rope.

The gate slammed shut.

Above him, boots moved. Officers shouting. Driver climbing down.

He hauled himself onto the bridge's side ledge and waited until all three were looking at the trapped wheel.

Then he climbed into the wagon.

The canvas flap was tied in a standard guild knot, which sounded impressive until you watched enough guild wagons and realized standard meant everyone used the same knot.

Cael slipped it loose.

Inside were six crates of grain chits, three tool requisition boxes, a packet of canal permits, and a sealed case stamped for the administrative quarter.

Mira's packet was not there.

He checked again.

Nothing.

For one second he thought the whole plan had been built around the wrong assumption.

Then he saw the driver climb back onto the bench.

A leather satchel hung beneath the seat.

Of course.

Missing items did not remain with the cargo. They became evidence.

Cael slid back out.

The officers were trying to lift the wheel.

Strength 18, maybe. Iron Rank. The sort of numbers that let a person solve problems by pushing harder.

They had the wheel halfway out when Cael crawled beneath the wagon and reached up behind the driver's bench.

His fingers found the satchel strap.

He pulled.

The strap caught.

He pulled again.

The driver looked down.

Their eyes met through the rain.

For a fraction of a second neither moved.

Then the driver shouted.

Cael yanked the strap hard enough to snap the old brass hook.

The satchel dropped into his hands.

He ran.

There were moments when Speed 3 was enough.

This was not one of them.

The first officer cleared the wagon in three steps.

Cael heard boots behind him, too fast, too heavy, enhanced.

He cut left instead of toward the market.

The officer expected him to run for the district alleys. Everyone ran for the alleys.

Cael ran for the Crack.

The actual crack.

The split in the bridge widened near the center pylon, too narrow for an adult body but wide enough that rainwater poured through in a continuous sheet. Cael jumped onto the low dividing wall, ran three steps along wet stone, and dropped.

Someone behind him shouted, "Idiot!"

That was fair.

Cael caught the maintenance beam beneath the bridge with both hands.

His shoulders nearly came out of their sockets.

The satchel swung from his wrist.

Endurance 3.

He held.

Above, an officer reached the wall and stopped.

"Come up."

Cael looked down at the canal.

"No."

"You're hanging over floodwater."

"I noticed."

"You think I'm not going to wait?"

"I think your wagon is blocking the only reinforced lane on a bridge during a guild logistics rotation."

The officer looked toward the wagon.

A horn sounded from the north.

Then another.

Heavy transport.

Right on time.

Cael had watched the route for months. Ranked supply convoys crossed the Crack every third evening after the administrative quarter shift changed. They had priority over district collections. Priority meant the requisition wagon could not remain where it was.

The officer looked back down.

Cael smiled.

This time his face was loud on purpose.

The officer swore and ran toward the wagon.

Cael dropped to the lower beam.

Then the ledge.

Then the canal stairs.

His arms shook so badly he nearly lost the satchel anyway.

No system notification congratulated him.

No stat increased.

No class evolved.

He had simply survived a bad idea by knowing the bridge better than the people chasing him.

That was how most victories worked in the Grinders.

Small enough the system did not count them.

Important enough that people did.

He did not take the satchel back to Mira.

That would have been stupid.

He took it to Ashmarket.

Ashmarket at night was less a market than a collection of people who had mutually agreed not to ask where anything came from. The rain had driven most stalls beneath patched awnings. Lanterns reflected in puddles. Someone was selling copper wire, someone else was selling guild-stamped boots with the stamps cut out, and a woman near the southern wall had

three crates of medicine that definitely had not passed through a legal distributor.

Cael went to a narrow alley behind a scrap dealer and opened the satchel.

Mira's packet was inside.

So were eleven other packets.

He stared at them.

Each was labeled with a communal site code.

Grinders kitchens. Ashmarket shelters. A Fodder workhouse near the third lock. Two child dormitories attached to canal labor crews.

The collection wagon had not taken too much from Mira by accident.

It had taken too much from everyone.

Cael pulled out the requisition notice stored with the packets.

The official forty-percent adjustment had been entered correctly.

A handwritten instruction beneath it said:

FULL PHYSICAL COLLECTION. RECORD 40%. SURPLUS TO DISTRICT DISCRETION.

District discretion.

A clean phrase for theft.

Cael leaned against the wall.

He could return Mira's packet and leave the rest.

That would be smart.

He could sell the other chits and eat well for weeks.

That would be smarter.

He could dump the satchel into the canal, which would erase the evidence and reduce the chance that the patrol connected the theft to any particular kitchen.

Safest.

Instead, he sat on an overturned crate and read every label.

Eleven sites.

He knew seven of them.

He knew people at four.

He knew what empty shelves looked like at all of them.

The rain hit the awning overhead.

He thought about the officer on the bridge. Strength somewhere in the high teens. Maybe twenty. Enough to lift a wagon wheel. Enough to catch Cael on dry ground before he made it ten steps.

Power made simple problems easier.

The guild had taken that lesson and built a city around it.

Stronger people received more authority. More authority gave access to better advancement. Better advancement made them stronger. Then the Spire displayed the result as if the number proved they had deserved the authority in the first place.

A perfect circle.

If you were inside it.

Cael was not.

He folded the instruction and put it in his pocket.

Then he separated the packets.

Returning them himself would take too long and create a trail.

Ashmarket had another kind of infrastructure.

People.

He found a courier named Pell who had Speed 5 and no interest in guild questions. He paid her with two copper fasteners and a promise of a favor.

"Eleven deliveries?" she said.

"Ten. I'm taking one."

"Tonight?"

"Before morning."

"You know there's an active patrol looking for a Fodder boy carrying a guild satchel."

Cael looked at the satchel.

"There won't be."

He traded it to the boot seller for an old canal jacket and three blank cloth sacks.

Within twenty minutes the guild satchel had become someone else's problem and the chits had become ten separate problems moving in ten separate directions.

Cael took Mira's packet under his jacket.

He was halfway back to the Grinders when the system finally noticed him.

Not because of the theft.

Because he crossed a registration scanner near the market boundary.

PUBLIC LEDGER PING

CAEL

STRENGTH 2 ENDURANCE 3 SPEED 3

CLASS: NONE

RANK: FODDER

STATUS: NO ACTIVE GUILD CONTRACT

The projection hovered beside him for three seconds.

A pair of ranked workers walked past without looking.

Cael dismissed it.

The system knew his numbers.

It did not know what he had just done.

That should have made him feel better.

Instead, for the first time, it made the numbers look smaller than they had that morning.

Not wrong exactly.

Incomplete.

The system measured what it knew how to measure.

Strength. Endurance. Speed.

It did not measure which maintenance rope had not been replaced in eight years.

It did not measure which wagon route crossed which broken bridge at what hour.

It did not measure how many hungry children fit inside the phrase district discretion.

It did not measure the difference between surviving and accepting survival as enough.

Cael walked faster.

Mira was still awake when he returned.

Of course she was.

The kitchen door opened before he knocked.

She pulled him inside by the front of his soaked jacket.

"Do you have any idea how many patrols are outside?"

"Three. One near the bridge, one by the market road, one circling the second lock."

"That was not a request for an inventory."

Cael took the packet from inside his jacket and placed it on the counter.

Mira stopped.

Joss, asleep beneath two coats near the stove, did not move.

She looked at the packet. Then at Cael.

"How?"

"It fell out of a wagon."

"Cael."

"During a drainage malfunction."

"Cael."

"The bridge is badly maintained."

"Cael."

He pulled the folded instruction from his pocket.

Her expression changed as she read it.

Not surprise.

That was the worst part.

People in the Grinders were rarely surprised when the guild found a more efficient way to take something.

"There were eleven packets," he said. "They're going back."

Mira read the note again.

"You copied this?"

"No."

"Then they'll know someone has it."

"They already know someone has the satchel."

"Do you have the satchel?"

"Not anymore."

She closed her eyes.

"I don't want to know."

"Probably wise."

"This doesn't fix it."

"No."

"They'll collect again."

"Maybe."

"They'll change the forms. They'll say the first notice was an error. They'll post new numbers on the ledger."

"Probably."

Mira placed the instruction beside the packet.

"Then what did you accomplish?"

It was not accusation. That would have been easier.

It was the question people in the Grinders asked after every small victory because every small victory existed inside a larger machine that had survived all of them.

Cael looked at Joss sleeping beside the stove.

"He eats next month."

Mira followed his gaze.

"That's it?"

"For tonight."

She breathed out slowly.

"You're seventeen."

"I know."

"You say things like a tired old man."

"Tired is free."

That got a laugh out of her. One short sound, gone quickly.

She poured more hot water into his cup.

This time there were two leaves.

Luxury.

They sat until the rain softened.

Near dawn, a new projection lit the wet stone outside the kitchen.

The Ranking Spire was updating.

Even from the Grinders, its eastern face could be seen between the tenement roofs, pale gold names crawling across ancient stone.

Ranked citizens. Trial winners. Guild promotions. People whose numbers were large enough that the city considered them worth displaying.

Joss woke and wandered to the doorway.

"Do you think my name will be up there one day?"

Mira looked at Cael.

Cael looked at the Spire.

He should have said something comforting.

That was what adults were supposed to do around children, even adults who were not actually adults and children who had already learned the comfort was usually a lie.

"Maybe," he said.

Joss frowned. "That's not very good."

"No."

"What about yours?"

Cael almost laughed.

Strength 2.

Endurance 3.

Speed 3.

Class none.

Rank Fodder.

The Spire had no reason to learn his name.

"Not today."

The boy considered that, then nodded as if today were a technical problem rather than a verdict.

He went back to the stove.

Cael remained in the doorway.

The rain had stopped. The streets shone beneath a gray morning. Patrols moved along the canal. Vendors began opening shutters. Somewhere in Ashmarket, ten packets of ration chits were finding their way back to people the district office had decided would not notice they were missing.

The Spire continued its broadcast.

Cael's name was not on it.

Tomorrow, it would still say nothing about him.

The day after that, probably nothing.

The system had looked at him and decided what mattered.

Two.

Three.

Three.

None.

Fodder.

Cael watched the numbers of better people climb the stone.

Then he turned away.

The Spire did not know his name.

He had already decided the Spire was wrong.

Continue the ascent

Ironbound Ascension, Book One of **The Iron Ascension Saga**, begins when the system finally notices Cael, and gives him a path it was never supposed to reveal.

Power is measured. Rank is visible. Weakness is punished.

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