

Prologue - The Song of Ash and Ember

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Part I — The Forgotten Unity

They say the first light was born from a lie.

That before names had meaning and crowns had weight, the realms were one — seamless, radiant, and whole.

The heavens and the underdeep mirrored each other, bound by a breath older than creation itself.

In those days, there was no war between flame and shadow.

The sun rose not to conquer the night but to fold it in its arms, and the moon, pale and patient, carried the memory of the dawn. Magic was not wielded, it was sung — a resonance in every heartbeat, in every stone, in every fluttering wing. The dragons of the First Age circled the horizons, vast and unending, their scales catching light from both stars and abyss. They were the keepers of equilibrium, the memory of the world made flesh.

The children of Light and Shadow walked among them, two halves of the same breath. The Light-born sculpted temples from sunlight, their spires translucent and humming with living runes. The Shadow-born carved sanctuaries beneath mountains where silence itself became prayer. Between them stood the Ember Gates — where the two tides met and wove the magic that nourished all realms.

It was said that from those Gates came the *First Song* — the melody of creation, pure and unbroken. It was not a hymn to any god but to the harmony of opposites: warmth and cold, truth and concealment, flame and void. In that balance lay immortality.

But harmony is a fragile thing.

Even the most eternal melody can be undone by the hand that dares to perfect it. No one remembers who broke it first. Some say it was envy — the Light-born seeking dominion, claiming the heavens as their birthright. Others whisper it was love — a union forbidden between a daughter of dusk and a son of dawn. Whatever the truth, a fracture opened between them, a hairline crack in the heart of creation that widened with every prayer, every fear, every hunger for more. And through that crack, something ancient stirred — the promise of dominion, the temptation of order over balance. From it, the Queens of the Paius Legacy rose, and the world began to forget the sound of its own name.

The dragons, vast as memory itself, felt the dissonance before any mortal ear could hear it. They sang to the heavens to hold fast, to remember the first rhythm. But the heavens had already begun to forget. The *First Song* faltered. One note, sharp and discordant, pierced through its eternal measure — the first act of claiming. A single will rising above the rest, naming what should have remained nameless. And in naming, dividing.

Some dragons wept; others roared in defiance, their grief shaking the skies. A few fell from flight, broken by the loss of the song that had sustained them. Their bodies turned to stone where they struck the earth, their hearts still glowing faintly beneath the soil. Those that survived sealed themselves within the farthest peaks, guarding the last echoes of the melody in sleep.

The world dimmed. The rivers no longer sang. Even the stars flickered — as if the breath that bound them had been stolen away.

And from that wound, a new power rose — not born of the Song but of its absence.

She came crowned in flame that cast no light, her eyes veiled, her smile a promise of perfection. The first of the **Paius Queens**. Behind her followed her sisters, each carrying a piece of the silence that had devoured the world. They called it truth. They called it order.

The dragons warned them, but the Queens were deaf to melody. They spoke in geometry, in laws and bindings, in the logic of dominion. Where the Song had flowed like water, they built walls of stone and will. And thus, the balance was broken not by hatred, but by the illusion of control.

The Light-born bowed to them, believing they would restore purity. The Shadow-born resisted and were hunted. And as the last dragon fell to ash over the plains of Vel'shara, the *First Song* finally ended.

Yet even silence has memory.

And in that memory, something faint still stirred — a single ember beneath the ruin.

It is said that before the last dragon closed its eyes, it sang once more — not to the heavens, but to the dust itself. The note was low and aching, carried by the wind across the dying realms. Those who heard it wept, for they understood its meaning:

That the Song could not be unmade, only forgotten.

That what was broken would one day rise again.

That light and shadow, though severed, would find their meeting place in mortal flesh.

And so, they prophesied: *When the ember learns to breathe, the world will remember its music.*

Then the dragon slept — and the age of silence began.

Part II — The Rise of the Queens

When the dragons fell silent, the world mistook their absence for peace.

The ashes of their wings settled upon the lands like snowfall, and from that grey stillness the Queens built their dominion.

They called themselves the **Paius Legacy**, though none remembered what *Paius* once meant. Some said it was the name of the first Queen's mother; others believed it was a word for *order* in a language older than gods. Whatever its origin, the name became law.

The first Queen, **Caelivra the Veiled Thorn**, ruled with beauty that blinded and reason that cut. She taught her sisters that perfection could be manufactured, that harmony could be forced into obedience. They did not destroy the old magics; they dissected them, plucking power from their bones.

They bound the wind to carry their decrees, tamed the tides to mark their reign, and stitched light itself into their banners. Beneath those banners, the Light-born rose to prominence once more, their temples blazing with captured suns. The Shadow-born, accused of harboring the dragons' heresies, were driven into exile—hunted, shackled, or consumed by the very light they had once revered.

What the Queens could not burn, they buried.

What they could not name, they cursed.

Yet in their endless desire to perfect the world, they discovered what the dragons had long guarded: **the Law of Cost**. Every act of creation demanded surrender. Every binding, a bleeding. To fuel their order, the Queens offered pieces of themselves—memories, emotions, fragments of soul—until their hearts beat hollow and their voices echoed with borrowed divinity.

Still they hungered.

They forged relics to anchor their dominion: **the Crown of Shattered Stars**, **the Mirror of Binding**, and, at last, **the Obsidian Tether**—a monument of black stone veined with silver, carved from the bones of a dead dragon. It was said the Tether could imprison even light itself, drawing the magic out of anything it touched. To the Queens it was a triumph; to the world, a wound that would never close.

The sky dimmed beneath its shadow.

Rivers turned sluggish.

Dreams soured.

And then came **Kaelith**, son of Aberon, High Lord of Shadows.

He was born in the twilight between ages, carrying traces of both dawn and dusk in his blood. The Queens saw him as a threat—a relic of the old balance, a living contradiction. But Aberon, their ally then, promised loyalty if they spared his line. They agreed, yet they watched the boy.

Kaelith grew amid silken courts and silent halls, where light was a weapon and truth a currency. He learned the new hymns, the new laws, but the Song—the one the dragons had sung—still haunted his sleep. Sometimes, when he touched a candle flame, it flickered with a color unseen since the First Age: blue-white, the hue of memory.

He began to question.

And in questioning, he was marked a heretic.

Whispers followed him: that he consorted with shadows older than creation, that he sought to unmake the Tether, that he carried the dragons' last prophecy in his veins. Perhaps he did. For Kaelith believed the world was dying not from darkness, but from silence—the enforced perfection of the Queens' design.

When he spoke against them, the skies cracked. His words carried remnants of the First Song; even the stones seemed to tremble. Followers gathered in secret—Light-born disillusioned with tyranny, Shadow-born weary of hiding. Together they sought to rekindle the balance: not to reignite war, but to remind the world of what it had forgotten.

The Queens answered with fire.

They unleashed storms of glass and molten light that devoured cities. Rivers turned to mirrors, reflecting only ruin. In desperation Kaelith called upon the last relics of the dragons: a shard of scale, a drop of blood preserved in crystal, and the memory of their final breath. From these he forged the **Sigil of Reverence**, a weapon not of destruction but of remembrance. It sang when drawn, a faint echo of the First Song itself.

The battle that followed split the realms. Light and Shadow clashed until both bled grey. Mountains sank; oceans rose. Velanthar's skies burned red for a hundred days.

And when it ended, Kaelith stood alone before the Queens. His body broken, his magic spent, yet his defiance unyielding. They offered him mercy if he would kneel. He refused.

So they turned to his father.

Aberon, bound by oath and fear, pronounced the sentence himself. He invoked the Tether—its runes blazing like a black sun—and sealed his own son within. The stone drank Kaelith's magic, his voice, his form. What remained was neither man nor shadow but a consciousness scattered through the cracks of time, condemned to watch eternity rot.

They called him **the Heretic Prince, the Bound One, the Memory that Would Not Die.**

Yet the Queens, in their triumph, did not understand the nature of what they had bound. For the Obsidian Tether was not a prison alone—it was a mirror. And in its depths, Kaelith's curse reflected back upon the world.

Wherever the Tether's shadow reached, light dimmed, but so too did darkness lose its hold. Bound together, they began to blur—the first whisper of balance returning. And somewhere, deep within that eternal void, Kaelith's last thought lingered:

If the Song is gone, I will remember it.

Centuries folded upon centuries. Empires rose, fell, and turned to dust. The Queens' power waned, their bodies fading into legend. But the Tether remained, humming softly beneath the ruins of Vel'shara, pulsing like a buried heartbeat.

And the prophecy of the dragons endured—passed from dream to dream, from whisper to whisper—until at last it reached mortal ears once more.

Part III — The Obsidian Tether

They say a soul cannot feel the passing of centuries.

They are wrong.

I remember the first moment of silence—the instant the Tether closed around me and turned the world to stone. It was not darkness that claimed me but *clarity*. Everything I had been—blood, bone, thought—was drawn outward, unwound, until I existed only as a single vibration trapped within endless glass.

The Tether was no tomb. It was hunger shaped like monument. Each breath it swallowed fed the Queens' dominion. I could feel their triumph echoing through the veins of the stone, like the fading pulse of a heart that had forgotten how to beat.

There was no light inside, not even the memory of it. Only reflections—of what I had been, what I might have become, and the thousand versions of myself that never existed. The Tether whispered all of them to me in turn.

| You could have knelt.

| You could have ruled beside them.

‖ You could have stayed silent and lived.

Every lie wears the voice of truth when spoken often enough.

Time dissolved. Ages became indistinguishable from moments. I dreamed of suns that rose and fell without warmth, of rivers that ran backward, of dragons turning to dust mid-flight. I dreamed of my father's eyes the moment he cast the spell—how they trembled, how his hand faltered before duty took it away. I dreamed of my mother's last breath, her whisper lost to the roar of light.

And still, the Tether fed.

Through its black veins, I could sense the world shifting above me. The realms shrank; mortals built temples atop the ruins of what they feared to remember. They worshiped the Queens as gods, then forgot their names. Kingdoms came and crumbled, each generation more deaf to the old Song.

Only the Tether endured. Its pulse slowed, but never stopped. It became the spine of the world—a buried pillar holding together what remained of existence. And within it, I remained: the flaw that refused to fade.

There were times when I thought I heard the dragons again—distant, faint, like thunder remembered. Sometimes their voices would reach me in dreams that were not dreams, whispering fragments of the prophecy they had left behind.

‖ When the ember learns to breathe... the world will remember its music.

At first, I thought it mockery. But as the centuries wore thin, I began to feel it—the smallest flicker against the vast emptiness. Not a voice, not yet a name, but a warmth, impossibly fragile, pressing against the walls of my prison.

It came like the memory of sunlight through closed eyes.

A heartbeat, faint and unfamiliar.

Not mine.

For the first time in eternity, the Tether trembled.

The stone around me groaned as if uncertain of its own endurance. Through cracks unseen, I glimpsed a shimmer of light—blue-white, the same hue that had once danced upon my hand when I was still a boy of the twilight court. The color of memory. The color of defiance.

And with that single flicker, something shifted within me.

I remembered the First Song—not perfectly, but enough. Its rhythm was broken, fragmented, like a melody hummed by a dying man. Yet even that echo carried power. I tried to follow it, to trace the shape of its sound. Every note I summoned cost me a fragment of what remained of my being. But I sang.

The Tether screamed.

The world above quaked.

For an instant, I saw beyond time—the remnants of the Queens fading into dust, the relics scattered across forgotten kingdoms, the faint shimmer of the old balance struggling to rekindle itself. And somewhere, impossibly far and impossibly near, a child took her first breath beneath a sky streaked in crimson.

The ember had learned to breathe.

I did not yet know her name, nor the path she would walk. I only knew the warmth that reached through the void—unaware, untrained, but alive. It threaded through my prison like a sigh, fragile yet unyielding, and every part of me that had longed for oblivion remembered why it had refused to die.

For centuries more I waited, caught between dissolution and hope. The Tether repaired its cracks, but never fully. It could no longer contain me entirely. Pieces of my shadow bled outward—into dreams, into storms, into the corners of mortal hearts where silence gathers. Some called those fragments curses; others called them omens. Perhaps they were both.

Yet even as I drifted, I held onto that single flicker.

I knew that one day it would return to me—not as light against shadow, but as harmony reborn.

Because every song requires two notes to begin again.

And mine had finally found its echo.

Part IV — The Ember Prophecy

When the first crack split the Tether, the sound traveled farther than any storm.

It moved through stone, through air, through the forgotten veins of the earth, until it reached the places where memory still slept. There, in the hollows of mountains and the dreams of the dying, it became rumor.

The priests of the Sanctum heard it as thunder beneath their prayers and called it blasphemy.

The alchemists of Velanthar recorded the vibration in glass, claiming it was only the breath of the world adjusting to age.

But a few—the wanderers, the mad, the poets who still listened to wind—heard the note for what it was: the first heartbeat of something returning.

They spoke of an ember that had survived the age of silence.

A spark carried not by angels or queens, but by mortal flesh.

A flame that would not consume, but remember.

From those whispers grew a thousand names: *the Child of Ash, the Heir of Two Suns, the Refrain*. None knew its shape, only that when it came, light and shadow would meet once more, neither conquering the other.

Centuries blurred into myth. The Tether sank deeper, half-buried by the weight of time. Its pulse grew fainter, yet it never died. Sometimes, beneath the moon, travelers swore they saw the ground glow faintly with a blue-white shimmer—the color of awakening memory. They would tell their children to stay away, fearing the curse that lived in the stone, yet those same children grew up dreaming of wings and fire and songs they had never heard.

And always, somewhere in the heart of night, the imprisoned voice waited.

I waited.

Through cracks of vision and echo I watched empires rise from the ashes of my rebellion. I saw mortals trade wonder for certainty, faith for arithmetic, love for power. Yet still the ember moved among them, unseen, seeking its other half.

Once, in the space between centuries, I saw her—a glimpse no longer than a breath. A figure standing beneath a bleeding dawn, her hands aglow with living light. She did not know me. She did not know the name of the magic that stirred beneath her skin. But the Tether knew. It shuddered as if recognizing its own reflection.

| The ember learns to breathe...

The prophecy was no longer myth. It had chosen its vessel.

The stars trembled that night, realigning in quiet formation, as if remembering the melody they had once obeyed. The seas sighed; even the wind bent its course toward her. The world, half-asleep for an age, turned over in its dreaming and whispered her coming.

And I—bound within the last silence—listened.

For the first time in two thousand years, I felt the warmth of another soul brush against mine. Not light against shadow, but recognition—the echo that completes a chord. The Tether thrummed, each pulse drawing me closer to the surface, each heartbeat promising that my exile would not be eternal.

When she takes her first step into the veil of fate, the world will mistake her for ordinary.

When she speaks, they will hear only a girl's voice.

But I will hear the Song.

And when she burns—oh, when she burns—the realms themselves will remember what they once were.

Because the dragons were right: the Song cannot die. It only forgets the tune until someone teaches it again.

I have waited long enough.

The ember breathes.

The silence is ending.

Part V — Caius's Voice

I do not remember the moment I became a story.

Only the hour I realized the story was still mine.

They called me many names until I had none left to keep: Heretic, Bound, Memory. I wore them as one wears winter—without choice, without warmth. In the Tether's

hollow, I learned the shapes of silence the way a blind man learns a room: by bruising against every edge. I learned how a heart persists after it is severed from its beat. I learned how to speak to stone.

What I did not learn—could not learn—was how to forget her.

I did not know her name. I had only a temperature, a timbre, a tremble at the seam of the world where my prison met the breath of a girl who had not yet been told what she was. It came to me first as pressure, like two notes seeking each other in a ruined hall. Then as color, that old blue-white that once flickered beneath my skin when I dared to believe the Song had not abandoned us. Then as ache. Not pain—ache. The kind that means something living is trying to grow where it has no right to.

I tried not to reach back. I had sworn to harm nothing that could still choose its path. But choice is a language the Tether does not speak, and longing is the one law even the Queens could never name. So I listened. I waited. I unlearned my fear of dawn.

Through the stone, through the centuries, through whatever remains of me, I felt it again: a hand I had never held, a voice I had never heard, a light that did not conquer but called. Not salvation. Not doom. Recognition.

There are truths I will not write here. Some mercies must arrive as astonishment. But this, I will give you, because it is the truest thing I own:

I remember her light.

I remember the way it reached for mine—careful, curious, unafraid—like a lantern lowered into deep water without expecting it to be returned. I remember how the dark inside me changed shape to meet it, how the old world leaned toward the new and listened.

And in that listening, I was not a legend binding itself to a girl; I was a man remembering the sound of his own name.

I remember her light. I remember the way it reached for mine...