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The Echo Climber

A novella of high towers, stolen voices and one very long fall.



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CHAPTER

01

Spire Nine



The wind at the top of Spire Nine had opinions, and all of them were about Mara Vey.

It shoved her left while she was reaching right. It found the gap between her collar and her neck and poured itself in like cold water. It sang in the guy-cables in a long, bored note, the sound of something that had been trying to knock people off this tower for forty years and saw no reason to stop now.

Mara clipped her second carabiner to the maintenance ring, counted to three the way Dez had taught her when she was fourteen, and leaned back into her harness until the line took her weight. Six hundred meters below, Kestrel Verge was waking up. The harbor lamps were going pale. The maglev lines threaded silver between the towers, and the first trains of the morning slid along them like beads on a wire. From up here, the city looked like a circuit board somebody had left out in the rain: green with moss on the old stone terraces, bright with copper on the new glass, and everywhere, rising out of all of it, the spires.

There were thirty-one of them. Relay towers, the city council called them on the maps. Everyone else just said the spires. They carried the Weave, the web of signal that ran every light and lock and payment and voice in Kestrel Verge, and they needed constant care. Salt ate them. Lightning loved them. Gulls, for reasons no one had ever explained, liked to nest in the exact places where they would do the most damage.

"Talk to me, Vey," said Dez in her ear.

"Relay housing's cracked," Mara said. "Spray seal's gone white. Water's been getting in since the spring storms, probably. I can patch it, but the whole collar wants replacing."

"Patch it. Collar's on the list."

"Everything's on the list."

"That's how you know it's a list." Dez's voice had the gravel of sixty-odd years and a lot of bad coffee. "Patch, photograph, come down. Weather service says wind's picking up after eight."

"It's already picked up."

"Then you'd better be quick."

She worked. She liked this part. Cracked seal scraped out with the hooked blade, the housing wiped dry, fresh compound pressed into the seam with her thumb and smoothed flat. Her hands knew it so well she could think about other things, and she mostly thought about nothing, which was the best thing about being this high. On the ground, the city had a thousand voices. Up here there was only the wind and the cables and the quiet hum of the relay under her palm.

And then, under the hum, the other thing.

It started the way it always did: a pressure behind her left ear, like the moment before a sneeze. Then a sound that wasn't quite a sound, because her ears weren't what heard it. A murmur, threaded through the signal itself. Mara had been hearing echoes since she was sixteen, since the afternoon she had fallen eleven meters from a training mast and lain in the gravel with her ribs cracked and her head ringing, and found that the ringing never quite went away. It had a shape. It carried pieces of things: a laugh from a phone call, a song someone was streaming, a child reading numbers off a bus timetable. Fragments of the Weave, leaking into her the way water leaks into a cracked housing.

She'd learned to ignore them, mostly. Most people who heard echoes did. You didn't tell anyone. You didn't put it on a medical form. You especially didn't tell anyone who worked for Halden Arc.

This one, she could not ignore. Because this one said her name.

Mara.

It was a woman's voice, faint and stretched thin, as if it had come a long way through a narrow pipe.

Mara Vey. Spire Nine. They have your scan.

Her thumb stopped on the seal.

Tell the tuners. Seven, four, Crown. They're coming for the tuners. Seven, four, Crown. Seven, four—

The voice frayed into static and was gone. The hum came back, ordinary and electric. The wind sang its long bored note.

"Vey?" said Dez. "You there?"

"I'm here."

"You stopped talking."

"I'm concentrating."

"You never concentrate. You talk the whole way through. It's a known problem."

Mara looked down. Her heart was going fast and hard, the way it did when a foothold crumbled. *They have your scan.* Who was *they*? How did a voice in the Weave know which tower she was on?

Then she heard the drone.

It came up the side of Spire Nine the way drones always did, fast and smooth and too quiet, a black disc the size of a dinner plate with four tilted rotors and a single cold blue eye. It stopped two meters from her face and hung there in the wind, perfectly still, as if the wind didn't apply to it.

On its belly, in neat white letters, was a word Mara had seen on half the buildings in the new district: HALDEN.

The blue eye brightened. A thin line of light swept down her body from her helmet to her boots, and then back up again.

"Dez," she said quietly. "There's a Halden drone up here."

A pause. "Doing what?"

"Scanning me."

The pause went on longer this time. When Dez spoke again, the gravel had gone out of his voice and something sharper had come in.

"Mara. Listen to me. Finish the seal. Don't look at it. Then come down the west face, not the ladder. Use the cable line."

"Why the cable line?"

"Because I'm looking at the base camera, and there's a black car at the bottom of your ladder, and the men standing next to it aren't from the council."

◆

She did not finish the seal. She would think about that later, with a strange stab of guilt, that she had left a job undone on Spire Nine and the water would get in again. But in the moment, she didn't think about it at all.

She unclipped from the ring.

The drone tilted, following her. She swung around the corner of the relay housing, putting the steel between herself and its eye, and ran along the maintenance catwalk on the west side. The catwalk was a grid of rusted metal fifty centimeters wide with a waist-high rail. She had run it a hundred times. She had never run it with something chasing her.

The cable line was at the end, a steel rope that ran in a long shallow curve from the top of Spire Nine to the roof of the old customs hall three hundred meters away. Crews used it to send tools and parts across with a pulley trolley. It was absolutely not meant for people. Every climber in the city had ridden it at least once anyway, usually at night, usually on a dare, and usually once only.

Mara took the trolley off its hook, threw the strap over the cable, and clipped her harness to the strap.

The drone came around the corner.

"Vey," said Dez, "tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing."

"You told me to use the cable line."

"I meant climb down beside it!"

"Should've been clearer," Mara said, and jumped.

For a second there was nothing but falling. Then the strap snapped tight and the trolley screamed along the cable and the whole city tilted up to meet her. Wind tore at her helmet. The customs hall came at her, a long green roof with a cupola at one end, growing faster than she liked. Behind her, she heard the drone's rotors pitch up into a whine as it gave chase.

The trick with the cable line, the part they didn't tell you on dares, was the brake. There was no brake. You slowed yourself down by dragging your boots on the roof tiles at the end, and if you misjudged it, you met the cupola at speed.

Mara dragged her boots at fifty meters out. Tiles shattered under her heels and skittered away down the roof. The trolley shrieked. She dragged harder, leaning back, and the cupola grew and grew and grew and then stopped, a hand's width from her nose, with the trolley jammed against the cable stop and her heart trying to come out through her throat.

She unclipped. Her legs were shaking. She made them stop.

The drone came down over the edge of the roof, its blue eye sweeping.

Mara grabbed a broken roof tile, turned, and threw it.

She had not expected to hit it. She had been the worst thrower on every team she had ever been on. But the tile went end over end and struck the drone's front rotor with a crack like a dropped plate, and the drone lurched sideways, spun, and dropped behind the cupola with a long descending whine.

For a moment, Mara just stood there.

"Did you just—" said Dez.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"That's a Halden asset. They'll bill the city for that."

"Then they shouldn't fly it at people." She pulled off her helmet. The wind grabbed her hair, short and dark and full of sweat, and flung it in her eyes. "Dez, what's going on? Why does Halden want me?"

He didn't answer right away. She heard him breathing, the slight wheeze he had when he was worried and pretending not to be.

"You heard something up there," he said at last. "Didn't you."

Mara went very still.

She had never told him. She had never told anyone except Pell, and Pell had only known because he heard them too, because whatever had cracked open in her head when she fell from the training mast had always been open in his, ever since he was small. *Our secret*, they'd said to each other. *Echoes don't exist.*

"How do you know about that?" she said.

"I've been doing this job for thirty-eight years, girl. You think you're the first climber who stopped talking halfway up a tower?" Dez cleared his throat. "Get off that roof. The stairs on the north side come out on Lantern Street. Don't go home. Don't go to the depot. Go somewhere with crowds and stay there, and call me from a public line in one hour."

"Dez—"

"One hour, Mara."

The line clicked off.

Below her, on the street side of the customs hall, she heard car doors slam.

CHAPTER

02

The Lantern Market

Lantern Street ran downhill from the customs hall to the harbor in a long crooked stair of shops, and at eight in the morning it was already full. Fishmongers were sluicing down their counters. Noodle stalls were firing up their burners, sending sheets of steam and the smell of ginger and chili into the cold air. Above it all, strung between the buildings on wires, hung the lanterns that gave the market its name: hundreds of them, paper and glass and old plastic, dim now in the daylight, swaying in the wind off the sea.

Mara walked. Not fast. Fast was how people noticed you. She had her helmet clipped to her belt and her crew jacket turned inside out so the reflective council stripes didn't show, and she kept her head down and her hands in her pockets and walked the way everyone else walked, like someone who had somewhere to be and was mildly annoyed about it.

They have your scan.

She thought about the voice in the echo. A woman. Older than her, maybe. Tired. Not a recording, not a fragment of somebody else's phone call. It had spoken to her. It had known where she was.

Seven, four, Crown. They're coming for the tuners.