The Names We Leave Behind

Extended synopsis • Naria Khan

Lis Rouvain knows the treatment bed from the years she's spent sitting beside it, helping patients give up memories they can no longer bear. When she wakes in that bed herself, she remembers her hands on the basin and a wet patch on her teacher's sleeve. She ought to remember asking for treatment, but her mind won't take her any further back. Outside, a man looks at her as though he expects her to know him. He says he hasn't got a name. Lis tells him she's going to her sister's, then finds the warning she sewed into the lining of her coat. DO NOT TRUST THE NAMELESS MAN.

At first her sister Coriselle fusses over the buns Lis has squashed on the way to her dye shop. On another visit, Lis mentions where Coriselle keeps the rent money, and all her sister sees is a stranger who knows enough to rob her. The man Lis warned herself against remembers eating at Coriselle's table. He is the Crown's executioner, and he and Lis once lived together. When she remembers the mismatched stitches on a dead man's collar, he tells her the man was Edrin Saurn and admits he killed him. Eighteen months earlier, a guard brought Edrin to Lis for help with his nightmares. In his memory she saw soldiers preventing people from escaping burning houses. Lis called in her teacher, Vessac, believing he would protect Edrin. By morning Edrin was gone, and the guard who had spent two days at his elbow couldn't remember his face.

At the fair, the executioner asks Lis to call him Aderic. Later, across the river, she kisses him. He pulls away because he thinks she doesn't know whom she's choosing. Lis reminds him she knew about Edrin when she crossed the river with him. The harder reckoning comes when a widow tells Lis what happened to her husband,

Florel. Lis had accepted his signature as permission to take what he remembered of the fire. Guards had hurt him until he signed.

Vessac keeps the stolen memories bound beneath the courtyard of the House where Lis trained. Every fortnight he renews that binding. Before she became a patient, Lis found how to undo it, but Vessac could follow her name back through everything she knew. She broke the name herself to keep the secret out of his reach. She can learn to love Aderic again, but she can never get back the first time he told her he loved her.

Lis also left evidence in the wooden wren Edrin had been carving when he showed her the fire. She asked Coriselle to collect it without telling her what it held. When a customer whistles in the dye shop, Coriselle smells burning, and even after she shuts the bird in a jar she can still taste smoke. Frightened that she's done something she can't remember, Coriselle goes to Vessac. Lis returns to the House for her sister before he can renew the binding.

As patients escape, a guard catches a little girl's skirt in a door. Aderic holds it open long enough for her father to pull her free, and the guard cuts him across the throat. In the courtyard, with Aderic bleeding beside her, Lis can feel the names Vessac holds. He offers her his place. When Coriselle asks for the memory of their mother carrying her upstairs, Lis longs to give it to her. But the reason their mother carried her was that Lis had knocked over a kettle and scalded her sister's hand. Lis can't promise to bring back the comfort without the pain. Coriselle asks her to leave it be. This time Lis listens. With her sister holding her up, she releases the names taken by force and leaves her own in pieces. Coriselle looks straight at her and calls her Lis. Aderic lives long enough to hear that she knows her sister again, then dies with Lis beside him.

Lis gives evidence about the treatments she performed. Vessac is convicted of taking names by force, and the finding in Lis's own case hangs where future patients can read it. Two years after the House opens, Lis goes dancing with Coriselle. For one step she can see the woman in her sister's arms from above and feels someone's disappointment that she's cut her curls. She wants to laugh at Aderic for finding fault with her haircut after all this time. When she speaks his name, she hears a little intake of breath. The fiddle starts again, and Lis takes her sister's hand and leads.