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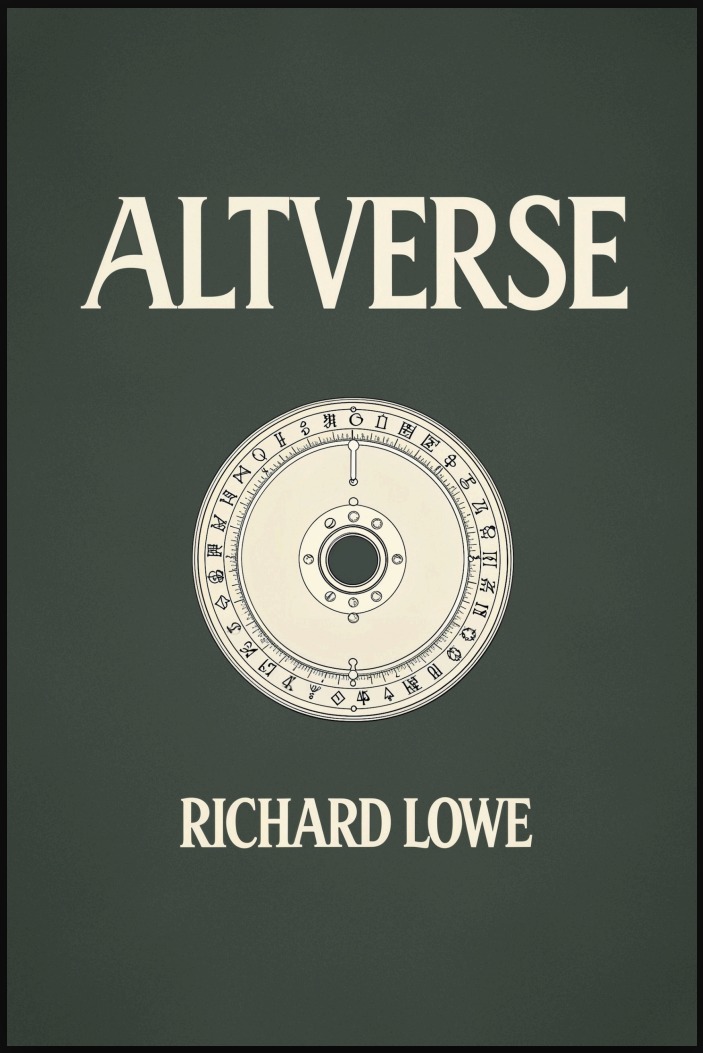
Two Hours Early

Thirty years before a stranger walks into Greenlight City, the forecast says mild, and fifteen-year-old Meren would rather be anywhere but inside a wall.



RICHARD LOWE

Two Hours Early

The forecast on Meren's palm said mild. She held the reader out across the table so her father could see the little cultivar disc glowing its steady green, the color for no change, and he didn't look at it.

He was looking at the wall.

The flat above the Endell market had four walls, and the one behind the stove was the oldest. The plaster there had gone soft and pale where the grid ran close to the surface, and on an ordinary evening it held a warm white with a thread of blue under it. Tonight the white had pulled back from the corners and gathered toward the middle of the wall, the way water gathers in a low spot on a floor.

"It's doing it," her father said.

"It's not doing anything. The forecast says mild."

"The forecast is a man in the administrative quarter with a barometer and a pension." Tamas got up from the table, and his knees made the noise they made in the cold months.

It wasn't the cold months yet.

"Get your coat," he said. "The heavy one."

Meren didn't move.

Ilsa's mother was taking a group of them to the lantern market in the administrative district tonight. It ran four nights a year, and the stalls sold cultivar sweets that lit your mouth blue so you could see your friends' teeth glowing across the square. Meren had talked about it for two weeks, at this table, with her father sitting right there.

"Ilsa's coming at seven," she said.

"Ilsa can come at seven and find a note." He was already at the hooks by the door, taking down the vest.

It had been his mother's vest before it was his. The leather at the pockets had gone dark and shiny from three sets of hands.

"I need you," he said.

"You've never needed me."

That landed. She saw it land, in the way he stopped with one arm in the vest, and she was glad for about two breaths and then she wasn't.

He finished putting the vest on. He buckled the tool belt over it, the long spreader on the left hip where it always rode, the pouches of cultivar on the right. Then he took a second belt off the hook, one she had never seen him wear, and held it out.

It was smaller. The leather was older than his.

"Your grandmother's," he said. "From before she went to the bigger one. She was fourteen when she started."

"I'm fifteen."

"So you're late." He held the belt out until her arm got tired of not taking it. "Cooper's Row is going first, and I can't hold a seam and pack it at the same time anymore, not with these."

He held up his hands. The knuckles on the right one were swollen. She had watched them swell over the last two winters and kept quiet, because saying it out loud would have made it a fact.

Meren took the belt.

* * *

Endell at seven in the evening should have been bright. That was the whole point of Endell, the thing her father said when he had a second cup of the market's fermented black: the eastern districts got the money, the administrative quarter got the attention, and Endell got the light. The walls on the market street were supposed to run a warm blue-green, every building breathing a little brighter when people passed and a little dimmer when they didn't.

Tonight the light had pulled inside.

Meren saw it as soon as they came down the stairs. The shop fronts on the market street were dim at their faces, their outer walls gone gray-white like the inside of a shell. Through the window of the fungus seller across the street, the rear wall of the shop glowed a strong gold, warmer than she had ever seen it.

The market itself was still running. People bought and sold and argued and laughed under a ceiling grid that hadn't changed, because the market ceiling never changed; the market ceiling was a performer. A man two stalls down was selling skewers of roasted cap mushroom, and the smell of the char and the salt reached her and made her stomach turn over.

She hadn't eaten. She had been saving room for blue sweets.

"Nobody's noticed," she said.

"Everybody's noticed." Her father pointed with his chin at a woman folding her awning with fast hands. "Mirra's going home, and look at the bread man."

The bread man was putting his loaves under cloth and looking at the gray face of his own building as if it owed him money.

"They don't know what it is," Meren said.

"They know it's the grid, and they know the grid's not often wrong." He walked faster than his knees should have let him. "Most people don't have to go into the wall."

She followed him off the market street. Her grandmother's belt sat badly on her hips, built for a woman with more of them, and the spreader in its loop knocked her thigh with every step. It was a long flat tool with two blades that opened when you squeezed the grip, made for holding a seam in the plaster apart while the other person worked.

She had seen her father use one a thousand times. She had never held one.

The air was still warm. That was the part that made her angry, the warmth on her face and the soft smell of the evening and nothing in the sky but a clear dark with the city's glow at its edges. It wasn't cold, and it wasn't going to be cold, and her palm said mild.

* * *

The assessor was waiting at the corner of Cooper's Row.

Meren knew him by the pin before she knew him by his face. It sat on the lapel of a good gray coat, a small disc of administrative-grade cultivar that glowed the pure white of the council chamber walls, the color you only saw on people who had done the two years in the administrative quarter and come out with the certificate. He was young, and he had a reader in his hand twice the size of hers.

"Tamas," he said. "You said it was urgent."

"It is."

"You said the grid was going to tell me something." The assessor looked up and down the Row. "It looks like a brownout."

The houses here were older and lower than on the market street, two stories and narrow, the kind of houses old people lived in because they had always lived in them. Their faces were gray. Their back

rooms glowed.

"It's not a brownout," her father said.

"That's a load shift away from the street faces. In a standard network I'd call it a failing feed junction, and it goes in the rebuild assessment." He wrote on the reader.

"Write down the time," her father said.

The assessor looked at him.

"Write down the time it started, and the forecast." Tamas put his bad hand flat against the wall of the nearest house, where the gray plaster met the corner stone. "Then wait."

He held his hand there. "This is Dorrin from the infrastructure office," he said to Meren, without turning around. "He's putting the eastern districts on the new design."

"The standard design." Dorrin's mouth went thin. "It's not new, it's efficient."

He looked at Meren for the first time. His eyes went to the belt on her hips and the old spreader and stayed there a second too long.

"Is this your apprentice?" he said.

"She's my daughter."

"Is she registered?"

"Nobody in my family has been registered for four generations," her father said. "The grid hasn't noticed."

Dorrin didn't laugh. He wrote again on the reader.

Meren stood on the street with the warm air on her face and wished hard for the lantern market and its blue sweets and Ilsa's loud mouth. She wished for her father to be a man who sold bread.

* * *

Cooper's Row junction was on the ground floor of the end house, behind a panel in the back wall of a room that had been a workshop once and was now a storeroom for chairs. The old woman who owned the house opened the door to them in a robe and slippers. She was small and creased all over like a paper bag folded too many times, and she looked at Tamas the way you look at weather you were expecting.

"Drel," her father said.

"I've felt it in my walls since supper." Drel stepped back to let them in. "Your mother used to come at this hour, and I'd already have the kettle on."

She looked at Meren. Her eyes were clear and pale.

"Is this the girl?"

"This is the girl."

"She's got Sanna's chin," Drel said, and shuffled off toward her kitchen.

The house was warm inside. It was warmer than the street, warmer than their own flat had been, and the warmth came off the walls the way it comes off a stone that has sat in the sun. The back rooms glowed a deep gold, and in the front room, where nobody was, the walls had gone gray and cool.

Meren stood in the hall with her hand out, not quite touching the plaster.

"It's putting the heat where she is," she said.

"It's putting the heat where she'll be." Her father was already in the storeroom, moving chairs. "She sleeps in the back, and it's been warming that room since half past six."

"Why?"

He set down a chair. He looked at her over it, and his face did a thing she hadn't seen it do in a long time, the lines around his mouth loosening.

“Ask me in an hour,” he said.

* * *

The panel came away in his hands. Behind it the plaster was thin, and behind the plaster was the junction.

Meren had seen junctions before. You couldn't grow up over the Endell market without seeing them, her father crouched at the base of some wall with a seam open and his hands inside it, the light in the gap a tangle of thin bright threads like the roots of a pulled plant. She had seen them the way you see your father's tools on the table, every day, without looking.

She looked now.

The seam her father opened with his good hand ran from the floor to the height of her shoulder, and inside it the network branched. A thick trunk came up out of the floor, out of whatever lay under the house, and split, and split again, each branch thinner, until the finest threads ran off into the plaster like veins under skin. It glowed brightest along the branches that ran toward the back of the house and dimmest along the ones that ran toward the street.

At the place where the trunk split for the first time, the glow was uneven. The light came up the trunk strong and steady, and at the split it stuttered, and the branches beyond it pulsed.

“There,” her father said. “That's where it chokes.”

“Why does it choke?”

“Because it's carrying more than it was grown to carry.” He crouched, and his knees cracked.

“Carrying what?”

“Every house on the Row is pulling heat into the back rooms, and all of it comes through here,” he said. “In about an hour every one of them is going to want everything this junction's got. If the split can't carry it, the Row goes dim, and dim in a cold snap is how old people die in their beds.”

He said it plainly. He said it the way he said the price of bread.

Meren looked at the stuttering light at the split, and then down the hall toward Drel's kitchen, where the kettle had started to rattle.

“There isn't going to be a cold snap,” she said. It came out smaller than she meant it to.

Her father didn't argue. He took a pouch off his right hip, opened it, and showed her what was inside: a gray-white paste, faintly luminous, smelling of wet earth and mushrooms with a sweetness underneath, like the fermented black at the market.

“Fresh cultivar,” he said. “Same strain as what's in the wall.”

“What does it do?”

“We pack it in along the split and it takes, and the split thickens, and the junction can carry more,” he said. “It needs most of an hour to bed in. So we pack it now, while the junction isn't straining.”

“If the cold comes.”

“If,” her father agreed.

From the hall, Dorrin cleared his throat. He was standing in the storeroom doorway with his reader, the white pin bright against the gray coat.

“You're re-seeding a junction on a prediction,” he said.

“I'm re-seeding a junction on a reading.”

“The reading says mild.”

“The grid says otherwise.”

“The grid in Endell runs long paths.” Dorrin chose each word as if he were paying for it. “Its branching is redundant by about forty percent against standard design.”

“It is,” her father said.

“I have the numbers,” Dorrin said. “I'm not going to put in a report that a wasteful network is also a fortune teller.”

Her father looked at the junction.

“Then put in your report what you see,” he said. “That's all I asked you here for.”

* * *

The spreader was heavier than it looked.

Her father showed her where to set the blades, one on either side of the split, flat against the plaster and angled in. He showed her how to squeeze the grip so the blades opened slowly and held the seam wide.

“Not too far,” he said. “Room for my fingers and nothing else, or you tear the small threads, and they take a week to grow back.”

He put his good hand over hers on the grip and squeezed with her, once, so she could feel how much. Then he took his hand away.

Meren held it.

Her forearm started to burn in the first minute. The grip fought her, the spring in it wanting to close, and the plaster on either side of the blades was warm and faintly soft, alive the way a horse's flank is alive under your palm. Inside the gap the junction's light pulsed against her knuckles as warmth, a heartbeat of warmth, stuttering at the split.

Her father worked. He scooped cultivar from the pouch with two fingers of his bad hand and pressed it into the gap along the split, the swollen knuckles stiff. He pressed a little and waited, and pressed a little more, and the paste went from gray-white to a faint gold where it touched the old network.

“It's taking,” he said. “See that?”

She saw it. Where the paste touched, the old threads reached into it, fine as hair, the gold running out along them.

“Hold it steady.”

“I am holding it steady.”

“You're holding it angry. Your blade's creeping.”

It was. The left blade had slid half a finger toward the split while she wasn't watching it, and when she pulled it back her forearm shouted at her.

She set her jaw.

“Better,” her father said.

The kettle in the kitchen stopped rattling. A minute later Drel came shuffling into the storeroom doorway with two cups on a tray. She set one on a chair seat beside Tamas and held the other out to Dorrin, who looked at it, and then at her, and then took it.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You're from the council.”

“The infrastructure office.”

“Sanna used to complain about the infrastructure office.” Drel watched Tamas's fingers go in and out of the wall.

“Did she,” Dorrin said.

“Back when the Row ran on the old network we lost the light every winter, two or three nights at a time, while the council argued about the money,” Drel said. “Since they seeded the new strain we haven't lost a night in ten years.”

“That's the strain's general vigor,” Dorrin said. “Not forecasting.”

“I don't know what it is,” Drel said. “I know I sleep warm.”

She went back to her kitchen.

Dorrin looked at the cup in his hands. Then he looked at the junction, at the gold running out along the old threads, and for a moment Meren thought his face changed. Then he drank his tea and wrote on his reader, and it hadn't.

* * *

It took forty minutes to pack the split. By the end Meren's right arm was shaking from the shoulder down and she had switched hands twice. Her father had stopped telling her the blade was creeping because she had stopped letting it.

When he took his fingers out of the gap the last time, he sat back on his heels and flexed his bad hand, slowly, the knuckles white. He didn't say anything about it, and neither did Meren.

“Ease it closed,” he said. “Slow.”

She eased the grip. The blades came together and the seam closed behind them, plaster meeting plaster, and the light in the gap narrowed to a line and then to nothing. Through the wall you could see a faint gold glow where the split was, like a lamp behind a curtain.

Meren pulled the spreader out and sat down on the floor of Drel's storeroom between two stacked chairs. Her arm hung at her side like it belonged to somebody else.

“That's it?” she said.

“That's the first half.” Her father leaned the panel against the wall without closing it. “Now we wait, and then we watch it carry.”

“For how long?”

He took out his own reader and glanced at it, and then he turned it so she could see. The disc glowed the steady green.

Mild.

“Half an hour,” he said. “Maybe less.”

* * *

They waited in Drel's kitchen because it was the warmest room. Drel made a second pot and put out a plate of the hard little biscuits the old people in Endell always had, flavored with a strain of cultivar that tasted like smoke and pepper. Meren ate four of them before she noticed she was doing it.

Dorrin sat at the end of the table with his reader and his coat still on. Every few minutes he went out to the street and stood in front of the houses and came back in and wrote.

“You don't have to stay,” her father told him, the second time he came in.

“I'd like to see what happens.”

“Why?”

Dorrin set the reader face down on the table. It was the first time Meren had seen him put it down.

“Because if nothing happens, I'm going to write that an uncertified district worker pulled an assessor out on a survey night to re-seed a healthy junction on a hunch,” he said. “I'd like to be able to say I stayed to the end.”

“That's fair,” her father said.

“And if something happens,” Dorrin said, and stopped.

He didn't finish. He picked his reader up again.

Meren watched him. He was younger than she'd thought at first, with ink on the side of his middle finger and a mend in the cuff of the good gray coat. She thought about the two years he'd spent in the administrative quarter for that white pin, and whether there had been a lantern market he'd missed.

“Why the eastern districts?” she said.

He looked up.

“The rebuild,” she said. “Why are they getting the new design?”

“Because their network's old and it's failing, and the standard design uses about half the material per block.” He said it the way her father said the price of bread.

“So it's cheaper,” Meren said.

“Shortest path between two points,” Dorrin said. “Fewer junctions, thinner trunks, no branching where you don't need it, and the council can rebuild three districts for what it costs to reseed two on a pattern like this one.”

“Is it better?”

“It's more efficient.”

“That's not what I asked.”

Her father made a noise into his tea that might have been a cough.

Dorrin turned his reader over in his hands. “It's better for the budget,” he said. “In my office that's what better means.”

He went back out to look at the street.

* * *

It came at half past eight.

Meren was at the kitchen window with her forehead on the glass, watching the dark yard behind Drel's house, when the glass went cold against her skin. It didn't cool. It went cold the way a cup of water goes cold when you drop snow into it, all at once.

She sat up.

Outside, the leaves on Drel's one sad tree flattened in the same direction, and the wind came over the wall of the yard with a sound like a door opening. She heard it hit the back of the house. She heard it go down the Row, house by house, rattling shutters.

The kitchen window fogged from the bottom up.

“Dad.”

He was already standing. He must have been standing for a minute or more, with his bad hand flat on the kitchen wall and his eyes closed. He opened them and looked at her, and his face had the loosened look again, the one from the storeroom.

“Come and see,” he said.

The front door opened. Dorrin came in with the wind behind him, and the cold came with him, hard and dry, the cold of the first real night of winter that finds the gap between your collar and your neck. His face was red from it.

He shut the door and stood with his back against it. His reader was in his hand. He turned it over and looked at it.

Meren looked at her own. The disc was green.

She watched it. It stayed green for four or five breaths, steady and calm, telling her it was a mild evening in Endell. Then it went pale all at once, and from pale to blue, and from blue to the deep cold violet she had only seen in the middle of winter.

Somewhere in the administrative quarter, a man with a barometer had looked out his window.

Dorrin said nothing. He went past them into the storeroom.

* * *

The junction was carrying.

Her father opened the seam with his own spreader this time, one-handed, wide enough to see. Meren knelt beside him, and Dorrin stood behind them with the reader forgotten at his side.

Inside the wall, the network blazed.

The trunk that came up out of the floor was a column of gold so bright it threw shadows on the plaster. At the split, where an hour ago the light had stuttered, it ran clean and thick, and the new cultivar had bedded in so well she couldn't see where the old threads ended and the new ones began. Beyond the split the branches ran off in every direction, thinner and thinner, out into the walls of the house and through them into the next house and the next, a tree of light inside the Row with every branch lit to the tip.

The light moved along them. It pulsed outward from the trunk in slow waves, and each wave leaned toward the back of each house, carrying heat to the people who were asleep.

She could feel it on her face. She could feel it through the floor, through her knees.

“It knew two hours ago,” her father said. “It started moving the heat back at half past six, a little at a time, so the back rooms would be warm through when the cold came.”

He looked at the blazing split. “Then it needed more than the split could carry,” he said. “It would have choked right when it mattered, unless somebody was here.”

“How does it know?”

“I don't know.” He watched the light move. “Your grandmother didn't either.”

“Nobody?”

“The strain they seeded here ten years ago has done it every year since,” her father said. “It feels the buildings, and maybe the buildings feel the weather. The council thinks it's a story we tell.”

Behind them, Dorrin made a small sound.

Meren didn't look round. She was looking at the tree of gold inside the wall and the waves moving along it toward Drel asleep in her warm back room, toward every old person on Cooper's Row asleep in theirs. Her throat went tight and her eyes went hot, and she didn't know why, and she was glad nobody could see her face.

Her father put his hand on her shoulder.

It was his bad hand. She could feel the swollen knuckles through her coat, the stiffness in them, the weight. He didn't squeeze; he let it rest there.

The light moved in the walls.

* * *

Dorrin left a little after nine.

He stood in Drel's hall buttoning his good gray coat to the throat, the white pin bright on the lapel, and he didn't look at either of them while he did it.

“I'm going to write it down,” he said.

“Write it down how?” her father said.

“As observed.” He did the last button. “Load redistribution to occupied rooms about two hours before the temperature drop, and well ahead of the official forecast.”

“And the junction?”

“Junction overload preempted by manual re-seeding,” Dorrin said. “The office will call it anecdotal.”

“Will you?”

Dorrin looked at the storeroom door. Through it the gold of the junction still showed behind the plaster.

“The eastern districts are going on the standard design,” he said. “That's approved, and it's not my decision.”

He picked up his reader. “Endell is on the list for the next cycle.”

Her father said nothing.

“I'm going to recommend it come off the list,” Dorrin said. “Insufficient data, further study advised, which buys a cycle, maybe two.”

He opened the front door, and the cold came in around his legs.

“That's what I can do,” he said, and went out into the wind.

Her father stood in the hall until the draft from the door had settled. Then he went into the kitchen and sat at Drel's table and put his face in his hands. Meren stood in the doorway not knowing what to do, so she poured him a cup of the tea that had gone cold in the pot and put it in front of him, and he drank it.

* * *

They checked every house on the Row before they went home.

It took an hour. Her father knocked, and if nobody answered he put his good hand on the wall beside the door and stood with his eyes closed before he moved on. At the fourth house an old man came to the door in a blanket and said, “It's warm,” as if they had asked, and shut the door again.

At the seventh house, nobody answered, and the wall beside the door was cool.

Her father frowned. He moved his hand along the wall to the corner of the house and around to the side.

“Here,” he said. “Feel.”

Meren put her palm where his had been. The plaster was cooler than it should have been, and under her hand, faintly, the warmth was trying to come through and not making it.

“A feeder split off the main,” her father said. “One wall, one room.”

He looked up at the dark window above it. “Child's room, I'd guess. Hennet's got two little ones.”

He reached for his spreader and his hand didn't close on it. The knuckles had stiffened in the cold. He tried again and got the grip, and his face went white around the mouth, and he let go.

Meren took her grandmother's spreader out of its loop.

“Show me where,” she said.

* * *

It was a small seam, and it took twenty minutes. Her father talked her through it, crouched beside her in the cold with his bad hand tucked inside his vest: where to set the blades, how far to open, how

much paste and how to press it.

"Less," he said. "Wait for it to take. Now a little more."

Her fingers were clumsy. The cultivar was cold and slick, and it smelled of earth and mushrooms and that sweetness underneath, and it went from gray-white to gold where it touched the old threads, the same as it had for him. She watched the fine threads reach into it.

When she closed the seam, the wall under her palm was warm.

She sat back on her heels on the frozen street and looked up at the window. Behind it, a child she had never met slept in a room that was getting warmer and would never know why.

Her father didn't put his hand on her shoulder this time. He stood and waited for her to get up, and when she did, they walked home together through the cold with the light moving in all the walls around them.

* * *

She woke late. The flat was warm, and the window over her bed was white with frost, the first frost of the year, feathered across the glass in patterns like the branching inside a junction.

Her father was at the table.

He had a sheet of heavy paper in front of him and the box of colored chalks from the high shelf, the ones she hadn't seen him take down since she was small. He held a chalk awkwardly in his bad hand and went slowly.

It was the junction.

He hadn't drawn it the way it looked on an ordinary night, with the stuttering split and the gray threads. He had drawn it the way it looked at half past eight with the cold coming down the Row: the trunk a column of gold, the split running clean, the branches blazing out to their tips through the walls of the house and into the next house and the next.

He had put Drel's back window in, small, in the corner, with a warm square of light behind it.

Meren stood behind his chair and watched him draw.

"Ilsa came at seven," he said, without looking up. "She found the note."

"Was she angry?"

"She said to tell you there's one night left, tomorrow." He worked at a branch with the edge of the chalk. "She brought you this."

He pushed a small paper twist across the table. Inside it were three blue sweets from the lantern market. Meren unwrapped one and put it in her mouth, and it tasted of sugar and cold and faintly of mushroom, and she knew without seeing it that her teeth were glowing.

Her father glanced up and saw them and laughed. She couldn't remember the last time she had heard him laugh.

He went back to the drawing. She watched it come together: the gold, the branches, the light inside the wall of an old house on an old street in a district the council had not decided about yet.

"Are you going tomorrow?" he said. "The lantern market?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"After," she said.

He stopped drawing.

"After what?"

Meren went to the hooks by the door. Her grandmother's belt hung beside his, where she had put it last night, the spreader in its loop. She took it down and held it, the old leather dark at the pouches from her grandmother's hands and her father's, and now hers.

“Cooper's Row,” she said. “You said the small threads take a week to grow back, so somebody should check the split.”

Her father looked at her. Then he looked down at the drawing and picked up the chalk and kept going, and his face had the loosened look on it, and he didn't say anything at all.

When he was done he blew the dust off the paper and held it out to her.

Meren took it to the wall beside her bed and pinned it there, where she would see it when she woke.

The World of Altverse

Who's Who

The people of the novel, as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Ari	An infrastructure surveyor who maps buildings before they come down, and who writes everything in a notebook so nothing disappears without a record. Ari lives alone in a second-floor apartment, half the bookshelf still empty, and still takes two mugs out of the cabinet.
Meren	A cultivar worker in the Endell district of Greenlight City, mid-forties, with oil on her hands and a tool belt over her vest. The fourth generation of her family to tend the district's grid, with thirty years in its walls and no council certificate. For six years she has kept a culture of the heritage strain alive.
Dav	A dealer in verified harmonics in the Choir Desert. His voice carries a second frequency under the words. He is one of four people who still know three sound patterns older than his settlement.
Sefa	A woman of the Inverted Garden whose survival skill is managing where she looks. She teaches the unfocus.
Perin	A boy of eight in the Inverted Garden, with a bruised shoulder and a great many questions.
Ysel	Someone who sits on a low wall at the edge of the memory market and takes memories off people who can't carry them anymore. Their left hand holds the right, steadying a load.
The keeper	A small woman dressed in the color of the pale stone she looks after, in a world where the walls remember everything that touches them.
Tenne	A sky-reader rebuilding her settlement's weather records from copies, because the originals were traded away.
Reva	A young engineer in a mountain settlement, rebuilding seven hundred years of gravity survey from a cord and two stakes.
Sable Venn	A collector who keeps an archive of things that are about to be lost, and who turns up where Ari does not expect anyone to be.
The specialist	A certified cultivar expert in the northern districts of Greenlight City who comes for council-approved contracts, not for one district.

In this story only: Tamas, Meren's father; Sanna, her grandmother; Drel, an old woman on Cooper's Row; Dorrin, an assessor from the council's infrastructure office; and Ilsa, Meren's friend.

Timeline

From the first generation in Endell's walls to the council chamber, early in the novel.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Four generations back	Meren's great-grandfather tends the Endell grid. After him, his daughter Sanna. After her, her son Tamas. None of them hold a council certificate.
Forty years before the novel	Endell's network is seeded from the heritage strain. Its architecture runs long and redundant, against the efficient standard.
Thirty years before	The eastern districts are rebuilt on the standard design. On a night the forecast calls mild, fifteen-year-old Meren goes into the walls for the first time, and her father draws the junction on Cooper's Row. *Two Hours Early* takes place that night.
About ten years before	The rebuilt eastern districts begin to fail.
Six years before	Meren applies for certification leave. The council rules that Endell's grid is not bad enough to justify training the person trying to fix it. She has kept the heritage culture alive ever since.
Eight months before	The woman Ari lived with clears out her half of the bookshelf in a single afternoon.
The last six weeks	Ari maps a building scheduled for demolition. In an unlocked room off the northeast maintenance corridor sits a projector with forty-three symbols on its ring.
The Friday	The building comes down. The projector is in Ari's bag.
Four days later	Ari turns the ring in the kitchen and walks into an alley in Greenlight City. At a market stall a woman is selling cultivar stock and has an old strain she does not usually bring.
The council chamber	Ari presents a report on the Endell grid to the council. Somebody sits alone in the gallery, which is never used for infrastructure reviews, and leaves without using the stairs.

Places

- **Ari's city.** A neighborhood that has been transitioning for fifteen years without finishing, with a good coffee place, a bad one, and a hardware store older than both.
- **Greenlight City.** A city lit by living light. Its buildings run a bioluminescent grid that breathes blue-green and warm-white and answers to the people inside.
- **Endell.** Greenlight City's district on a twenty-five-year maintenance cycle, when the budget passes. Its grid grew from the heritage strain, and it still works.
- **The administrative district.** The brightest grid in the city, replaced every five years, with junctions serviced quarterly. The council chamber has no shadows.
- **The eastern and northern districts.** The east was rebuilt on the standard design. The north is home to the specialist and the certification program.

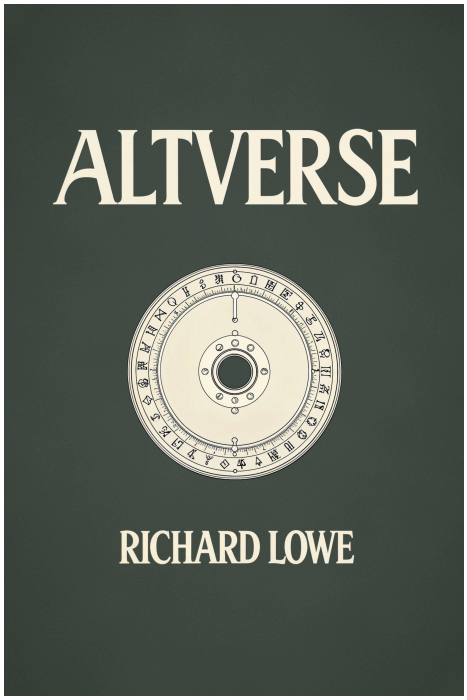
- **The Choir Desert.** Pale rock under a hard sky, where the air carries tones and sound tells the truth. A lie spoken at full voice in a closed room can break bones.
- **The Inverted Garden.** Deep green country where gravity follows attention. Look hard at a stone and it falls toward you.
- **The memory market city.** A city of steady rain and a covered market, where people trade memories hand to hand.
- **The stone record.** A complex of pale layered stone built over generations. The walls remember everything that touches them.
- **The lying sky.** A farming settlement whose sky still makes forecasts and no longer keeps them.
- **The gravity pockets.** A mountain settlement above the clouds, where down is not always the same direction and the boundaries are moving.
- **The water city.** A city on pilings, where wind and current move as one system.

Glossary

- **The projector.** An object the size of a large hardcover book, made of something that holds like metal and weighs less. It is warm when charged and cools as it is used.
- **The ring.** The band around the projector's middle, cut with forty-three distinct symbols. Turn it to a symbol and a door opens in the nearest wall.
- **Crossing.** Going through one of those doors, and coming back before the charge runs out.
- **The flat hour.** Ari's name for the first hour in any new world, when everything arrives as data and nothing yet as a place.
- **The grid.** Greenlight City's living infrastructure. A fungal network grown through the walls that gives light and warmth and, the old tenders say, lets buildings feel each other.
- **Cultivar.** The living stock the grid is grown and repaired from. Different strains suit walls, weather and even the fermented drinks in the market.
- **The heritage strain.** The old strain Endell's network was seeded from. It built redundancy into everything it grew.
- **Junction.** A point where the network branches and carries load. When a junction fails, the block goes dim.
- **Spreader.** A two-bladed tool that holds a wall seam open while a cultivar worker reaches inside.
- **Standard design.** The council's efficient network: shortest paths, thinner trunks, half the material per block.
- **Certification.** Two years of full-time study in the administrative quarter. The council does not count training handed down in a family.
- **Harmonic signature.** The frequency every voice carries in the Choir Desert. It holds under truth and changes under a lie.
- **Verified harmonics.** Statements witnessed and certified by one of the desert's few authenticators, accepted as currency by other traders.
- **Listeners.** People paid to stand at the edge of the desert market and catch false notes.
- **The unfocus.** The soft-focus way of looking that keeps the Inverted Garden's ground where it is.
- **Cupped hands.** The gesture of a memory changing hands in the memory market.

Read the Novel

Two Hours Early is Meren's first night in Endell's walls. Thirty years later a surveyor named Ari turns the ring on a projector rescued from a demolished building and steps through a wall into Greenlight City, then into a desert where a lie can break bones and a garden where gravity follows your eyes. Every world Ari reaches is about to lose something it can't get back, and Endell, where Meren is still keeping the heritage strain alive, is one of them.



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