

Chapter 18: you, counting down

The chapter opens with a tense conversation between Essun and an unnamed narrator, who reveals that the Gray Man's true intention is not to prevent the opening of the Obelisk Gate but to manipulate someone into opening it for his own purposes. Essun, wary yet resigned, understands that her inability to be controlled makes her a target. The narrator warns that if Essun cannot be used, she will be eliminated, as her actions could restore the Moon and end the catastrophic Seasons. This confrontation leaves Essun burdened with the weight of her role in the unfolding conflict.

Seeking solace, Essun visits Alabaster, who is now physically diminished and reliant on Antimony for support. Their conversation reveals Alabaster's past efforts to fight for Meov, driven by the slim hope of a normal life for Essun and their family. Despite the inevitability of betrayal, Alabaster insists that any chance was worth taking. His words resonate with Essun, inspiring her to attempt salvaging Castrima's fragile community, even as she grapples with her own cynicism and despair.

As Castrima prepares for a critical vote in response to Rennanis's ultimatum, Essun quietly mobilizes the comm's roggas, instructing them to stay vigilant and protect one another. She distrusts the community's loyalty but follows through with Ykka's orders, even as she avoids relying on Cutter, whose offer to guard her unsettles her. Essun's actions reflect her internal conflict—balancing self-preservation with a reluctant commitment to Castrima's survival.

The chapter culminates in chaos as Essun awakens to the sounds of an angry mob gathering near the baths. Ykka rushes to intervene, while Essun, pragmatic yet prepared for the worst, follows with supplies in hand. The scene underscores the precariousness of Castrima's unity and the inevitability of violence, leaving Essun and the reader bracing for the impending crisis.