A Heart on Borrowed Time

Extended synopsis • Naria Khan

Verenne is late for her brother's farewell supper when two guards bring a dying hunter into her Lowbank clinic. A needlehound has bitten Rook Arden through the chest, and Lord Sorn wants him alive for questioning. Rook has stolen the spare glass heart that protects Sorn's life. Verenne can close the wound but cannot keep Rook's heart beating. As his grip on her fingers weakens, he tells her there's money sewn into his coat. She tells him he can pay her later, takes the glass from the guard and grafts it into Rook.

Verenne has bought him twelve days before Sorn's claim closes. Removing the glass would kill him, and Sorn's men are searching homes along the canal. As Verenne finds shelter for her patients, Rook admits why some of them know him. He caught hounds for Sorn and helped his collectors hold people at the grain wharf. He left after refusing an order to turn the animals on a crowd with children in it. Stealing the heart was his way of hurting Sorn. He had no plan for what Sorn would do to the people in his way.

Zélie, the woman who taught Verenne to heal, knows how to turn the glass into a heart that belongs to Rook. They must melt Sorn's seal in the furnace where the glass was fired, and someone must freely give an entire inborn gift. Rook offers the hearing that once let him find an animal or a person in the dark. Verenne grew up believing Zélie had lost her own healing gift saving patients during the war. In the old workroom she learns that Zélie used it to make Sorn's spare heart and that Rook knew. When he gives Verenne a plan of Sorn's house, he marks the parts he's unsure of. He also hands over the money he'd saved for himself so her patients have somewhere to sleep.

With help from her brother Emric, Verenne takes the seal. Then Zélie opens the furnace gate to Sorn's men. Sorn recovers the seal and imprisons Verenne along with patients and her fellow healer Linnet. By the time Rook helps them escape, he can barely stand, and they have to leave Linnet behind. Verenne loves him. She tries to imagine tending her patients with ordinary hands if she gives her gift in his place.

At the furnace Sorn offers Rook his old position and promises Linnet can go home to her children if she gives up her gift. He wants Verenne's gift for a replacement heart of his own. Rook refuses the bargain. Verenne gets the seal into the furnace, but when Sorn threatens Linnet she hesitates. Linnet tells her to finish. Rook releases his gift, and Verenne guides the glass into living tissue until she feels his own pulse under her palm. Sorn seizes her by the throat of her dress. Mortal now, he dies when Rook takes his sword and drives it through the bars.

Rook tells the quay watch about the killing and the men he once helped hold at the wharf. Verenne gives evidence about her teacher. Three months later, Rook has his own key to the rooms above the clinic, and Linnet shares the practice. With Linnet downstairs, Verenne can lie beside him, hear his heart beat twice, and kiss him instead of counting any further.