Where the Sea Learned to Fall

Extended synopsis • Naria Khan

Sella has put a deposit on two rooms high above the streets where her mother drowned. In five days, if the warden approves her promotion to chief eastern tuner, she can pay the balance. So when a fish drops out of the sea suspended over Nareth and lands in her tea, Sella asks her friend Dema to hold off reporting it. Five minutes should be enough to put the fault right. Instead the eastern bell cracks, a column of water hits the street, and a wounded man lands on her platform. Sella cuts the rope that is pulling him back towards the sea. As the water lifts off the roofs, he asks whether she saw what happened to his two companions. Sella saw only him.

She hides him from the wardens and helps pull an eleven-year-old girl out of the bootmaker's shop. The girl has a broken arm and thinks she brought the water down by coming to collect her boots. Sella assures her it's safe now. When Warden Ossana, the woman who carried Sella out of the flood at sixteen, offers her the promotion on condition that she leave the stranger to the watch, Sella signs. But she's seen the white tuning wedges still pulsing in their crate. She goes below the tower to find out what they're made of.

The stranger, Ivo, shows her a tideback named Keth yoked beneath the city. The bells sustain the note that holds the sea overhead, and each time Sella corrects the pitch she puts more strain on the animal's heart. If Keth dies, all three bells will fall silent. The keepers have been cutting wedges from the animals and catching young ones. Sella gives up her post to help Ivo escape. At his home on the floating shelves, one of the two missing men is brought home dead. His wife has a baby. After the funeral Ivo admits

that his crew deliberately weakened Sella's bell to get him through to Keth. He thought the breach would stay above the tower. Sella tells him the injured girl's name.

Neither of them can simply silence the bells while people live below. An old river channel leads west out of the basin. By changing the pitch and guiding the animals with a pipe, they can release the sea a little at a time. A trial sends water into a disused quarry, and Ossana gives Sella six days to clear the channel and evacuate the low streets. The people on Ivo's failing shelves need somewhere to go too. While Sella works on the gate, Dema keeps track of the families who need beds or a lift uphill. She moves her wedding forward. At the reception Ivo draws the cabin boat he's had built and puts Sella and a very badly drawn dog on the deck beside him. She asks if he'd really take her. They kiss just before a second voice sounds in the bells. The wardens are using a calf to sustain the note.

Families are still crossing the bridge when a woman's youngest child slips from a roof. Dema has told Sella to divert the water into the quarry if the bridge is occupied. But seeing the child dangling from her mother's hand, Sella remembers her own mother's hand slipping out of hers. She drives a spare wedge into the bell. The woman pulls her daughter up. Trying to give Dema time to reach them, Sella hits it again. The calf answers, the rising water drives a timber footway into the bridge, and Dema falls after pushing a guard to safety. The woman and her three children get across. Sella holds Dema's hand as she dies, the day after her wedding.

The wardens could fit the calf with a new collar to buy more time. Instead Ossana helps release her, and Ivo takes his small boat, the Moth, into the gorge to lead the animals out. When his line catches, Sella knows how to ease the water at his ledge. It would mean raising the bell again while hospital carts are still climbing the terrace.

She leaves the spare wedge alone and sends for a rope. Ivo catches it, but the calf is coming back to him and Keth is turning across the current. He lets go. When he signals, Sella draws out the working wedge and lets the sea fall. The calf and Keth swim clear. Ivo and the Moth disappear.

Sella searches the river for eleven days. The searchers find pieces of the Moth, but no one can tell her what happened to Ivo. At a public hearing she admits delaying the first report. When Etti asks whether Dema warned her before the bridge fell, Sella asks the clerk to record that too. The bell service helps families from both settlements rebuild. In spring Ivo’s sister and niece bring Sella a dog, and later Sella and Etti visit his cabin boat at the new harbour. That night three knocks come through the fog. Ivo taught her the call boatmen use when they lose sight of each other. There’s a rope tapping a post nearby. Sella calls his name, kneels beside the dog and knocks twice in answer.