Chapter One

By the time I finished with my last patient, I was late for my brother's farewell supper. The fishmonger had cut his hand on a crate. While I got the seamglass out he'd wrapped my good yellow shawl round it, although there were clean rags in a pile at his elbow.

"That's my shawl," I said, stopping beside the table.

His face fell as he looked down at the blood on the yellow wool. "I'm sorry. I thought—"

"It's all right." He started to lift the wool for a look at the damage. I put it back against the cut. So much for wearing yellow to supper. "Let me see your hand."

I peeled the wool back and took out a lisk, one of the little slivers I kept for hands. A silver seam was what I wanted. When I breathed on this one, a second line came up against it and caught the light. A cerrel. I dropped it into the scrap dish. There were two slivers left and tomorrow was market day. I laid the better one across his knuckles and warmed it under my palm. The edges of his cut drew together.

When I said he'd need help unloading tomorrow, he told me his son couldn't come until noon. The fish wouldn't wait. I wrapped his hand. "Try to keep this dry, at least."

Perril appeared in the doorway carrying my coat. "Emric's started eating."

"He promised he'd wait."

"He did wait, Verenne." She held out the coat, one eyebrow raised.

It was almost dark beyond the window. I'd wanted a whole evening with him before he left. "Is he annoyed?"

"A little. Come and apologise before he eats your share."

I took my coat. Emric's boat left in the morning, and I'd gone to some trouble to have tonight free. Linnet had offered to take the evening patients. The dress Emric had helped me choose was still hanging behind the screen.

While Perril helped the fishmonger into his jacket, I put the unused glass in the storeroom and bolted the door from outside. I left my coat on a chair. Someone struck the outer door.

I wanted to pretend I hadn't heard. I'd barely begun washing my hands when the door opened.

Two guards dragged a man inside. His head hung forward between them, and blood had soaked his shirt to the waist. One boot scraped the floor as he tried to find his footing. The other was missing.

"On the table." I pulled the shawl out of the way and helped them lower him. "Carefully."

The older guard let go before I had a proper hold. The man's shoulder struck the wood, and he gasped. I nearly snapped at the guard, then saw the silver pin at his collar.

"Keep him alive," he said. "Lord Sorn Avrak wants to question him."

Perril moved the lamp to the shelf above the table. Its light caught the blood gathering beneath the man's torn shirt.

"Why didn't you take him to Sorn's physician?"

"He went down at the fish steps. Wouldn't have made Flintstair." The guard shifted a wooden case under his arm and turned to his companion. "Get a cart. Send word ahead that we've got Arden and the heart."

The younger guard left with a torn coat over his arm. My fishmonger followed, giving me an anxious glance before closing the door.

I found my scissors beside the bandages. Rook Arden. He hunted the creatures that came down from the northern hills, killing some for the city and bringing others back alive for Sorn. When they got loose, their victims came to me.

His eyes opened as I cut through his shirt. “I’d rather you hadn’t heard of me,” he said.

Was it that obvious? I looked down at the cloth instead of answering. “Lift your shoulder a little. I need to get this out from under you.”

He tried, caught his breath and fell back. I eased the shirt away as best I could, with the guard leaning so close that his sleeve brushed my cheek.

“I need room.”

“He stays where I can see him.”

I wasn’t sure where he thought Rook was going.

“Then come round this side.”

Perril moved him around the table. He shook her off, but stayed there.

A needlehound had bitten him high in the chest. I recognised the narrow punctures and spreading bruises. A carter had survived a shallower bite the previous winter. I held on to that as I put my hands over Rook’s chest.

I could feel the damage beneath the torn flesh. His heart was struggling, each beat weaker than the last. I drew warmth towards it, trying to reach deeper while the edges of the wound began to mend.

Rook gripped the table. When I eased back, his hand slipped from the edge and I caught it. He held on to my fingers.

Perril opened the storeroom beside his head and put a clean cloth by my hand. “What else do you need?”

“Another piece of glass. In the—no, wait.”

She stopped at the storeroom. The wound was closing under my palm, but Rook’s pulse kept faltering.

“Am I that bad?”

His mouth pulled up at one corner. I tried to smile back, but I was still waiting for the next beat.

“I’m having trouble with your heart.”

The guard glanced towards the street. “The cart will be here in a minute. Get him ready.”

“He can’t sit up.”

“Then we’ll carry him.”

They’d dragged him through the door. I could still see his boot scraping the floor, his head falling forward. “Bring the cart round the back,” I said. “But don’t move him until I say.”

The guard muttered and went to the window. If I could keep Rook alive until the cart came, perhaps Sorn’s physician could do more.

His fingers loosened around mine.

“Rook?”

He opened his eyes and tried to tighten his grip. I held on, keeping my other hand over the wound.

“Perril, could you come here?”

She came round the table with the cloth, and I shifted aside to make room for her.

A dull knock came from the window. The guard looked down at the case under his arm. It knocked again, although he hadn't moved, and I felt Rook's heart answer beneath my hand.

"What's in there?"

"Recovered property."

Rook turned his head towards him. "Open it."

The guard ignored him.

"Bring it here," I said. "Please. Let me look."

He hesitated before setting the case beside Rook's hip. Its clasp was broken, and the lid lifted easily. Inside lay a curved piece of red glass, no larger than my fist, with fine gold lines running beneath its surface.

My thumb followed the first turn of gold without quite touching the glass. Zélie used to cover the bottom half of a pattern with her hand. Go on, then. Where does it come out? A maker's mark could sit at the margin where it couldn't disturb the work. Here the gold doubled back. Whoever had put the claim there had run it right through the shape a living heart would have to take.

Warmth reached towards me from the open case. Someone had bound an entire healing gift into that glass.

"That could keep him alive," I said.

The guard shut the lid. "It belongs to Lord Sorn."

I'd heard about Sorn's spare heart. His own could be pierced and the glass would mend it before he died. I'd seen him ride through Lowbank unbandaged after an attack while people were still carrying the injured out of the street.

His spare heart was within reach of my good hand. Rook's fingers had stopped holding on to the other one.

"Can it help?" Perril asked.

I nodded. The guard moved the case farther down the table. "You'll leave it alone."

Rook's hand had grown cold in mine. I kept hoping he would squeeze my fingers again.

"You said you wanted him alive."

"And you know whose life that protects."

Sorn could have me killed for touching it, and the guard knew exactly where to find me. If the cart came now, I could still let them take Rook to the physician. I could still go to Emric.

I looked from the door to the man on my table. His fingers lay cold in mine, and I couldn't make myself put his hand down.

Rook moved his lips, and I bent closer to hear him. "Did he take my coat?"

"The other guard has it."

"There's money in the lining." He paused to breathe. "I was going to pay you."

"You can pay me later."

His heart faltered beneath my other hand. My warmth could do nothing for it. He was still looking at me.

"Can you set the glass?"

I glanced at the guard. He was watching the window again, but he'd kept one hand on the case.

I'd set seamglass hundreds of times, but never a piece this large or one claimed by someone else. I understood the pattern. I could feel it reaching for Rook. If I was wrong, I might kill him sooner. If it worked, we'd both have to run.

"It wouldn't belong to you," I said quietly. "Sorn's claim closes at the full moon. If the glass is still inside you then, it could kill you."

"I know." I hesitated, and his fingers tightened a little. "I'm dying now, Verenne."

He must have read my name on the window. A moment ago I'd wanted somebody else to choose. Now all I wanted was for him to say my name again. His hand went slack, and the case was still within reach.

I looked at Perril.

She set the cloth down and reached for the lamp, lowering the wick until the flame went out. Then she took hold of its heavy iron stem.

I hadn't meant to ask her to do that. I nearly told her to put it down. Then Rook tried to breathe and couldn't, his body jerking under my hand, and the guard leaned over to hold him down.

I let go of Rook's fingers and opened the case.

The broken clasp scraped my wrist as I took the heart. Wool clung to the glass. I shook it free, pressed the red curve against the wound and let my warmth flow into the gold lines.

The guard caught my arm and pulled.

"Let go!" I tried to keep my palm flat as the glass softened against Rook's skin. "You'll break it."

His grip slackened. He was staring at the heart, its edges already sinking beneath my hand.

“Take it out.”

I couldn’t. I wasn’t even sure I could stop. The glass was taking warmth faster than I’d ever given it. When Rook arched off the table, I braced my hip against the edge to keep hold of him.

Gold shone through his skin and faded. I felt a heartbeat, then another, and Rook dragged in a breath.

“Oh, thank God.”

My arms were shaking, and I wanted to sit down, but I kept my hands on him until I was sure the rhythm would hold.

The guard released me. I was still looking at Rook when Perril shouted my name.

The knife was already in the guard’s hand. Perril swung the lamp at him, and he ducked, taking the blow across his forearm. Its glass hood broke against the table. He shoved her into the workbench as oil spilled over the floor.

As I moved towards Perril, the guard blocked my path. I backed against the table, staring at the knife. Rook caught his wrist before I could get out of reach.

He was half lying down, his legs tangled in the bloody cloth. Still, he twisted the knife away from me and struck the guard’s elbow against the table’s edge. The man cried out and dropped it.

“The door,” Rook said.

Perril caught the injured arm as Rook let go. I grabbed the guard’s collar, and between us we pushed him through the open storeroom door. He hit the shelves. Jars

fell around his feet as I slammed the door, and Perril drove the bolt across just before he struck the wood.

I let go of the handle slowly. The next blow shook the door against its bolt.

Perril had blood on her cheek.

“You’re hurt.”

“Later.” She turned to Rook. “Can you walk?”

He tried. His knee folded as soon as he put weight on it, and I caught him under the arm, nearly going down with him. Perril came around to help.

“Back steps,” she said. “We’ll take the launch.”

The guard hit the door again. “You can still undo this, Vennor.”

For a moment I wanted to believe him. Then I looked at the knife on the floor.

I took my bag from its hook. Bandages lay among the broken bottles, and I nearly stopped to pick them up. My dress still hung behind the screen. Linnet would be here soon. What was she going to walk into?

“Verenne. Your coat.”

Perril lifted it from the chair and pushed it into my arms. I helped Rook through the outer room, but he stopped before we reached the back door.

“Two people on the steps.”

I listened. The guard was still shouting, and a cart rattled somewhere in the street. I couldn’t hear anyone outside.

“One’s coming up,” Rook said.

Perril pulled us against the wall behind the hanging coats. A moment later, the latch lifted and a boy stepped inside carrying a covered pot. I knew him from the kitchens at the end of the quay.

"Master Emric says if you won't come, he's sending the rest of it too."

The guard bellowed, and the boy stopped. His eyes went from my face to Rook's shirt.

His sister was waiting below with the bread. Perril sent them back by the rear lane: Emric was to find Linnet and meet us at her mooring.

"Tell him I'm all right," I added.

The boy looked at the blood on my sleeve. I tucked that arm behind Rook. "It isn't mine. Go on."

He hurried out. We followed him down the steps, with Rook leaning so heavily on me that I was afraid we'd both end up in the canal. Perril steadied the launch for us, and between us we got him onto the bench. He sat breathing hard, his hand over his chest.

I knelt in front of him and waited until he let me move his hand. His heartbeat was steady. "Does it still hurt?"

"Yes." He watched my face. "Less than it did."

"Good. Stay there."

"I wasn't planning to go far."

I smiled before I could help it. Now he was sitting in Perril's boat with Sorn's heart in his chest, and neither of us could go home.

I pulled on my coat, but my fingers wouldn't work properly. After I missed the same button twice, Rook reached over and held the cloth steady. I caught his knuckles instead of the button. For a moment I held the hand I'd been afraid to let go of on the table. He waited. Then I fastened the coat and sat beside him with my bag on my knees.

"Thank you," he said to Perril.

She was untying the rope. “You can thank me when we’re off the quay.”

Rook eased back against the boat. I wanted to know what he’d been doing with the heart, and whether the hound that bit him was one he’d brought here. His eyes had closed. I would ask when he could answer, before he had a chance to leave us.

As Perril pushed away from the quay, I kept looking back at the clinic.

Rook had turned towards Flintstair, where Sorn’s windows shone above the dark houses. “He’ll know something’s happened,” he said. “While the glass is keeping me alive, it can’t mend him.”

“How soon?” Perril asked.

“I’d get off the main canal.”

She put more weight into the pole. I looked for the moon between the roofs. Twelve nights until it was full. “My teacher might know how to break the claim,” I said. “We need to find Zélie.”

“We’ll get Emric and Linnet first,” Perril said.

I wanted my brother with us and dreaded telling him what I’d done. If he’d heard about the guards, he might already be looking for me.

The launch turned into a narrow channel. Rook shifted beside me and caught his breath, and I reached for his wrist again. His pulse was still steady. I kept my fingers there while Perril took us towards her mooring.

Chapter Two

Emric was waiting on the steps at Perril's mooring. I called to him before the launch reached them. "I'm all right."

He caught the rope Perril threw him and pulled us alongside. "You said that in the message."

He stepped aboard and put his arms around me, trapping my bag between us. I dropped it onto the bench so I could hold him properly. He smelled of the kitchen, and for a moment I wanted to stay there and let him be cross with me.

He drew back. "What happened?"

Linnet came running down the steps with her bag, her coat flapping open.

"I'll tell you both. Can you help him first?"

Under the mooring lamp, Rook's bloody shirt looked nearly black. Emric took off his coat, but Linnet stopped him from wrapping it around Rook's shoulders.

"Let me see him before you cover him up."

I moved aside for Linnet and told her about the bite and the glass. When I reached the part where I'd taken it, I began explaining how little time there'd been. Emric was listening. I stopped.

Linnet put two fingers against Rook's neck. "How long since you set it?"

"Not long. We've come straight from the clinic."

She checked his back as well as his pulse. I'd already done that. I nearly said so, then saw how hard I was gripping the bench.

"Will it hold?" she asked me.

"It's holding now."

Emric covered Rook with his coat and went for clean water. I started to follow, but Linnet caught my sleeve.

"Let him. Sit down before you fall down."

"I'm not going to—"

"Verenne."

I sat on the step into the boat. My legs were trembling now that I wasn't using them. Perril crouched beside me to tie off the rope, and I saw the cut on her cheek again.

"Let me do that."

She gave me a tired look. "You can wipe it. No more glass tonight."

I found a clean cloth in my bag. The cut was shallow, though it had bled down to her collar. She held still while I cleaned it, looking over my shoulder at Linnet and Rook.

"We can't stay here," she said. "People know this is my mooring."

"They'll go to the clinic first," Rook said. "The guard who brought me in will still be telling them which way we went. We've time to get to your teacher."

I'd been hoping someone would tell me we had time. "Perril hit him with a lamp," I said. "He might remember her."

"He'll remember you taking the heart. That's what they'll be asking about."

"You don't know what he'll tell them."

"No," Rook said. "But I know where they'll start."

Rook needed Linnet's help to set down his cup.

"You can't walk to Zélie's," she said. "Not tonight."

"We have the boat."

“Only as far as the mill bridge,” I said. “Then there are stairs. A lot of them. And the patients will turn up at the clinic tomorrow. I need somewhere to send them.”

“Linnet could leave word.”

Linnet was busy fastening her bag. “I could also go home to my wife. She thinks I’m seeing evening patients.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean—”

“I know. You want to get there.”

I wanted to reach Zélie too. She’d listen, and she might even know what to do. What frightened me almost as much as the guards was how readily I could hold it against Linnet that she wanted to go home.

Emric crouched beside me and began unwrapping the loaf. “There’s cheese as well,” he said. “The children brought the bread back. I thought we might as well have it.”

I broke off a piece before he’d finished unwrapping it. He watched me eat, then took the cloth from my hand and poured water onto a clean corner for Perril.

“You’re meant to be leaving in the morning,” I said.

“I know.”

“I don’t want you to miss your boat because of this.”

“I don’t want to, either.”

I tore off another piece of bread, smaller this time, and made room for him on the step.

He cut the cheese with his pocketknife and passed a piece to Linnet. Perril took hers without sitting down. There were still boats on the main canal, and twice she went up the steps to see who was passing.

The second time, she stayed there.

“Put that away,” she said quietly.

Emric wrapped the bread. I reached for my bag, expecting to hear the cart, but the voices came from farther along the quay.

“Open it. All the way.”

A shutter banged against a wall. Light spilled across the canal from a doorway where a man stood with his hands spread. Two guards went past him into the house. A third waited outside.

There were more lights beyond him. Someone protested, and the guard at the door shouted back that every house was being searched.

Perril came down and began untying us, sending Emric to the front to push off at her signal.

I knelt beside Rook while Linnet got herself onto the bench. He tried to move his legs out of her way, and I helped him tuck his bare foot under the coat. He watched the houses without saying anything.

They were well beyond the clinic already. I turned towards Rook. He’d told us we had time.

“He won’t want people knowing he’s lost the heart,” Rook said, looking towards the next landing, where another shutter had opened. “I thought that would matter more to him.”

Perril pushed us away from the steps. I sat on the floor of the boat with my back against Rook’s bench, holding my bag between my feet. A lantern swung onto the landing we had just left. I kept my head down until we had turned into the channel.

“You made it sound as though you knew.”

"I know how he's dealt with things before."

"But you've never stolen this from him before."

"No."

The pole scraped bottom as Perril turned towards the warehouses, away from Zélie's bridge. She kept checking the narrow channels ahead for somewhere to turn.

"I took the case in his stable yard," Rook said quietly. "The man carrying it hadn't heard I'd left Sorn's service. He let me hold it while he fetched a horse."

I wondered what had happened to that man after Rook left with the case.

"A stable lad saw me leave by the lower yard. They had the hounds out before I reached Lowbank."

"And you meant to sell it?"

"No," he said at once. "I wanted to hurt him. I meant to get it out of the city, then find a way to destroy it."

"You didn't know how?"

"I knew enough not to hit it with a hammer." He saw my expression and stopped. "No. I didn't know how."

I wanted to call him a fool. Then I'd have to explain how putting the heart into him had been any wiser. I rubbed my wet hands on my coat. Zélie had to know more than we did.

"If you're guessing, tell me. Please. I need to know."

"All right."

Perril took us beneath a loading platform at the back of a timber yard, where stacked planks screened us from the houses. We ducked as we went under, and Emric caught a post while she fastened the rope.

"They start loading at first light," she said. "We'll have to be out before then."

Linnet climbed onto the landing, where a gap in the stacked wood led up to the yard.

"I'll come back before they open, with clothes for him." She looked at Rook. "Tell Verenne if it gets harder to breathe, or you feel faint again. Don't wait."

"Thank you."

Emric went with her to collect his travelling bag. I nearly asked him to go straight to his boat instead. But I couldn't send him off alone just because I was afraid to have him near me.

I loosened Rook's remaining boot. He reached to help, caught his breath and waited while I drew it off. The ankle was swollen; the blister on his heel hadn't broken.

"Not yet, then," he said with a rueful smile.

I wrapped his bare foot in Linnet's cloth and moved to the end of the bench so he could put his feet up.

The searches moved farther away. I ate another piece of bread and closed my eyes.

When I woke, my neck hurt and Emric's coat had slipped onto the floor between us. Rook didn't wake as I drew it over him. His face looked different asleep, younger and so exhausted that I was glad he couldn't see me watching him.

Perril was still sitting upright, rubbing her cheek. I caught her hand before she touched the cut. "Lie down. I'll listen."

She made me promise to wake her, then took a moment to settle, trying to find somewhere to put her knees. I kept watch until the sky beyond the platform began to pale.

***

Linnet returned with Emric before dawn. He had his travelling bag and bread; she had brought clothes and boots for Rook.

“My wife’s,” she said, setting the boots beside Rook. “She wants them back.”

“I’ll take care of them.”

“She’d rather you stayed out of the river in them. They take days to dry.”

“My wife’s taking the boys to her mother’s, outside the walls,” Linnet said. “I told her I’d send word tonight.”

“I’m sorry you’ve had to—” I began.

“We talked about it. She’d rather go now than wait to see if anyone asks about me.” Linnet picked up the shirt. “Help me with this, would you?”

We helped Rook dress, then I joined Emric on the landing.

He told me the children had reached home safely. I touched the strap of his travelling bag.

“Is it time?”

“I sent word I won’t be on it.”

“Emric—”

“I can take a later boat.”

He kept his eyes on the launch. I wanted to thank him, which would make it sound as though I’d asked him to stay. I wanted him to stay. I couldn’t get past that.

“Let’s get through this morning,” he said.

From the landing I could see smoke rising from the kitchens. People would already be heading towards the clinic before work. I thought of the fishmonger coming back because his bandage had slipped, and finding Sorn’s men waiting for him.

"I have to go back," I told Perril when she joined us. "There's a book under the counter. Everyone I'm meant to see this week is in it. If they haven't taken it, I can send word."

"I'm coming with you."

Linnet looked up from fastening Rook's shirt. "I'll stay with him. Come back to the kitchens, not here. Emric can show me where to wait."

We left them to move the launch. Perril pulled me into passages twice to avoid guards questioning the stallholders. At the clinic, we watched two more guards come out and cross to the lodging house next door. Their lantern climbed the stairwell.

"While they're upstairs," Perril said. "Just the book and whatever you can carry. Come out at the back."

She watched from the corner while I hurried round to the back steps and through the open door.

Inside, someone had pushed my table against the wall. Glass crunched under my boots, and the room smelled of lamp oil. The storeroom bolt hung crookedly from one screw. I had no idea whether the guard had been hurt getting out, and for the moment I didn't care.

I grabbed the book from under the counter, tore out a page and wrote that the clinic was closed. Leaving the note where patients would see it, I took the clean dressings, soap and Linnet's jar of salve from the drawer.

Behind the screen, my new dress hung exactly where I'd left it. I took it down and rolled the supplies inside, holding the bundle against me.

I stepped over Emric's overturned pot and went out at the back. Perril caught my arm at the corner and hurried me away before the guards came down.

Behind the chandlery, I opened the book: seven patients that morning, two housebound. The first lived above her daughter's shop. She'd broken her hip a month ago. Yesterday she'd walked from bed to window on my arm. I'd promised we would try again today.

Her daughter opened the back door before I knocked.

"They were here last night," she said. "They made her get up."

I went past her and up the stairs. The woman was sitting on the edge of her bed, fully dressed, with both hands clamped around the stick I'd brought her.

"I told them I couldn't manage the stairs," she said as soon as she saw me. "They thought I was pretending."

I knelt beside her. The hip was sore, but nothing had shifted. She kept talking while I checked it, telling me which cupboard they had opened and what they'd asked her daughter. I listened with my hand resting on her knee.

"They know you come here," she said.

"I know."

I couldn't promise they wouldn't be back. Through the window I could see Perril watching the street. For a moment I hated Rook for bringing this to my door. Then the woman put her hand over mine. "Could you both stay with your sister across the river?" I asked her daughter.

The daughter looked at her mother. Neither of them answered immediately.

"I can't leave the shop open."

"Then close it," her mother said. "Will I have to walk?"

"Only as far as the quay. We'll help you."

Her daughter packed the bag, unpacked it and asked again which petticoat to bring. I kept listening for boots below. I reached to finish packing for her, then made myself take my hand away.

Perril helped us down the stairs while the daughter locked up.

“There’s one more,” I told Perril quietly. “The carter behind the kitchens. His leg’s still in splints.”

“Let’s get her off the street first,” Perril said.

Emric met us at the kitchens with a chair. As I helped the woman sit, he told Perril the quay patrol was stopping everyone on the way down to the boats.

I looked at the carter’s window, three doors away. He would be harder to move.

When I asked Emric if we could bring him into the kitchens too, he glanced inside and nodded. Perril handed him my bundle and came with me to fetch the carter.

Chapter Three

The carter had his boots on the bed beside him. He had polished them, though he couldn't wear the left one for weeks.

"I thought you'd be later," he said.

"So did I."

I told him about the searches while Perril went to fetch his handbarrow from the yard. His room was on the ground floor, which was the first good thing that had happened that morning. He listened without interrupting, then asked who was going to feed his horse.

"The man in the next room," he said when I couldn't answer. "You'll have to tell him. He won't think to do it."

Perril asked the neighbour to feed the horse. We settled the carter on his barrow, his splinted leg supported and his boots wrapped in his lap.

Emric made room for him beside the old woman in the kitchen storeroom. Her daughter helped us in.

"How are we getting across?" she asked.

"Perril will take you. We can lay him along one bench and—"

"No," Perril said.

I stopped with my hands still beneath the carter's shoulders.

"Put him down first," she said. "Then come outside."

Once we'd settled him on Emric's pallet of folded sacks, I followed her out.

"I'm not taking them through the river gate with Arden aboard."

"He doesn't have to be with them."

“And who’s bringing him? Me again? They’re stopping every small boat. What am I supposed to say when they ask why I keep going through?”

“I thought you were helping us.”

“I am helping you. You haven’t asked me what I can do.”

Through the doorway I could see the carter making room for the old woman’s feet. They’d believed me. I wanted Perril to lower her voice, though she hadn’t raised it.

“If they take my launch, I can’t work,” she said. “I can get you to the lower landing by the warehouse channel. You’ll have to find another boat from there.”

“All right.”

“Tell them.”

I went back inside. The daughter looked up at me, waiting to hear the rest of the plan. “I shouldn’t have promised you Perril’s boat,” I said. “I’ll find passage from the lower landing.”

The carter asked how much it would cost. I didn’t know that either.

A whistle sounded on the quay. Perril came through the door and pulled it nearly shut, leaving herself a narrow view of the yard. I crouched beside the pallet, my hand on the carter’s good knee to keep him from trying to rise.

As the boots passed, a man called down the lane to ask whether anyone had checked the back of the kitchens. Emric answered from the main doorway in his ordinary working voice, loud enough to carry.

“They came through last night. Do you want breakfast?”

The man said something I couldn’t catch. Perril kept her hand on the door until the boots had gone towards the front.

"Not all of you at once," she said to me. "I'll take Arden first. These two can lie down properly when I come back."

Rook was on a bench at the far end of the kitchen, with Linnet sitting beside him. A strip of his ruined shirt curled in the stove. His borrowed shirt was buttoned to the throat, and Emric's coat lay across his knees.

"He walked up from the launch with us," she told me. "He's had enough of that for a while."

"Only to the lower landing," I said. "Perril can bring us close to the waiting room."

"Walk the last few yards, then sit," Linnet told Rook. "I'll follow with the others."

Emric brought my bundle. "Change first."

I'd stopped noticing the blood on my sleeves.

The daughter held my coat across the gap while I changed behind the storeroom door. My new dress was creased from carrying supplies. I shook out the skirt, wishing Emric had seen it before all this. Linnet took the bloodied clothes to burn.

Emric lent Rook his hat and took messages for my five remaining patients: the clinic was closed; stay home; Linnet or I would send word. I gave no destination.

"I'll make sure they get there."

"Thank you."

He had already turned away. There were onions to chop, patients in the storeroom and my messages to carry. He should have been on his boat. I let him go.

Linnet and I helped Rook down to the launch. On the last step his weight sagged between us.

“Don’t try to make this look easier than it is,” Linnet told him.

“I’d rather it was easier.”

“So would I. I’ll see you there.”

Perril took us between the warehouses. I wanted to apologise without making her discuss it in front of Rook. Even asking her to listen felt like another favour. I nearly used that as an excuse to put it off. “I’m sorry I said you weren’t helping,” I said at last.

She kept her eyes on the channel. “Don’t do it again.”

“I won’t.”

***

The lower landing was crowded with people turned back from the nearer wharves. A little girl slept on a folded coat beside her father.

Two guards stood at the foot of the ramp. Neither was one of the men from the clinic. They were opening bags while their owners protested that they had already been searched.

Perril brought us to the side steps. The waiting room was close, but we still had to pass the guards.

“I’ll be back with Linnet,” Perril said.

“Let me rest a minute before we do that,” Rook said.

We waited until he could breathe more easily.

Rook put on Emric’s hat and climbed the steps on my arm, his borrowed boots scuffing the stone.

We reached the ramp as the man with the sleeping child came back for a dropped blanket. He held out his hand to steady Rook, who thanked him and managed to stand a little straighter.

"Your husband been drinking?" the nearer guard asked.

"No." I tightened my hold on Rook. "He's hurt his ankle."

The guard looked down at the boots. Rook had all his weight on the other foot.

"I told him we should hire a cart," I said. "He thought he could walk."

"I thought it was nearer." Rook looked at me with a small, apologetic smile. "She was right."

He looked so fond of me that I nearly smiled back. Then I remembered the guard.

The man with the child laughed as he picked up the blanket. "You won't hear the end of it now."

"I'm hoping she'll forgive me once she's had breakfast," Rook said.

"I've had breakfast."

"Ah," he said. "I'll have to think of something else."

The guard held out his hand for my bag. I passed it over, still supporting Rook. He moved aside the appointment book and pulled out a roll of dressings.

"What are these for?"

"I need them," I said. "He's not the only person I'm looking after."

I wished I'd stopped after the first sentence. The guard looked up at me.

"My mother's coming too," I added.

The guard pushed the dressings back and handed me the bag. Rook asked where we could sit, but the guard had already turned towards a man carrying a long wrapped bundle.

"Through there. Don't block the doorway."

We crossed the yard at a pace Rook could manage. I was still half expecting the guard to call us back when we reached the waiting room, but he was busy making the man unwrap his fishing rods.

Inside, there were benches along the walls and a table with a cracked pitcher of water. Rook sank onto the nearest bench. I sat beside him until he could speak without stopping for breath.

“Did I lean too hard?” he asked.

“No.”

I was still holding his arm. I let go and put my bag between my feet. “I didn’t know whether to look cross or pleased,” I said.

“You managed both.”

He smiled at me again. Without the guard watching, his smile was smaller and a little uncertain, and I liked it more. I hadn’t noticed the crease beside his mouth while he was dying on my table. I wondered what he looked like when laughing didn’t hurt.

I still didn’t know how easily he could show that warmth to anyone useful to him.

“Your ankle was a good choice,” he said. “You’ll have to tell Linnet.”

“And I’ve acquired a mother.”

“That part was yours.”

He tried not to laugh and failed. The sound caught when it hurt, and he pressed his hand to his chest. I waited until he could grin at me again before letting myself laugh too.

Perril was still at the side steps. I went down long enough to warn her that the old woman would have to be my mother until we were clear of the landing.

***

Linnet arrived with the old woman on her arm. Perril had warned her about the new relationship. The daughter followed with their bag, looking as though she'd want an explanation later.

Emric and Perril brought the carter up on his barrow. The guard searched it and Perril's launch, then waved them through.

Linnet sat the old woman down, then came to Rook. I told her about his ankle before she began examining him.

"I'm not going across," the carter told me. "My work's here. I need somewhere I can stay until I'm on my feet."

Linnet had agreed to stay with the carter while Emric paid for a ground-floor room across the yard. Rook could lie down there too.

I hesitated. Rook had closed his eyes, his head against the wall.

"I'll stay," she added. "You don't have to keep checking him after I've checked him."

"I know."

My hand was already out, waiting for Linnet to move hers. I put it on my bag instead and went outside.

The morning boat was full, but I secured the women a covered bench on the evening crossing. They would be searched at the river gate.

I paid for the women and held a third place until evening. That left enough for my fare and very little else. I had meant to buy Emric something for his new room at the inn.

The boatman found us a letter carrier. The daughter wrote to her sister, and Linnet to her wife.

“I’ll pay for that,” she said. “I promised.”

Emric came in to tell me all five patient messages had gone with the bread deliveries.

“Thank you,” I said. This time I made him look at me while I said it.

With the carter settled, we helped Rook into bed at the lodging house. Linnet put my coat on the bench beneath the window.

“Your turn.”

I slept until midafternoon, then paid the letter carrier and watched her leave. Perril had agreed to help the old woman aboard, then move her launch before anyone searched it again.

When the boatman called across the yard, Linnet pulled her chair close to Rook’s bed, and I went to help the old woman.

Chapter Four

The old woman was afraid of the gap between the landing and the boat. Her daughter had already crossed it with their bag, but she stood gripping my arm while the hull shifted against its ropes.

“Wait until it comes back towards us,” Perril said.

We waited. I could feel the woman counting through her fingers on my sleeve. When the gap narrowed, Perril stepped aboard and held out her hand. Between us, we got her across.

We settled her on the covered bench. For the first time since leaving the chandlery, she looked as though she believed she might reach her other daughter’s house.

Perril caught me before I went for water.

“Arden asked me to speak to the master of the salt boat. He paid for a berth before all this happened. It leaves at dawn.”

“He can get aboard?”

“There’s a cargo ramp. I’ll find out whether the berth’s still his while I move the launch.”

I had been thinking about leaving all afternoon. Hearing that he could go too made me feel foolish. I hadn’t realised I’d been counting on him to stay.

“Will you come back?” Perril asked me.

“I don’t know.”

“If you do, you can come off at the gate quay. The towpath brings you back here.”

Perril cast us off, and I watched her head towards the warehouse channel until the boat turned.

The older woman had shut her eyes. Her daughter sat beside her, one hand spread over the bag in her lap.

“She’s been talking about visiting my sister since summer,” she said. “I couldn’t get her to leave the shop.”

“Does your sister sell candles too?”

“No. She keeps telling us to move over there, though. There’s a house beside hers with a shop at the front.”

I could picture it without trying very hard. A little house with dry shelves and no guard standing in the doorway. I hoped it was as good as it sounded.

The daughter moved their bag to make room for me.

“You could come with us.”

“I’ve held a place.”

“I heard you ask.” She lowered her voice. “We could use another pair of hands getting her off.”

All she was asking was for me to help her down one more plank. After that there’d be a house where someone would put the kettle on and everyone would argue about where to make up a bed. I wanted to be there so badly that I sat down before my knees could give way.

“I might,” I said.

***

At the river gate, the boatman tied up to wait for the tide. Beyond the plank, a lantern marked the towpath back to Lowbank.

Two guards boarded. I stayed beside the old woman while one opened our bags and the other walked between the passengers, looking into their faces. My pulse beat hard enough that I could feel it in my throat.

The man searching our bags paused over the salve, his boot close to the old woman's bad hip.

"Mind her leg," the daughter said.

He moved away, put the salve back and finished the search. Neither guard spoke to me again.

When they had gone ashore, I paid my fare. My bag was beside me and the way through the gate lay ahead.

I could leave.

Nobody was waiting for me to get off. Linnet was with Rook in the rented room; he had slept most of the afternoon, and she had her own glass and bandages. She would still be there if I sailed.

The daughter offered me half of an apple. I took it and ate slowly, looking past the stone arch to the wider water outside.

There would be work somewhere. I could set a bone and bring down a fever, take evening patients, keep a little money back. Eventually I could rent a room of my own. People might stop asking why I had arrived with only a bag.

I wanted that life. I wanted a whole day when no one was looking for me.

But I kept thinking of my clinic, with the table pushed against the wall. Linnet and I had been talking about sharing the work. I had wanted evenings free, a chance to see Emric at his inn without begging someone to cover for me. None of it had been very grand. I hadn't expected to lose it in one night.

The old woman opened her eyes and asked how long we would be waiting. Her daughter went to ask the boatman, leaving me with the apple core in my hand.

“You’re very quiet,” the woman said.

“I’m thinking about the clinic.”

She reached for the blanket that had slipped beside her hip. I pulled it up for her.

“I left my good scissors in the shop,” she said. “I keep remembering things I ought to have brought.”

My yellow shawl was still at the clinic. I had taken the dress and left the shawl, and now I wished I had them both.

Zélie knew the pattern in the heart. She might know how to break the claim. I’d spent all day finding seats and beds for people, and still hadn’t asked her.

If she could help, Rook might live and Sorn might stop turning Lowbank upside down for him. I wanted my own door back, and I couldn’t leave without asking.

The daughter returned as the boatman began taking in the ropes.

“I’m getting off,” I said, picking up my bag.

She stopped. “You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

I asked her to let her mother rest before trying to get her from the landing to the house. She listened, frowning a little, and nodded.

“I hope you find somewhere,” she said.

“So do I.”

The boatman was still beside the plank. He stepped back to let me pass, then lifted it after me. Only then did I remember that I hadn’t asked for my fare back.

I stood beneath the lantern until the boat moved away from the quay. The daughter raised her hand. I raised mine, then turned onto the towpath before I could watch them go all the way through.

***

Linnet looked up from a letter when I returned. “They’ve arrived,” she said. “My wife sent this back with the carrier.” Linnet’s mother-in-law lived just beyond the walls.

“Both boys?”

“All three of them, yes.” She folded the letter carefully. “The little one wanted to bring every blanket we own. She says she let him take two.”

I smiled. Linnet held the folded letter a moment longer, and I waited with her. Then she put it away and went to check the carter, who had been complaining that the room was too warm.

Rook sat up as I came in. His hat was on the floor beside the bed, and he had unbuttoned the borrowed coat.

“Did they get through?”

“They were going through when I left,” I said. “I’m going to ask Zélie to come here. We should have sent for her this morning.”

“I can take a note.” Emric was sitting beneath the window with a plate on his knees. “If you write it now, I’ll finish eating.”

I sat beside him and found a clean page in the appointment book.

I wrote what I’d done. At Sorn’s name I stopped, then made myself go on: Linnet was keeping Rook stable; we needed Zélie here. I folded the note and told Emric to hand it only to her.

“I know.” He took his plate to Linnet. “I’ll be back.”

When he had gone, I sat on the end of Rook's bed.

"You could have found work outside the city," he said.

"I know how to find work."

"No, I only..." He rubbed at the edge of the blanket. "I thought it might make it easier. To go."

"It would be easier tonight."

He waited, and I looked down at the crease in my dress.

"I want to go home. Not just find another place to sleep."

I hadn't meant to say it like that. My throat hurt, and I was angry with him for being there when I finally had time to feel it.

He moved his feet to give me more room.

"I can't promise you that," he said.

"I wasn't asking you to."

"No."

For a while neither of us spoke. Linnet was talking to the carter next door. When Rook shifted his foot away from my skirt, I gathered the cloth clear instead of getting up.

Perril came in and warmed her hands at the fire. "The berth's still yours," she told Rook. "I can take you to the cargo ramp at dawn. We'll carry you aboard." Rook looked towards the window. "He wants an answer tonight," she added. "There's someone else asking for it."

There was a bed waiting for him on a boat that could carry him away while he slept. I'd been hoping the berth was gone. I hadn't wanted to be the one who asked him to stay. "You know what happens at the full moon," I said.

"Yes."

He didn't sound angry, but I wished I hadn't said it as though he might have forgotten.

"I'd have eleven days to find someone else," he said. "Or to come back after I've had some sleep and can walk properly."

"You might find someone."

"I might." He looked back at me. "I think your teacher's the better chance."

I did too. That didn't make the boat a foolish thing to want.

"Tell him I'm not coming," Rook said to Perril.

"He'll give the berth away."

"I know."

Perril nodded.

Rook rubbed his face with both hands. "I have money put away," he said. "Not in the coat. At the room I was using above the sailmaker's. I can fetch it in the morning."

"You can't—"

"Not tonight, Verenne."

"How far from the water?" Linnet asked.

"Back door opens on the channel. One flight of stairs, with a rail."

"Then I'll see how you are in the morning. If you're faint standing up, someone else goes."

He nodded, though I couldn't tell how willingly.

Perril agreed to leave him at the sailmaker's steps on her way to make a delivery she'd missed. He had to be back there at eight. She wasn't coming to look for him.

“Eight,” he said.

He sounded as sure as he had when he told us there would be time to reach Zélie. I hoped he understood that I couldn’t afford another guess.

***

Emric returned with Zélie’s answer beneath my note. She was attending a first birth, but could meet Perril below the mill bridge at eleven. She had added two questions about the graft. I read them twice.

Perril agreed to collect her. Zélie had offered to walk if she couldn’t manage it.

Perril went out to release Rook’s berth and returned with word that another passenger had taken it. He lay back against the pillows, looking tired enough to sleep through the salt boat leaving.

Linnet began writing answers to Zélie’s questions about how Rook had been while I was at the gate.

I sat beside Emric on the bench. He handed me the plate he had covered when he went out. He’d saved me the browned potatoes, the ones I liked. I let my shoulder rest against his while I ate.

Chapter Five

Perril came back alone.

I was holding the carter's leg while Linnet changed the padding beneath his splints. When I saw Perril in the doorway, I nearly let it slip.

"He wasn't there," she said. "The sailmaker saw him go out towards the shops."

"At eight?"

"Before eight. On his feet, with his hat on. I waited until a quarter past."

Linnet looked up. She had allowed him the stairs and the boat, with a rest between. Nothing more.

I kept my hands under the carter's leg. Rook had money now, and I didn't want to think about what he might do with it.

"Perhaps he's on his way," Emric said.

"He knows where we are," Perril said. "I'm not going back for him."

I began to say that someone ought to look, then stopped. Linnet was waiting for me to lower the carter's heel onto the bed.

"Slowly," she said.

He drew in a breath through his teeth as we settled it. I reached for the little bottle Linnet had put beside the salve, but movement beyond the window caught my eye.

Rook was crossing the yard.

He had a long cloth-covered bow beneath one arm. His other hand followed the waiting-room wall until it ended. He paused there before starting towards us again. I met him at the passage door. He stopped inside, bracing himself against the wall.

"Where have you been?"

"The bowyer's." He had to pause for breath. "I'm sorry. I know I missed her."

He followed me into the room. Beyond him, through the window, I could see a broad man in a brown coat talking to the guard by the ramp. The guard pointed across the yard towards the lodging house.

Rook followed my look.

"Shut the front door."

I pushed past him and slid its bolt across. When I came back, the man in the brown coat was starting towards us.

"I thought I'd lost him," Rook said. "He used to work with me."

"Back way," Perril said. "Through the washhouse. I've tied up behind it."

Perril ran ahead. Linnet pocketed her seamglass and pulled the carter's blanket loose while Emric fetched his barrow.

I swept bottles into my bag, reaching for the dressings and soap as someone struck the front door. Linnet's answer to Zélie lay beneath the appointment book. I grabbed for both.

"Arden!"

The carter tried to sit up, pushing on his good foot.

"Wait for us," Linnet told him. "Don't try to stand."

Emric brought the barrow into the passage, but with the carter's leg stretched out, there wasn't room to turn it beside the bed. I left my bag open and went to his other side. "Hold on to my shoulder," I said. "We'll keep your leg straight."

A blow shook the window behind me. The glass broke on the second one. I ducked over the carter while fragments struck the blanket.

The guard from the ramp reached through to lift the catch. I pushed the table against the window. My bag fell sideways, spilling bottles, and the table caught him across the forearm. He swore and pulled back.

With Linnet supporting the carter's leg, Emric and I lifted him in the blanket. The turn through the doorway pulled at my back.

"Stop," he said. "Please, stop."

"We're nearly there."

We weren't nearly anywhere. We still had to get him out of the house and down to the water.

Rook held the washhouse door. Emric's travelling bag was beside his feet; he had dragged it out of the passage for us. The bow leaned against the wall within his reach.

We lowered the carter onto the barrow. Emric shouldered his bag and took the handles. I glanced back into the room.

The guard was climbing over the table. My bag lay beneath his boot, with a dark stain spreading out of it.

"Verenne."

Emric needed help at the washhouse threshold. I turned back to lift the barrow's front.

We pushed through wet sheets towards Perril's voice. Behind us, the front bolt cracked.

Rook snatched up the bow and pulled the washhouse door shut. The bolt scraped, caught, then slid home.

Three steps separated us from the wharf. Perril held the launch against it with her pole.

“Arden, get in first. Keep it against the wood.”

Rook lowered himself aboard, grey-faced, and caught the post to hold us steady. We carried the carter down, Linnet supporting his leg.

The launch shifted beneath us. The carter cried out, and Emric caught my elbow before I fell.

“Down here,” Perril said. “Across the boards. Don’t try for the bench.”

We laid him between the seats and climbed aboard. The barrow stayed on the wharf.

Rook let go of the post. Perril pushed hard enough to scrape the pole along the stone, and the launch slid away just as the guard came through the hanging sheets.

He ran down the steps and reached for our stern rope. Emric pulled it in before his hand closed. The guard shouted to the man in the brown coat, who had turned towards the public landing.

Perril drove us into the warehouse channel as they ran for a skiff. She took the first narrow branch, scraping past a loaded lighter. I thrust a hand against its hull before my head hit it.

Beyond it, the channel divided. Perril turned again. I couldn’t see the lodging house or the skiff now, but I kept listening for oars behind us.

The carter had both hands over his mouth.

Linnet loosened the binding that had twisted against his shin. His leg was swelling, and every touch made him flinch. I put my hand beneath hers, sharing a little

warmth while she checked the splints. I couldn't make this journey painless for him. I had left the bottle that might have helped under a guard's boot.

"Are we going across?" he asked.

"No," I said. "We're staying in Brindle."

"My boots are on the bed."

I hadn't brought them.

He shut his eyes before I answered.

Rook sat on the bench with his bow across his knees. The cloth had fallen away from one end, showing pale wood and a narrow dark tip. He was breathing through his mouth, his hand pressed flat against his chest.

I wanted him to put it down. There was nowhere for it to go except across our feet, but I still wanted him to put it down.

"You were supposed to wait for Perril."

"I know." He turned towards Perril. "The bowyer had it for a new string. That man saw me outside the shop." His hand closed over the bow. "I thought I'd shaken him."

"And then you came to us."

"Yes."

He looked down at the carter. I wanted to know how long he'd waited at the shop while Perril waited for him, but the answer wouldn't get us back into that room.

Where our branch opened onto the main canal, Perril drew the launch behind the corner of a warehouse and pointed across the water.

On the far side of the canal, a boat was tied at my back steps. Two men were carrying my treatment table through the clinic door while a guard stood below them,

holding the boat steady with his foot. A board had been nailed beside the doorway. Even from the water, I could read SEIZED in the large black letters across its top.

One of the men tilted the table to get it through. I knew where he would catch it. I had caught it there myself when we first brought it in.

I leaned forward before I could stop myself.

“Verenne,” Perril said quietly.

A woman came out behind the men with a crate of jars. My yellow shawl had been stuffed between them to keep the glass from knocking together.

I sat back. The guard was looking towards the street, but he would only have to turn his head.

Perril drew us away from the opening. I watched the corner hide the steps, the table, the strip of yellow wool hanging over the crate.

***

Perril took us to the ropewalk farther down the inner channel. There were rooms behind it where barge crews slept between journeys, and a wharf level enough to bring the carter ashore without another flight of steps.

She left us beneath the covered loading place to ask about rooms. The owner knew guards were looking for us. He would take us, but wanted a week’s money even if we left sooner.

Rook took two purses from inside Emric’s coat. He put the larger back unopened, then counted out the money Perril named from the smaller one.

By the time we got the carter onto a bed, he was shaking. Linnet sent everyone but me out and checked his leg. The bone hadn’t shifted, but the swelling meant he wouldn’t be trying to stand soon after all.

He let me put a folded blanket beneath his heel. When I asked whether he wanted water, he said he wanted to be left alone.

I went into the adjoining room. Rook sat on a bench, bent forward with his elbows on his knees. His bow was against the wall.

“Did you get all of it?” I asked, looking at the purse.

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you come back?”

He rubbed his thumb against a rough place on the leather. “I’ve had that bow for six years. It was made for me. I didn’t want to leave it behind.”

“You can’t even draw it.”

“No. Not now.”

He looked tired and ill, and I was tired of noticing it before anything else.

“I thought I had time,” he said. “I knew the shop would be open. I was already so close.”

“You didn’t tell Perril.”

“She’d have said no.”

“So would I.”

“I know.”

Last night I’d been glad he hadn’t promised me anything. I’d stayed on his bed because I wanted to. Now I wished I hadn’t let him see that.

“I wanted it,” he said. “I went for it. I’m sorry.”

In the next room, Linnet asked the carter to turn a little towards her. He swore, then apologised in a voice I could barely hear.

Rook opened the purse again. “Tell me what you need.”

I wanted to push the purse back at him. I kept my hands at my sides.

“Pain medicine first. Clean cloth. Salve, soap. Linnet will tell you the rest.”

He counted more coins onto the bench.

“I’ll pay for the barrow too. And his boots.”

“He polished them yesterday.”

Rook stopped counting for a moment, then set another coin down.

Emric offered to fetch medicine from the kitchen supplier. When I said I would come, he shook his head.

“I can carry a bottle, Verenne. Write it down.”

Linnet wrote the list on wrapping paper Perril found in the launch. Rook paid without asking what anything cost.

While Emric was gone, I sat on the wharf with a basin of clean water and washed the dust and splinters from my hands. There was one small cut beside my thumb. I kept dipping it in the water, watching the red thread disappear.

I wished I’d stayed on the passenger boat. I kept seeing my place beside the old woman, and the daughter moving her bag so I could sit down.

When I went inside, Linnet was checking Rook’s chest. She told me he’d become dizzy at the carter’s door and she’d made him lie down.

“He’s resting now,” she said to me. “You can leave him with me.”

“I’m going with Perril to the mill bridge.”

Rook turned his head. “Will Zélie still come?”

“We’ll ask her.”

I left before Linnet finished. I needed a little time when I couldn’t see him.

Emric returned with medicine and cloth. Rook pocketed the change while Linnet took the bottle to the carter.

***

Zélie was waiting below the mill bridge when we came round the bend a little before eleven. She had a basket beside her feet and the old brown coat she wore when she expected rain.

I stood too soon, making the launch rock. Perril caught the steps and waited for me to sit before bringing us close.

Zélie bent to look at my face. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Some.”

She held out her hand, and I took it to help her aboard. Her fingers were warm and familiar.

“We’ve had to move,” I said. “Rook’s with Linnet. There’s a room behind the ropewalk.”

“All right.” She settled her basket between her feet. “Tell me what happened.”

Perril pushed us away from the steps, and I began with Rook coming through the door carrying his bow.

Chapter Six

Zélie would not let Rook get up to greet her.

"No, stay where you are. I can come to you."

He eased down again while Zélie asked Linnet how he had been.

Linnet repeated what she'd written in the note we'd lost that morning. Rook's heartbeat was regular, but he'd walked too far. Now his chest hurt and he became dizzy whenever he tried to rise. Zélie listened with one hand on his wrist.

She had brought bread, a jar of broth and two rolls of linen in the basket I used to carry as her apprentice. One handle had been mended in red thread.

"Let me see what Verenne's done," she told Rook.

He looked at me before unbuttoning his shirt. I went to the bench, and he moved his arm out of my way.

The bruising had spread around the bite. Zélie felt along the healed edges, asking him where it hurt. I'd never felt any answering warmth beneath those fingers. She'd lost her healing gift before we met.

I had thought of that often in the last two days. It was still Zélie I wanted beside the bench.

She asked whether I'd kept the gold lines open as the glass fused. I showed her, remembering the guard pulling at my wrist.

"I wasn't sure I could hold it."

"You did hold it." She put her hand beside mine. "The graft is sound."

I had been waiting to hear that since the boat left my back steps.

After some broth, the strain around Rook's mouth eased.

"You've spent what strength you had this morning," she said. "You'll have to let it come back."

"Can we keep it there?" I asked Zélie. "Without the claim?"

"Yes."

I tried to ask how, but for a moment I couldn't get the word out.

"We can make it a living heart," she went on. "An ordinary one, permanently his. But only in the furnace where the glass was made."

Rook stopped drinking.

"The Kilns," Zélie said. "The long shed on Saggar Quay. We used to pack the good glass into clay boxes for the firing. Every chipped box wound up in that quay. Third gap in the roof was over my bench. I worked with a pot between my feet when it rained."

I knew that broken line of roof from the water. All the times I'd passed it, I'd never once pictured her at work in there with the whole of her gift still hers.

"And we need Sorn's seal. The metal stamp he uses for his letters." Her fingers rested on the basket handle. "His claim was set with it. We have to melt it in that furnace."

"He keeps it on him," Rook said. "Pinned inside his coat."

"Then we have to get close enough to take it off him," Perril said.

"Yes," Zélie said. "But to remake it, one living person has to give up their whole inborn gift. It doesn't have to be a healer's. They won't get it back."

"Use mine, then."

Rook was almost smiling. I'd been waiting for somebody to offer us a way out. It had never occurred to me that he might have something of his own he could offer, or that I'd wish he would keep it.

"My tracking," he added. "If that will do."

"Tell me what you can do," she said.

"I hear living pulses. People, animals. If they're close enough, I can follow them without seeing them." He rested the cup against his thigh. "It's how I find things."

"The children outside my clinic," I said.

"Two people. I couldn't tell they were children. I heard one of them moving closer."

I remembered the latch lifting, the boy standing there with Emric's pot while I hid behind the coats.

"I can follow a pulse," he said. "Can't tell you what its owner wants. If someone's coming to help, I hear them just the same."

Zélie nodded. "That gift would be enough."

"Good." He looked at me. "There's our answer."

I couldn't smile back.

When I was seventeen, I had tried to give Zélie her gift back.

She had told me how she'd spent it during the war, saving patients she would otherwise have lost. I knew a spent gift could not be restored. But I was seventeen and had only just learned to close a cut without hurting the patient. I was sure that working harder ought to count for something.

For weeks I'd tried to pass warmth through seamglass into her palm. It shone beneath my hand.

Then I took my hand away.

There was never anything left for her to call on herself. At last she took the glass and put it back in its box.

“You’re making yourself ill,” she said. “I can’t let you keep doing it.”

I had cried, furious with her for stopping when the next attempt might have worked. She had sat with me until I could bear to have her put an arm around me.

For months afterwards I still watched her hands when she treated someone, waiting to see her warmth return.

Rook was watching me now.

“I tried to give it back to her,” I told him. “I kept thinking I’d missed something. But there wasn’t anything left to mend.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t think you’ve had time to.”

“Would you rather I said no?” he asked.

“No.” That came out too quickly. “I’m glad there’s something we can do. I just don’t want you agreeing because it sounds like another thing you can replace later.”

“I know it isn’t another bow.”

From the next room came the scrape of the carter’s cup against the wall. Linnet went to him, leaving the door open.

Zélie took Rook’s empty cup. “You don’t have to settle it while you’re exhausted,” she said. “When the time comes, you must be awake and able to give it freely. No one can take it from you in your sleep, or after you die.”

“I’m not asking anyone else to do it.”

“I didn’t say you were.”