CHAPTER 1

A bad day for rain

The first fish fell through the roof of the bell tower at seven in the morning and landed in my tea.

It was a small thing, no longer than my thumb, with transparent fins and a bright blue gut. It flapped about in the cup, splashing my sleeve, while Dema looked up from the floor where she was sorting the tools.

‘That’s new.’

Above us, the roof was intact.

Something cold slapped my little finger. I put a hand over my tea and looked up. Beside the weather vane was a gap just wide enough for a swallow. Fishlight ran across my knuckles. You got it every morning in Nareth when a shoal turned in the water overhead, a green flicker that used to send Dema and me racing to the window. Usually the fish had the decency to stay up there.

‘Get the long ladder,’ I said.

‘Sella.’

‘What?’

‘That’s your breakfast.’

‘I noticed.’

She took the cup anyway and poured the fish into our water bucket. Dema liked things that inconvenienced other people. Once, she had made me walk halfway across Nareth with a nest of gutter hens inside my coat because she’d decided the mother looked tired.

‘I’ll go up,’ she said. ‘You’re meant to be resting that ankle.’

‘It’s fine.’

‘Then why were you walking like Belo on the stairs?’

There was a long, wet scrape from inside the bucket. Dema bent to look, and I got the ladder down myself before she could turn round. Once I had a front door of my own, Dema could tell me about my ankle through the keyhole.

Our front door at present opened into a room that smelled of onions from the shop below and the damp stockings Dema hung beside the stove. Half the room belonged to her, the other half to me, and the space between our beds was the width of a saucepan. After her wedding, Etti was moving in. I loved them both dearly, but I had no intention of listening to them being married from six feet away.

From the upper platform, the city spread below us in a bowl of pale stone. Smoke from the bakers’ ovens collected in long grey bands beneath the sea, and the light that filtered through the water made the rooftops look as though they had already drowned. On the far rim of the basin, the high terraces caught the sun. I had put a deposit on two rooms up there. They were small, infested with something that ate plaster and warm enough to dry a shirt indoors without putting it on first. In five days, if Warden Ossana approved my final contract, I would have a key.

A boy waved to me from the roof opposite. When I waved back, he ducked behind a chimney. He was supposed to be at school and must have thought I’d tell his mother.

‘See anything?’ Dema called.

The roof tiles were dry. That was peculiar. Anything which fell through the sea ought to have brought water with it, and even a single drop in the wrong place ought to have left a ring of salt. I leaned over the railing to examine the gutter. There, caught

between two iron brackets, was a second fish, very much alive. Its tail beat helplessly against the stone. A thread of water hung from its mouth and stretched up into the air.

I drew back. ‘Dema. Gauge.’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake.’

She came up with the instrument in its leather case. It was one of Belo’s better inventions: a needle suspended in a little glass chamber which responded to the strain in the bronze. We were supposed to report any movement beyond the first mark. As Dema took it out of the case, I pointed to the gutter.

She stared at the fish. ‘What’s it doing?’

The thread stretched another inch. Then, with a little jerk, the fish slid out from between the brackets and went up. Neither of us moved until it had disappeared into the dark green ceiling above the tower.

‘We ought to call them,’ she said.

‘Let me see what it is first.’

‘So you can tell them it’s fixed before they even know it’s broken?’

The gauge case still had the reporting slip tucked inside it. Dema had already got a pencil out. If she put today’s date on that slip, I’d have to explain the fault to Ossana before she signed my contract. There’d be an inspection, and Mistress Vei had said she couldn’t hold the rooms for me without the rest of the deposit. Eleven months without an adjustment. I knew this bell better than anybody who’d be sent to inspect it.

‘Five minutes,’ I said.

Dema laid the pencil down. ‘I’m putting the time on it, Sel.’

Dema crouched to connect the gauge to the bronze while I climbed inside the great eastern bell. Its mouth was big enough to contain our entire room. Generations of

keepers had scratched their initials into the inner wall, in spite of successive wardens' efforts to stop them. Mine were just above the lip, rather badly carved. Dema had added a fish beside them on the occasion of my twenty-first birthday. It resembled a potato with a face.

The bronze was warm beneath my fingers, though the sun never touched it directly. A thin line of condensation followed the grain in the metal.

'What's it showing?'

'One and a half. No, two.'

Two. On the roof below us the boy came out from behind the chimney. He put a bowl under the place where the awning had begun to drip, the way we did at home when we got sivvel over the stove. There was no fire under that awning and no rain above it. I could have told Dema to run down to the watch post and clear the street.

'Are you holding it steady?'

'Would you like to come down and hold it yourself?'

The metal beneath my left hand moved.

It wasn't the familiar vibration of a bell in song. Something slipped against the inside of the bronze, as if a large creature had turned in its sleep. The sound that followed was so low that I felt it in my gums before I heard it.

Dema got to her feet. 'Down. Now.'

A crack opened in the bell's lip.

The water above us bulged.

I don't remember taking the ladder. I remember the rungs striking the insides of my wrists as I slid, and Dema grabbing the back of my coat before we fell through the hatch together. The bell rang once behind us. All along the street, windows blew out.

Then came the rain.

It struck the city in a narrow, astonishing column. Tiles burst from roofs beneath it, and the fish that came down with the water glittered in the air. A laundry woman ran into a doorway with her basket over her head. The basket disappeared; the woman nearly did, too.

Dema was already on the stairs.

‘The shutter!’ I shouted.

She took the west stair to the ground-level flood shutter while I went for the tower’s emergency mallet. A second tuning wedge lay in the cupboard. If I drove it into the collar, I might force the note back into its proper register.

That was when something much larger than a fish hit the platform.

A man. A rope trailing from his waist, one boot missing, dark blood spreading beneath his ribs. He landed hard enough to knock the gauge off the railing. For a moment I simply stood there with the mallet in my hand. I had never seen anyone fall from the sky before.

The rope snapped taut, dragging him towards the edge.

I dropped the mallet and caught his arm. He was heavy, and the rope was pulling upwards with enough force to lift his hips off the floor. I jammed my knee against a brace and pulled until my shoulder hurt.

‘Cut it,’ he gasped.

‘You’ll fall.’

‘I’m aware.’

His knife was in a sheath at his chest. I got it free and sawed through the rope. He struck the boards beside me. The severed end whipped up into the rain and disappeared.

The stranger lay still for several seconds, then turned his head to look at the bell.

‘Did it stop?’

‘What?’

‘The song.’

Before I could answer, the bell shuddered back into its note. Water leapt upwards from the flooded roofs, taking fish, laundry and bits of broken tile with it. Somewhere below, Dema began to cheer.

The man’s face changed. ‘Oh, no,’ he said.

And then, quite horribly, he began to weep.

I’d expected him to thank me. Instead he was crying so hard that I had to move his hand away from the cut before I could turn him over.

‘Can you move your legs?’

He made an attempt to push me off. ‘Leave me.’

‘You can move your arms, then. That’s one thing.’

The gash beneath his ribs had caught the edge of a metal bracket when he landed. It wasn’t particularly deep, but the boards were wet beneath him and I couldn’t tell how much blood he’d lost. His hands were cold. I got my neckcloth off and pressed it against the wound, and he grabbed my wrist with enough strength to startle me.

‘There were three of us.’

‘Where?’

He looked up.

Beyond the broken railing, the breach had already closed. A strip of somebody's washing was still rising towards it. Nothing that might have been a man.

'They'll have gone back up,' I said, because I wanted him to release my wrist. 'The water's going up again.'

'Did you see them?'

'I saw you.'

His fingers slackened. I was about to call for Dema when a blue flag appeared in the window of the central tower. Emergency inspection. Anyone who remained on an affected platform was to await the wardens.

The stranger saw it too. He turned on his side, tried to get up and promptly collapsed against my leg.

'For pity's sake, stop.'

'Can't stay here.'

'You'll be a great deal less trouble if you stop trying to kill yourself.'

From the street, somebody was shouting for help. Dema's footsteps came up the stair so fast that I thought she might miss the last rung. She appeared with the shutter key in one hand and blood running from a cut on her forehead.

'Two houses down,' she said. 'The old cobbler's roof has gone. There's a girl trapped—' She stopped when she saw the man. 'Oh. Good morning.'

'He fell out of the sea.'

'Of course he did.'

'I need you to hold this while I get a stretcher.'

The man caught the edge of my sleeve. 'No wardens.'

Dema looked from him to me. Behind her, through the tower doorway, I could see the blue flag unfurling in the pale light. A second flag appeared over the western tower, confirming the order.

The sensible thing would have been to take him straight to the infirmary. That's where the wardens expected us to put anybody recovered from a leak, and where his friends would be taken if they came down alive.

We'd had an argument about them only the previous winter, when a young woman from the rim had disappeared from the infirmary after being picked up on the northern road. Dema had insisted the wardens had taken her. I had told her she ought to stop repeating things she'd heard in the tavern.

I had defended the service then. I could still have called Sile and let him take this man off my hands. But the reporting slip was upstairs with the gauge, and I didn't particularly want a witness telling Ossana what he'd seen on my platform until I'd had a chance to speak to her myself.

The stranger's grip tightened. 'Please.'

I looked at Dema. 'The storeroom.'

She didn't ask me why. She went to get the sail from the cupboard, and together we lifted him. He bit the inside of his cheek rather than make a sound, though I saw what it cost him when we negotiated the first step. At the bottom of the ladder, Dema stopped.

'Wait. The fish.'

'What fish?'

'Your tea fish. It's still in the bucket.'

'Leave it there!'

‘Just checking.’

We staggered down to the next landing. I had almost got the storeroom door shut when the bells of the watch began to ring in the street. Not our great bells, but the ordinary little handbells which told the inhabitants of Nareth that the danger had passed.

Outside, a woman called the name of her child over and over again.

I left Dema to keep our stranger quiet and went to find her.

CHAPTER 2

The man from above

The woman was standing in what had been the front window of the bootmaker's shop, trying to climb over a fallen beam. A man on the other side of it held her by the shoulders, which was a great deal less useful than he seemed to think. When I pushed through the crowd, she caught my sleeve.

'My daughter's in there.'

'How old?'

'Eleven. She was collecting the boots. Please, she's only eleven.'

The front of the shop had gone, but I could hear the girl crying behind a partition which had folded over the counter. There were several people trying to lift it, among them the laundry woman whose basket I had seen in the rain. She had lost her shoes and was standing in water up to her ankles.

'Everyone out of the doorway,' I said. 'You, with the red scarf. Get a cart. And you—'

The man holding the girl's mother turned towards me. 'Rell,' he said. 'I'm her father.'

He kept the grocery on Clapper Row. I knew his door by the cracked brass tongue over it. You could go in on a very quiet errand and announce yourself to every woman buying flour. Last week I'd made him take a sack back because of a beetle. Now he was standing in his apron with blood down one arm and I couldn't remember what I'd been about to say.

'Come with me.'

We climbed in through the window. From the back of the shop, the bootmaker was shouting instructions about a crowbar. He was alive, sitting with his back against his bench and a leather strap tied round his head. I found his crowbar and wedged it beneath the partition, but it would barely move. The girl cried out as Rell attempted to lift the other end.

‘Stop. Leave it. Can you see her hand?’

He lay on the floor. ‘Tibby? Darling, give us your hand.’

A small hand emerged from beneath a tangle of belts. The girl was wedged against the counter, with one arm trapped under the partition. There was enough room to move the beam if we could support the weight of the roof above it. The trouble was that half the shop seemed to be resting on the same piece of timber.

‘Has anyone fetched a keeper?’ I called.

‘You’re a keeper,’ said someone behind me.

I was sixteen when Ossana carried me out of that flooded stairwell. From her arms all I could see was the underside of her chin. I got down on my knees where Tibby could see my whole face.

‘Tibby, does your other arm hurt?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Hold your father’s hand with it. He’s going to tell you something terribly boring while I move this.’

Rell looked at me in horror.

‘What?’

‘Anything.’

Rell launched into the morning's potato delivery at a speed no horse of his had ever managed. I missed half of it. Tibby didn't.

'Not six sacks.'

'No, love, seven. You're quite right.'

By the time we got to the price of onions, two men had brought a length of timber from the next street. One of them was Fesel, the western tower apprentice. Everyone called him Fen. I had met him at the central workshop a handful of times, usually in connection with something expensive he had broken. He was slight, fair-haired and so eager to help that people often gave him unsuitable jobs just to keep him occupied.

'Master Belo sent me,' he said. 'He wants to know why your bell's singing sharp.'

'Tell him to come here and make himself useful.'

Fen looked at the wreckage. 'Oh.'

We propped the beam, and Rell crawled beneath it to bring Tibby out. The girl's right forearm lay at an unfortunate angle. She gave me a look of enormous indignation when I told her we would have to put it in a splint.

'Is the bell going to do it again?' she asked.

'No, love. It's ringing now.'

She held very still while I tied the splint. She believed me, and I hadn't even listened to the note before I answered.

'I only went to get my boots.'

'I know.'

'I didn't do anything.'

‘No. No, you didn’t.’

Her mother took her from Rell, and I helped the bootmaker onto the cart when it arrived. By then the street had filled with keepers from the other towers. One of them was telling people that the fault had been corrected and that they could return to their houses after inspection. A woman asked what he intended to do about the large hole in hers. He repeated that the fault had been corrected.

I took Fen aside.

‘Did Belo see the sea open?’

‘From the west platform. He said it was like someone had pulled a stitch out of it.’

‘Did he see anything falling?’

‘Fish, mostly. Why?’

‘Nothing. Go back to him.’

He ran off, and I watched him until he disappeared. From the eastern tower came two short blasts of a whistle. Dema was telling me the wardens had arrived.

* * *

By the time I got back, Dema had tucked our visitor into the storeroom bed and covered him with an old sail. She had also put my fish in the largest grease jar, after emptying the grease into a saucepan. We would be hearing about the saucepan for weeks.

The storeroom was the only part of the tower that did not have windows. It contained six full jars of grease, a pair of alarming leather trousers left by a former bellkeeper and a bed that smelled of feet. I had spent enough nights in it to know which part of the mattress to avoid.

The man was awake when I came back with bandages. He'd found the knife.

'Put that down,' I told him. 'You'll frighten my friend.'

'Will I?'

Behind me, Dema was eating a piece of dried apple and watching with interest.

'Probably not,' she said.

He returned the knife to its sheath, which was more cooperation than I had expected. His coat was made of a strange black fabric that shed water onto the floor without seeming to get wet. Under it, his shirt had been torn open by the fall. There was a gash beneath his ribs and older marks across his shoulders, fine silver scars that looked like the tracks of something with many teeth.

He caught me looking. 'If you'd rather I took the rest off, you can ask.'

'I would rather you stopped bleeding on our blankets.'

He smiled, briefly. It was an irritatingly attractive smile on a face that had been grey with pain a minute before. I resented it enough to tighten the bandage more than necessary.

'Where did you come from?'

'Up.'

'Wonderful. Dema, get a map.'

'Which one? The map of up?'

He laughed, then winced and covered the wound.

'My name is Ivo. I was travelling with a crew.' He looked at the ceiling. 'What happened to my bag?'

We had found no bag. His expression told me that this was rather more important than the knife, and I was going to ask why when boots sounded on the stair outside.

Dema moved to the door. ‘I’d keep him out of sight,’ she murmured. ‘Ossana herself is here.’

Ivo swung his legs off the bed at once.

‘Is she the one who runs this place?’

‘The bell service, yes.’

He reached for his knife again. I put my hand over his.

‘If you want to get out of here with all your limbs, sit still.’

He studied me for long enough that I became painfully aware of my fingers over his. Then he withdrew his hand.

We got him into the shaft behind the grease cupboard. I had thought it unlikely that a man of his height would fit through the gap, and for a moment, with his legs protruding into the room and Dema trying to push him in, the absurdity of the situation nearly got the better of me. He seemed to be of the same opinion.

‘If I get wedged in here,’ he whispered, ‘I’m going to tell them you put me there for pleasure.’

‘Get in.’

He did. I shifted the cupboard back and went to meet the warden on the landing.

Ossana had served the bells since the first year of Nareth’s dry age. Her white hair was cropped close to her skull and she wore the blue cord of a warden over a plain woollen coat. She’d carried me out of the flood after I broke my ankle. Two years later, she took me on as an apprentice.

The man who accompanied her was her deputy, Captain Haro Sile. He had the unpleasant habit of looking at a person's hands when they spoke, as if he expected to find a weapon in them. With him came a young keeper carrying a replacement gauge.

'The collar was hot before the crack,' I explained. 'I think something's shifted below the tower.'

Ossana looked past me into the storeroom. 'Who drove the spare wedge?'

'No one. The note came back on its own.'

That bothered her. I could tell because she stopped pretending to be interested in the cracked windows.

'Was there anything else in the rain?'

'Fish. Roofing tiles. A lot of water.'

'Anything that might have come from the upper surface?'

I hesitated. Too long.

Ossana stepped past me and opened the door. Dema was sitting on the bed. Ivo was nowhere in sight, although the sail that had covered him was in a heap at her feet.

'Is there a problem, Warden?' Dema asked.

Ossana looked from the bed to the wet floor. Then she turned towards the grease cupboard, which had a gap in the wall behind it just wide enough for a man to climb into the maintenance shaft.

Sile took a step towards it. I wondered if it would be possible to claim that the blood on the floor was mine. My ankle was in rather a poor state, but there was nothing wrong with the rest of me that could account for so much of it.

'The bootmaker needs a surgeon,' I said. 'I sent him to the infirmary. His head was bleeding.'

Ossana looked at me. ‘Did you bring him here first?’

‘No.’

Sile reached for the cupboard.

‘Captain,’ Ossana said.

He stopped. There was a moment when I could hear the fish moving in its jar, and I prayed that it would not choose that particular moment to make a spectacular leap onto the floor.

‘If you find anyone,’ Ossana said, addressing me, ‘do not give them a knife. Do not listen to them. And send for me.’

‘Anyone?’

‘The people above have been trying to interfere with the bells for years. You know how many people live beneath this one.’

I knew. I had walked through those streets every day of my life. Dema’s mother lived three doors down from the laundry woman. The old man who fixed my boots had a shop beneath the tower.

Ossana put her hand on my shoulder. ‘Your new contract is ready. Come to the central tower this evening, and I’ll have it signed.’

Sile followed her out. At the bottom of the stairs, he stopped to speak to the young keeper. I couldn’t make out the words, but a few moments later we heard the front door being shut and locked.

Dema waited until the sound of their boots had faded before she knocked twice on the cupboard. There came three faint knocks in return.

‘Can you fit?’ she asked.

‘I’m reconsidering the trousers,’ came Ivo’s voice.

I helped him out, and as he brushed dust from his black coat, something slipped from inside it: a small curved piece of white material, threaded with blue veins. It looked remarkably like the pale wedges we used to tune the bells.

He snatched it before I could pick it up.

‘Where did you get that?’

His good humour was gone.

‘You wouldn’t believe me.’

‘Try.’

He turned the thing over. One end was broken, jagged and dark where it had been attached to something else.

‘Have you ever wondered why your bells sound like an animal in pain?’

Dema gave a little laugh. I didn’t. There was something about the way he was holding the piece, with his thumb over the broken edge, that reminded me of a boy who’d once brought us a bird with its leg caught in wire.

I went to the drawer and got an old wedge. The service collected them after use, but Belo had given me this one to practise carving. I’d made a hash of it and kept it out of a mixture of embarrassment and superstition. When I held it beside Ivo’s fragment, the fine blue lines ran through both in exactly the same way.

‘What’s it made of?’ I asked him.

‘Bone. More or less.’

‘From what?’

He was quiet for a moment.

‘Would you open the lower shaft if I told you?’

‘No.’

‘Then I won’t tell you.’

I put the wedge back in the drawer. ‘You can get out of here when the wardens leave. Until then, you’re not going anywhere near the bells, and if you try to get into the shaft, I’ll make sure you’re considerably less comfortable than you are now.’

Dema gave me a look. I ignored it. I was cold, my ankle hurt, a girl had broken her arm and the city smelled of rotting fish. I had reached the end of my hospitality.

Ivo watched me walk to the door. ‘Sella.’

I stopped.

‘When the bell started singing again, did it hurt you?’

‘No.’

‘Did you feel anything?’

The warmth in the bronze. That queer movement beneath my hand. I remembered the sound in my gums, but I wasn’t going to give him the pleasure of knowing it.

‘It rang,’ I said. ‘That’s what bells do.’

CHAPTER 3

The people under the bell

By lunchtime, word had reached the lower market that the rain had been caused by a woman putting her washing out on a forbidden day. At the northern stairs, according to the people coming down them, a creature with seven heads had landed on the tower and eaten two keepers. Nobody knew who the two keepers were, but a woman in the infirmary was already collecting money for their families.

I left Dema with Ivo and went to find Belo. If he told me it was an ordinary failure, I could still go to Ossana that evening and sign the contract.

His workshop occupied the ground floor of a former chapel. The saints had been removed from their alcoves long ago and replaced with shelves of small bronze bells, none of which appeared to have been dusted since the change. A stone woman over the door still held her hands up to receive a blessing, although someone had hung a pair of work gloves from her fingers.

Belo was at the long bench with his back to me, fitting a new handle to a service mallet. He was old enough to have learnt his trade when the bells had still been rung by hand. The tip of one finger had gone missing in a casting accident and he walked very slowly on wet days. Neither fact had persuaded him that there were things he ought to leave to other people.

I banged a piece of bronze against the bench.

He turned. ‘Didn’t hear you come in.’

‘I know.’

‘Don’t start.’

I took the cracked gauge from my coat. Fen had retrieved it from a roof below the tower, minus its little glass window. The needle was bent, but it had stuck just above the second mark.

Belo put down his mallet. ‘Who was holding this?’

‘Dema.’

‘She’s all right?’

‘A cut on her head.’

He took the gauge to the light. ‘And you?’

‘Fine.’

‘Of course.’

While he examined it, I wandered to the other end of the bench, where a row of tuning wedges lay beside a pot of ground shell. The wedges had come from different towers. One of the western ones was so old that the blue lines in it had turned brown. I picked it up.

‘Belo, what’s this made of?’

‘Service material.’

‘Yes. Very informative. And the handle of that mallet is made of workshop material.’

He didn’t laugh. He took the wedge from me and returned it to the bench.

‘Where did you get that question?’

‘From looking at it.’

‘You were happy enough to use them yesterday.’

I looked at him properly. His hearing might be going, but there had never been anything wrong with his ability to notice the exact question a person was trying not to ask. It was one of the reasons I disliked lying to him.

‘There was something in the bell before it cracked. It moved.’

‘The bronze?’

‘No. I don’t know.’ I pressed my fingertips together. ‘I had my hand on it. It felt as though something was moving beneath the metal.’

Belo returned to the gauge. For a little while he tried to straighten the needle with a pair of tweezers.

‘Put the spare collar on,’ he said. ‘Take the strain off the lip. I’ll come and have a look when I’ve finished here.’

‘I’ve already done that.’

‘Then leave it alone.’

‘You know what it was.’

He took off his glasses.

‘Listen to me, girl. There are some things in the service that have no business being left to an eastern tuner to sort out. I have complained about the wedges for years. They send down rubbish, I tell them it’s rubbish, they send down more rubbish. And every time the bloody bells ring.’

‘But this one stopped.’

‘I noticed.’

‘For nearly two minutes.’

Belo’s expression softened. He put a hand on my arm. ‘You’re not sixteen any more, Sella.’

As he went back to the gauge, I almost thanked him. I'd spent half the morning waiting for somebody to tell me that what happened when I was sixteen wasn't happening again.

I wished he hadn't said it.

'No. I'm the person who's responsible for that bell.'

He let go. 'And I've got a man coming to collect a warning bell that fell off his house. Sit down if you're going to stay, or go and do something useful.'

A knock sounded at the door before I could answer. Fen came in backwards, carrying a large basket with both hands, followed by a woman with a bandage round her head. Dema's mother. She'd got as far as the market in her slippers when the rain came, and had apparently spent the next several hours persuading people she was well enough to carry things.

'Oh, Sel,' she said. 'Good. Make him let me go home.'

Belo drew a chair out from under the bench. 'Sit down, Mara.'

'It's my head, not my bottom.'

'Sit.'

She sat. The basket Fen had carried contained most of the contents of her kitchen. I recognised a blue jug with a crack in the handle, two pots of goose fat and the peculiar red cups Dema had given her for her birthday.

'Where's my daughter?' she asked.

'At the tower.'

'She ought to be here. Etti's been trying to find her.'

'She's working.'

Mara looked at me in a way which suggested she didn't believe that, but could hardly object to a keeper working after a leak. When she noticed my wet sleeve, she took a clean apron out of the basket and made me wipe the dried blood off my wrist.

'Did you get any breakfast?'

'Yes.'

'What?'

'Tea.'

'That's not breakfast.'

'I had a fish in it.'

She looked at Belo. 'Do you feed them nothing?'

Belo, who had spent twenty years refusing responsibility for anything other than bronze, pretended not to hear. Mara took a roll out of a napkin and pushed it into my hand. I was so hungry that I ate half of it before remembering that I had meant to save something for Ivo.

'Have they looked at your house?' I asked her.

'They won't let me in. The roof's all right, but the man from the watch says he wants to inspect the back wall. He's a little chap with a dreadful beard. I don't know how he expects me to believe he knows more about my back wall than I do.'

'You can stay at ours tonight.'

'Nonsense. You've only got the two beds.'

'Etti has a room at the glassworks.'

Mara took the other half of my roll and wrapped it back up for me.

'Don't fuss. I'll go and stay with my sister.'

I felt a small, childish relief. Mara’s sister lived three streets farther uphill. For once, something could be done simply by asking a person to move.

Then Fen, who’d been standing beside the door, cleared his throat.

‘Master, there’s a man outside wanting to know where to go. They told him he can’t go to the terrace.’

‘Who’s they?’ Belo asked.

‘The watch at the north steps.’

I went to the door with him. Outside stood a young man with a bundle of damp blankets and two children, one of whom had his fingers in the other’s mouth. The man was trying to get them apart without dropping the blankets.

‘They said the houses are for contract holders,’ he told me. ‘I’ve got a work card. Is that not the same thing?’

A work card got him into the service yard, not into the terrace lodgings. I’d been looking forward to the day I could walk into those houses with a contract instead of waiting outside in the rain. Now the young man stood in front of me with a pile of wet blankets and nowhere to put them.

‘There’ll be room in the school,’ I said.

‘It’s full.’

Behind him, a woman was sitting on the chapel step with her sewing machine beside her. She had wrapped it in her coat. Farther down the road there were a dozen more people, all looking towards the workshop door because a keeper had come out of it.

I looked at the chapel. There were two long storage rooms behind Belo's bench and a loft which contained nothing but wooden moulds. I could have made a dozen beds out of those rooms.

Belo followed my gaze.

'No,' he said.

'You can't leave them out here.'

'This is a working foundry. You put a child in the wrong corner and it'll come out without eyebrows.'

'The furnaces aren't lit.'

'Because I'm waiting for charcoal.'

I turned to Fen. 'Get the apprentices. We'll clear the loft.'

Belo opened his mouth, closed it, then looked at the young man with the blankets.

'Have you got anyone who can carry things?' he asked.

The man looked down at his children.

'Not very heavy things.'

'Come on, then.'

For the next hour we cleared the loft. Mara sat beneath the saints' alcoves and made a list of things people needed, although she insisted she was not staying. Fen found four mattresses and took so long carrying the last one upstairs that we eventually discovered him trying to get an elderly woman up the steps on it. By the time the charcoal arrived, there were seventeen people in the workshop, and Belo had made the delivery man put the sacks in the yard.

I liked the work. It was the kind of problem that got smaller as you dealt with it, and I was about to suggest putting a stove upstairs when two members of the watch came through the door.

‘Who’s in charge?’ one asked.

Belo raised his hand.

‘We’ve orders to inspect all temporary accommodation. No unauthorised persons from outside the basin.’

‘They’re from the eastern district,’ I said.

The watchman gave me a polite little nod and went to the young man with the blankets. ‘Work card.’

The young man put one child down and searched his pockets. While he did, the other watchman walked past me to the stairs.

‘There’s no one up there who’s done anything wrong,’ I told him.

He stopped. ‘That’s not what we’re looking for.’

‘Then what are you looking for?’

He glanced at his companion. ‘Someone may have come down through the breach. There was a report from the north watch.’

Belo looked at me.

I hadn’t told him about Ivo. I’d almost forgotten him during the last hour, except when I put my hand in my pocket and found the roll.

‘If they have,’ I said, ‘surely they’ll be at the infirmary.’

The watchman went upstairs.

I waited until he’d gone before picking up my coat. Mara caught me by the door.

‘Where are you off to?’

‘Back to the tower.’

‘Etti’s waiting in the glass yard. Tell Dema to go and see her before she comes looking for her herself.’

I said I would. Belo was watching me over Mara’s shoulder, and I wondered if he could tell from where he stood that I’d lied to the watchman. Perhaps he could. He didn’t ask me to stay.

* * *

On the way back to the eastern tower, I passed the glass yard. Etti was in the doorway wearing a leather apron over a very pretty dress. She’d put on the dress that morning to go and see the woman who was making their wedding clothes, but there had been a rush of orders for window glass after the rain and she’d been working ever since.

‘Where is she?’

‘Tower.’

‘Is she hurt?’

‘She’s all right. A cut.’

Etti closed her eyes. I wished I had brought Dema with me. There were things you could say to a person who was worried about their wife that you couldn’t say to someone whose entire acquaintance with marriage had been watching other people make a great many mistakes.

‘I’ll send her down,’ I said.

‘Please do. I bought something this morning and I want to show her before she goes on shift.’

She took a small object from the pocket of her apron. It was a glass bird, pale green, with its wings spread. When she held it up to the light, the glass threw a little shape onto the stone behind her.

'For the trees,' she said. 'At the wedding. Dema thinks candles. I think she'll set someone's hair on fire if we let her near candles.'

I laughed. 'Fair.'

'You'll help me convince her?'

'I'll try.'

She put the bird away again. 'And how are the rooms?'

'I'll find out this afternoon.'

'You know, you don't have to move out straight away. We can find somewhere else if you need time.'

'No.' I said it so quickly she looked at me. 'No, I mean, the rooms are lovely.'

They were. I was glad she couldn't see how much I wanted them, because it would have been difficult to explain that I didn't particularly want to leave Dema. I wanted a place I could come back to after a day like this and know that nobody would be able to take it away.

Etti reached across the doorway and rubbed a smudge of dirt from my cheek. 'Go on, then. Get her for me.'

I had almost reached the tower when I heard a commotion in the yard. A pair of watchmen had brought in a black bag with a length of rope tied round the handle. It had apparently been found on a rooftop in the southern district. A young officer was holding it open while Captain Sile examined its contents.

There was a pipe inside, made of white material. Beside it lay a folded chart and a set of little metal rods, the sort you could use to measure the pitch of a bell.

Sile lifted the pipe by its end. ‘Take this to the central tower,’ he told the officer. ‘And find out who else was working up here this morning.’

I walked past them before he looked up.

In the storeroom, Ivo was sitting on the bed with his bad boot on his lap. He had been attempting to repair its sole with a length of wire. Dema was standing over him with a pair of scissors.

‘Guess what,’ she said when I came in. ‘Our man from above can’t sew.’

‘I’m quite good with a sail,’ Ivo said.

I shut the door.

‘They’ve found your bag.’

The boot slid off his lap.

‘Where?’

‘In the yard. They’re taking it to Ossana.’

He looked at the door, then at the knife beside him. Dema took the knife before he could reach it.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ she said.

He looked much worse than he had that morning. The colour had gone out of his face, and I could see the little muscles working beside his mouth.

‘What was in it?’ I asked.

‘Something they can’t have.’

‘Well, they have it.’

He ran both hands through his hair. It was dark and damp, curling a little around his ears, and in spite of everything that had happened that morning I found myself noticing the shape of his shoulders beneath his shirt.

‘Is there a way out of this room that doesn’t involve the yard?’ he asked.

I could have shown him the little door at the bottom of the maintenance stair. It led into the passage beneath the tower and from there into the fish market. I’d used it a dozen times when I didn’t want to walk past the watch in a dirty coat. Instead, I thought of Tibby’s arm, and of the rods in his bag.

‘No.’

His eyes came back to my face.

I took the roll from my pocket and put it on the shelf beside him. ‘Eat something. I’ll find out what they’re doing with it.’

He didn’t touch the roll until I was at the door.

‘Sella,’ Dema called. ‘Where are you going?’

‘To get my key.’

Ivo was watching me again. There was nothing remotely grateful in his expression.

CHAPTER 4

A room of my own

The climb out of the basin took nearly an hour. There was a queue at the terrace steps, composed mostly of people carrying belongings which had been salvaged from the eastern streets. I had expected to walk straight through with my service badge, but the woman in front of me had a little girl asleep on her shoulder and I couldn't bring myself to ask her to move. We stood there for a quarter of an hour while a guard tried to convince an elderly gentleman that a pair of canaries did not count as dependants.

When I finally reached the high terraces, the sea thinned to a dark band at the edge of the sky and, for the first time that day, sunlight struck my face. The houses there had red roofs. Real red, not the muddy brown that everything became beneath the water. An old vine grew over the gate of a house on the corner, and bees had gathered in its little white flowers. I stopped to watch them. There were bees in the basin, too, but ours lived in the walls of the eastern glassworks and had a tendency to sting you if you came out smelling of sugar.

The landlady, Mistress Vei, was sitting on her front step with a basket of mending. She had put on a straw hat, evidently in honour of the sun.

'You look as though you've been in a fight,' she said.

'I haven't.'

'Pity. I'd have enjoyed that.'

She brought me through the side door and up the little staircase which led to the rooms. It was the fourth time I'd been to see them. By now I knew where every board creaked, where the plaster was coming away from the wall, and how far the window opened before the catch struck the sill.

Dema and I had found the rooms in spring. She was getting married in six weeks and had been insufferable about the prospect of leaving our shared lodgings. Etti had been quietly teaching her to cook in the hope that one of them would survive domestic life.

‘You’ve a perfectly good room here,’ she’d said when I’d complained about the price.

‘With you eating the crusts off my bread.’

‘You can learn to like crusts.’

I could afford the rooms alone. Or I would be able to, once Ossana made me chief eastern tuner. Mistress Vei had even agreed to let me keep a dog, if I found one small enough.

The key lay in a little dish on the windowsill. I picked it up and walked through the empty rooms, imagining a table under the window, somewhere to put my boots, a whole shelf for my tools. The wall behind the kitchen was cracked. I knew a plasterer. There would be books, perhaps, and a chair nobody sat in with a wet coat.

I was so pleased with the prospect that I stood smiling at a bare wall like an idiot.

‘Well?’ Mistress Vei asked.

‘I should have my contract this evening.’

‘The agent wants the rest of the deposit by Friday.’

‘I can get it.’

She looked at the key in my hand. ‘I’ve had two families asking this morning. One’s got six children. I can’t put six children up there. The poor floor wouldn’t know what had hit it.’

I put the key back in the dish. ‘Do you want me to give them up?’

‘No. You’ve paid for first refusal and I like you. But I need the money, love. That wall downstairs isn’t going to mend itself.’

We went back to the kitchen. Through the window I could see an apple tree in her garden with three little apples hanging from it. I had never lived anywhere with a fruit tree. When I was a girl, my mother used to put an apple in my school bag on the days she had enough money to buy one. I would eat it in tiny bites, taking a ridiculous amount of pride in the way I could make it last until the afternoon.

‘Do you get much fruit off that?’ I asked.

‘When the birds don’t.’

Mistress Vei took a knife from the kitchen drawer and cut one of the apples on her table in two. She pushed half across to me.

‘There. Don’t tell the agent. He says they’re included in the rent.’

The apple tasted a little sour, but it smelled wonderful. The scent was still on my fingers when the eastern bell faltered.

From this distance it sounded almost beautiful, a deep note winding through the streets. Mistress Vei closed her eyes.

‘Always makes me think of my husband,’ she said. ‘He used to hum when he came home.’

I looked down into the basin. A fine grey mist drifted below the eastern tower. Already, people were opening their doors again.

‘Do the bells ever frighten you?’

‘Only when they’re quiet, love.’

On the mantelpiece beside the clock stood an old handbell, the kind people had used to warn their neighbours of a leak before the tower flags were introduced. Its handle was wrapped in red wool.

My mother had owned one just like it. She'd rung it the night the water came through our ceiling, and I remembered being furious with her because she'd woken me when I had an examination the following morning. I'd taken my books with me when we left the house. I don't know why I still remember that. Perhaps because I would have given anything, afterwards, to have left them where they were.

At the bottom of our stairwell, the water had caught my foot between two railings and broken my ankle. My mother went back down to get me. I remembered her pulling at my leg, telling me to stop screaming so she could think, and the way the water lifted suddenly when the bell recovered. The force tore her away from the railing. By the time Ossana came down the steps, there was only me.

For months afterwards, I'd made a horrible nuisance of myself at the bell service, asking to see the gauges, wanting to understand precisely what had happened. A keeper had finally shown me the defective wedge. It was no bigger than a piece of soap. A whole life had gone because someone hadn't changed it in time.

I had become exceptionally good at changing wedges.

Mistress Vei was watching me.

'Shall I keep the rooms for you until Friday?'

'Please.'

I had almost reached the lower steps when she called after me.

'A house isn't much good if you spend all your time working somewhere else, love.'

I waved to show I'd heard her. I had every intention of proving her wrong.

* * *

At the central tower that evening, there were six apprentices lined up along the wall outside the warden's office. They'd all been brought in to take their first service oaths, which appeared to involve an unnecessary amount of washing. One boy had scrubbed the skin on his knuckles until it was red, and was trying to keep his sister from putting a finger in his eye to remove a piece of fluff.

I remembered standing in the same corridor nine years earlier, in a second-hand coat with sleeves that came halfway down my fingers. The first person to speak to me had been Dema. She'd asked if I'd got any money for a pie.

I hadn't. She'd bought two pies and eaten most of mine.

'Miss Arven?'

A clerk in a grey dress waved me into the office. On the table lay my contract, with a little blue ribbon tied round the folded paper. Beside it was a new coat with a row of copper buttons. The old service buttons were brass, which tarnished if you worked too long beneath a leaking shaft. The chief tuners wore copper. I had wanted those buttons so badly that I was rather embarrassed by the intensity of my feelings when I finally saw them.

Ossana was at her desk, arguing with Captain Sile about the cost of something. When she saw me she sent him outside.

'Sit down. How's your ankle?'

'All right.'

'You ought to have it looked at again.'

'It hasn't been broken for eleven years.'

‘And yet you still insist on climbing ladders on it.’

She looked almost amused. It had been a long time since she had spoken to me about anything except the eastern bell, and I remembered sitting in her kitchen after the funeral, when she had tried to persuade me to eat an egg. There’d been no ceremony about her kindness. She’d carried me upstairs and put me in her spare room for a week, and when I had been ready to leave, she had found me a place in the apprenticeship queue.

I wished the stranger had fallen on somebody else’s tower.

‘You said my contract was ready.’

‘It is.’

She signed it without reading it. Ossana had always been capable of doing three things at once, and while she signed, she listened to a report from the clerk about water damage and directed a man with an armful of new tuning wedges towards the lift.

The wedges caught my eye. They were pale, veined with the same strange blue as the piece in Ivo’s coat.

‘Where are these made?’ I asked.

Ossana finished her signature.

‘Below.’

‘What are they made of?’

The clerk stopped talking. Ossana looked at her, and the woman gathered up the papers and left us alone.

‘Have you spoken to Belo?’ Ossana asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Then you know he thinks we should go back to making them out of bronze.’

‘Why don’t we?’

She went to the window. The central bell hung outside it, a monstrous cup of bronze suspended between stone piers. Every street in Nareth had been laid out in relation to its note. From here, the sea appeared close enough to reach with a ladder.

‘Sella, thirty-eight years ago there was nowhere for these people to go. The old river broke its banks. It took the lower villages and everything in the basin. My son was three.’

I had heard parts of this story before, though never about her son.

‘We saved what we could. The bells are the reason Nareth exists.’

‘I’m not asking why we have them.’

Ossana put both hands on the sill. ‘What did the man tell you?’

The silence between us lasted a little too long.

‘You don’t have to protect him,’ she said. ‘He would kill everyone in your district without a moment’s hesitation.’

I owed her nearly everything I had. That made it difficult to ask the next question.

‘You haven’t met him.’

‘You think he’s the first?’

I was about to ask what she meant when she opened a drawer in her desk and took out Ivo’s bag. It had been emptied. She held it by the handle, where a name had been written in faded black ink.

‘Serrat,’ she read. ‘Do you know that name?’

‘No.’

‘His father came here twenty-one years ago with a petition. I saw him. We agreed to let some of his people into the city, provided they obeyed the service restrictions. He returned with a dozen men and tried to bring down the western bell.’

‘What happened to him?’

‘He was killed.’

The room was very quiet apart from the note of the bell. I looked at the bag.

‘Why did he want to bring it down?’

Ossana folded it and put it away.

‘People don’t need much of a reason to resent a city which has things they don’t. They see our fields and our houses, and they think we stole them.’

‘Did we?’

The question came out before I had quite decided to ask it.

Ossana turned. For the first time since I had known her, I saw something in her face that I could only describe as fear. She went back to the desk and untied the ribbon on my contract.

‘You’re very good at your work. I’d like you to keep doing it.’ She slid the contract across the table. ‘Sign it, go back to the east and let me deal with the man who came down. If anyone asks you about the lower workings, send them to me. You needn’t lose your rooms over this.’

‘Then tell me what they’re made of.’

The lift behind us gave a gentle clang. Two men emerged carrying a box which seemed to be leaking. Its contents shifted with a wet scraping sound.

One of them noticed me and covered the opening.

Too late. I had seen what was inside: a strip of white cartilage, blue veins pulsing beneath the surface. A length of it had been cut into neat sections, all the width of my thumb.

‘Where do you get that?’

Ossana put the contract into my hand. ‘Go home.’

I had spent years wanting that piece of paper. I signed it and folded it once, very carefully, so that the salary and the two signatures were on the inside. The men carried the box to the lift. There was a wet noise from it just as the doors closed.

I could have put the contract back on her desk. I didn’t.

Outside, the apprentices were being given their little copper handbells. The boy with red knuckles rang his accidentally and grinned at me as though I ought to be delighted for him.

I managed a smile. On the stairs I put the contract in my inside pocket, where it couldn’t get wet.

CHAPTER 5

Below the streets

When I returned to the eastern tower, Ivo was gone.

Dema had a split lip and a large bruise forming on her cheek. She was sitting on the stair, swearing at a bucket.

‘Where is he?’

‘You’re going to love this.’

‘Dema.’

‘He stole my keys. Went down the lower shaft. Two of Ossana’s men came looking for him, so I told them I hadn’t seen anyone, which they didn’t appreciate.’

‘They hit you?’

‘One did. The other one’s nursing a broken finger.’

I crouched beside her. ‘Let me see.’

‘It’s fine. Your face is doing that thing.’

‘What thing?’

‘That thing where you decide how to solve my entire life without asking me.’ She pushed my hand away. ‘Go and get the bastard before they hang him.’

I fetched a clean cloth from the storeroom and dipped it in the bucket. Dema accepted it after I threatened to have Mara sent for. The fish had gone very still in the grease jar. I lifted the lid to make sure it was alive and found it hanging sideways just below the surface, its little gills opening and closing.

‘It won’t last long in that,’ Dema said.

‘It’s got water.’

‘It had an entire sea this morning.’

I put the lid back on. The storeroom looked as though someone had gone through it in a bad temper. The spare blankets were on the floor and one of the grease jars had been opened. The new wedges in the wall cupboard were gone.

‘Did Ivo take those as well?’

‘The watch did. Apparently they’re evidence now.’

‘Of what?’

‘They didn’t say.’

Dema got up and followed me to the maintenance door. She had locked it from the outside with the key on her spare ring, but the lock was an old one and the iron around it had begun to rust. Ivo had managed to persuade the upper catch out of its housing with a length of metal he’d taken from the tool shelf.

‘Did you show him how to get down?’

‘He’d been listening to you all morning. He knew there was a way into the shaft from the cupboard.’

He’d known where to go. While I’d been at Mistress Vei’s, walking about my empty rooms like a fool, he’d been finding a way into the lower shaft. I was particularly angry about Dema’s keys. He hadn’t needed to make her like him in order to steal them, and yet he had.

‘I’ll have to take the west passage,’ I said.

‘Are you actually going after him?’

I looked at the bruising on her cheek. ‘I’ll be back before the end of the shift.’

‘That isn’t what I asked.’

‘I want to see what’s down there.’

Dema made no attempt to hide her surprise. She had spent the afternoon with a man who'd given us a choice of either believing something appalling or believing he was mad, and so far she seemed to have chosen the latter. I couldn't tell her about the box at the central tower without telling her why I'd brought it to mind.

'I'm not going to tell Ossana,' I added.

'Oh, Sel.' She looked tired suddenly. 'Have you got any idea what you're doing?'

'No.'

'Good. I was worried you might be having one of your sensible ideas.'

She took the lamp from the hook beside the door, checked that it had oil and gave it to me. Before I left, I made her promise to go to the glass yard. There was no point in her staying at the tower now that the watch had taken the spare wedges.

'Etti's waiting,' I told her.

She smiled in spite of the lip. 'She's going to kill me.'

I didn't say what I was thinking, which was that Etti would probably cry first.

* * *

Belo had shown us the first of the lower passages in training. Everything beyond the painted line was supposed to be unsafe. As children we'd been told that the dead still lived down there; as apprentices we were told that we might bring down a street by stepping in the wrong place. I wasn't sure which version had kept us out more effectively.

Belo had taken me into the first section once, to replace a pair of copper sleeves around the main cable. I remembered him turning the lamp towards a painted line on the floor and telling me not to cross it. I'd asked what was beyond it. He had said nothing of

interest to a person with a perfectly good job waiting for her on the other side of the line.

Now I found the iron grille open and went through with the lamp and a spanner.

The passage sloped towards the centre of the basin. At intervals, water dripped from the stone and went straight back up before it touched the floor. I had to duck beneath a stream that ran along the ceiling. There was a point where the walls changed from newly cut rock to little square blocks of masonry, and beyond that point the passage had the remains of doorways in it. The service cables went through them, held in place with clamps.

I passed a doorway with a number carved in its lintel. Twelve. A house, then. There had been a street down here before the towers. On the other side of the opening, a stair went into darkness. A broken wooden handrail remained attached to the wall.

Something in that little ruin bothered me. Not the fact that it was underground; I'd known the basin had been raised after the first flood. It was the sight of the handrail, with its polished curve where somebody's hand must have passed over it for years. I had a similar rail in the stairwell where my mother and I used to live. I'd slid down it whenever she wasn't watching.

The cable beside the doorway tightened. A low note travelled along it, and a clump of dirt fell from the ceiling onto my sleeve.

I hurried on.

At the junction of two passages, I found a mark in the dust where someone had dragged a foot. It led towards a set of stone steps. I followed it as far as an open door, through which a much warmer light fell. Voices were coming from the room beyond.

'Put the new one beside the collar,' a man said. 'No, the large one.'

I raised my lamp, extinguished it again and crouched behind the doorframe.

Two keepers were moving a crate along a set of tracks in the floor. Neither wore the ordinary blue service cord. Their coats were grey, with black collars, and both had the same narrow copper tool attached to their belts. I'd seen that tool in the central workshop, though never in use. Belo had told me it was a kind of chisel.

As the men approached the far end of the room, one of them turned the crate round. I saw an iron cage beneath the wooden lid, and behind the bars something pale moved.

It was a fin. A fin no larger than my hand, with the same blue veins I'd seen in the tuning wedges.

The man at the front of the crate swore.

'It's going again.'

His companion leaned over to look.

'Get the physician.'

'He won't be here for another hour.'

'Well, I'm not sticking my hand in there.'

Something struck the lid from inside. Both men jumped back. The first one picked up his copper chisel and hit the side of the crate. There was a sound that made me put a hand against the wall. A high, thin cry, like the note of a little bell when the lip was damaged.

I backed away from the doorway.

Someone caught me round the middle.

I swung the spanner. The man behind me ducked, swore and clamped his hand over my mouth.

‘It’s me.’

Ivo. I pushed his hand away, and for a moment I couldn’t decide which of us I was angrier with.

‘You’ve got a lot of nerve.’

‘Yes.’

‘Dema’s been hit.’

He went still. ‘What?’

‘The watch came in looking for you.’

‘Is she hurt?’

‘She’s got a bruise the size of my fist.’

His gaze moved towards the open door. ‘I thought they’d go straight to the roof.’

‘Oh, did you?’

‘I’m sorry.’

I would have enjoyed arguing with him, but the men in the room had begun to move towards us. Ivo took my lamp and drew me behind the wall. In the dark I could hear him breathing through his teeth.

The keepers passed within a yard of us. One was complaining about his supper. The other said he ought to have eaten it before the watch brought them another job.

When their footsteps faded, I pulled away.

‘What was in that crate?’

‘A piece of her, probably. They take the living parts out first. They’re more responsive that way.’

I stared at him. ‘A piece of who?’

Instead of answering, he went back to the room and looked at the cage. I followed. The wooden lid was fastened with two clasps. Ivo opened one of them, and a smell of salt and something sour came out of the crate.

The cage inside contained a creature the length of my arm. It lay on damp cloth, pale and naked, with fins drawn in close to its body. A split ran the length of its back, where part of the ridge had been cut away. When Ivo reached through the bars, the creature turned its head towards his fingers.

‘Oh, little one,’ he said.

It was breathing much too fast.

‘Is it a fish?’ I asked.

‘A young tideback. Must have been taken from the nursery along the northern shelf.’

He crouched beside the crate. I watched him move his finger along the creature’s jaw, not quite touching it. Its fin opened a fraction.

‘Can we get it out?’

‘Where would you put it?’

I looked around the room. The only water I could see was the shallow pool collecting beneath the pipes.

When the other clasp wouldn’t open either, Ivo slipped his knife under it. I saw him flinch as he pulled the blade away.

‘Give it here.’

He handed it to me without a word. I levered the clasp up, then took the lid off. We lifted the cage onto the floor. The little creature gave a strange, breathless sound and tried to raise its head.

‘There’s a pool in the next chamber,’ I said. ‘I passed the old cistern on the way down.’

He shook his head. ‘Not connected to the sea. If we take her there, she’ll die anyway.’

I looked at the cage. ‘So we leave her?’

He closed his eyes.

For a while neither of us moved. Then the creature stopped struggling. Its fins folded beneath it and its mouth opened. Ivo put his hand through the bars. He spoke a few words I didn’t understand, very quietly, and kept his fingers against its jaw until it had ceased moving altogether.

I had wanted to ask for Dema’s keys since he’d caught me in the passage. When he withdrew his hand from the cage, I couldn’t do it. He folded the cloth over the little creature before he put the lid on.

‘We need to go,’ I told him.

He put the lid back over the cage. ‘Yes.’

There was blood on his shirt again. I took his arm and made him lean against the wall while I checked the bandage. The cloth was sodden along one edge, though the wound didn’t seem to have opened very far.

‘This is going to need stitches.’

‘I’ve had worse.’

‘I’m sure you’re very proud.’

He smiled a little, but it faded almost immediately. ‘Sella. There’s something I need you to see before you go back up.’

‘You’ve just shown me something.’

‘No. This is why I came.’

We left the room by a low door at its rear. On the far side, the cable split into three smaller strands, each of which went through a separate hole in the floor. Ivo followed the middle one until we reached an iron barrier. Someone had already forced the latch.

‘You?’ I asked.

‘No.’

He held the lamp higher. Beyond the barrier, three wet footprints led down the stairs. There was a dark smear beside one of them.

From below came a sound like the eastern bell just before it cracked.

Ivo handed me the lamp.

‘Don’t shout,’ he said.

I stepped through the barrier.

CHAPTER 6

The long swimmer

The chamber at the bottom of the stairs was so large that my lamp could not reach its far wall. Three shafts led from the ceiling towards the bells. The air smelled of wet iron and fish, and there was an extraordinary warmth to it, the sort of warmth you felt standing close to a horse on a winter morning.

At first I took the pale mass in the centre for a wall. Then a great black eye opened in it.

The lamp slipped in my hand.

A creature lay in a pool beneath the three shafts, so large that I could see only its head and the nearest curve of its body. White ridges rose along its back like the ribs of a wrecked ship. Thick metal yokes pinned its fins to the stone. Where cables ran from those yokes into the shafts, the flesh had grown over the metal in swollen, discoloured folds.

The eye moved towards us.

A tremor passed through the creature. The cables vibrated, and in the distance the city’s bells answered. I must have brought the lamp a little closer, because a second sound came out of her, high at the beginning and falling away so softly I nearly missed it. This time nothing pulled on the cables. I knew the first sound from the tower. No one had ever let me hear the second.

I pressed myself against the rock.

‘What is it?’

‘A tideback. She should have been out at the western sea twenty years ago, with the rest of her kind.’