

Hold Fast

An original novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Quit-Picker

The tenement had fallen in the night, and by dawn it was already going quiet.

Isla Venn came down the ladder-street with her hook over her shoulder and heard the silence before she saw the wreck. Osmark hummed. It always hummed — ten thousand kept promises strung tier over tier, a low warm chord you were born inside and stopped hearing the way you stopped hearing your own heart. But where a span went down, the humming stopped. The dead do not keep their word. They cannot. Their cords go grey and cold and dumb, and the quiet they leave behind is the truest map of a disaster there is.

She followed the quiet along the swaying planks of Lowspan until it opened in front of her: a slung tenement, forty families' worth of rope-and-shutter dwelling, peeled off the underside of the Tallow Bridge and hanging now by three cables where there should have been thirty. It had folded when it fell, the way a wet sleeve folds, and it swung a little in the updraft with a sound like a slow breath. Below it there was nothing. There was never anything below. Only the Underbreath, the fog that filled the Sile from lip to unguessable floor, moving now in the cold, lifting a smell of iron and old rope out of the dark.

"Don't lean on the rail," Isla said, without turning around.

Behind her, Coll stopped leaning on the rail. He was fifteen and built like a promise that hadn't been kept yet — all length, no width, hands he tripped over. He had his own hook, which he carried the wrong way, and a face that couldn't hold still.

"Forty homes," he said. "You'd think they'd hear a thing that size coming."

"They heard it." She crouched at the broken lip of the walk, where the planking had splintered and a single cable, sheared, curled up grey and dead. "The ones who could pay to move, moved. The ones who couldn't stayed and hoped. That's what the Underhang is. A place to hope from."

She set her hand flat on the dead cable. Quit-cord. Cold as a stone that had never seen the sun, and silent — not the silence of a thing at rest but the specific absence of a thing that had, until recently, been alive. This cable had been a bond once: some woman's promise to pay her rent, some man's word to mind another's child, a marriage, a debt, an apprenticeship. When the people who made those promises went into the fog, the promises died with them and went quit. Now it was only material. Now it was hers to take.

"We work fast," she said, "we work quiet, and we're gone before the Knotwrights send anyone to appraise the loss. Understand?"

"We're stealing."

"We're picking. There's no one left to steal from." She fit her hook under the grey coil and drew her knife — the small honest one, the working one, not the other — and began to cut lengths. "Quit belongs to whoever hauls it up. That's the one law down here nobody argues."

Coll crouched beside her and got to work, and for a while the only sounds were the wet complaint of the wreck swinging and the scrape of their knives and, far off and everywhere, the city keeping its word.

He worked well when he stopped talking, which was seldom. He was cord-sensitive, the boy — could see the live ones, the way they

ran person to person and tier to tier, gold where they were strong and fraying pale where they weren't. It made him good at this. He could tell live cord from quit at a glance, could see where a dead line still held a knot worth prising loose. It also made him look at her too much, and she knew why, and she let him, because to tell him to stop looking would be to admit there was something to see.

"You've got another quit-thread on you," he said. He said it lightly, but he watched her hands when he said it. "Here. At your wrist. Since yesterday."

Isla did not look at her wrist. "It's nothing."

"It's grey. It goes to nobody. You've got —" He stopped himself, and then, because he was fifteen and could not not, went on. "You've got no live ones at all. Not one. I've never seen anybody with none. Even Onil's got forty. Even that." He nodded at the wreck, at all its dead. "They had hundreds, before."

"And look how it held them up," Isla said.

That closed his mouth for a moment. She was sorry for it and did not show that either.

The truth was the thing he'd seen and could not name: she wore no cords. A grown woman in Osmark walked the city dragging a whole life of the stuff — every debt and promise and love a bright filament running off her into the crowd, so that a cord-sensitive looking down from Highspan saw the tiers webbed together like frost on a window. Isla went through that web trailing nothing. She made no promises. She kept no one's. It was the great discipline of her life and it had cost her the way all disciplines cost, and there was a boy beside her now who was, though neither of them had ever said the word, the nearest she had come in twenty years to breaking it. She had never tied the apprentice-cord to him. Two winters he'd slept by her stove and eaten from her hand, and she had never once made it a promise. He knew. That grey thread at her wrist went to nobody because she had let it go nowhere. He looked at it the way a hungry person looks at a shuttered shop.

“Someone’s coming up the low walk,” Coll said.

She heard it then — the tread, careful, on planks that told you everything about a person by how they trusted them. This person did not trust them at all. A creeping, edge-of-the-board tread. A landsman’s tread, or a frightened one.

The man came out of the grey morning holding to the guide-rope with both hands, and Isla knew what he was before he was close enough to speak, because she could see the one thing on him that mattered. Most of his cords were ordinary — a wife, a child, a landlord, the small business of being alive. But one of them was wrong. It ran from a heavy iron collar at his chest, and it was barbed: hooked all down its length like a fish-spine, the mark of a cord made under coercion. A debt-oath. A cord-lord’s indenture, sworn because the alternative was worse, and now sunk into him past any hope of paying out. It did not hum. It whined, faint and constant, the sound of a promise being kept by a man who would give anything not to keep it.

“You’re the picker,” he said. “The mender. They said — the mender on Lowspan, they said you can — “ His eyes went to Coll and back. “They said what you can do.”

“They say a lot on Lowspan,” Isla said. “I mend cord. I pick quit. That’s the whole of it.” She turned back to the wreck.

“Please.” The word came out of him with no dignity left in it at all, which was how she knew he was in earnest. “It’s killing me. Not — not fast. Slow. I signed for grain in the bad winter, for my daughter, and they’ve turned it and turned it and now I owe nine years and the interest is a year a year, I’ll never — I feel it pull when I breathe. I can’t breathe past it anymore. I heard you can cut a man free.”

“Cutting’s a hanging crime,” Coll said, too quick, because he was afraid — not of the man, but for her. “And it’d kill you. You cut a live cord, it recoils, it takes the cutter’s heart out through his back. Everybody knows that.”

“Not everybody.” The man’s ruined eyes stayed on Isla. “There’s the other kind. The kind that can hold it. I heard there’s one on Lowspan.”

Isla straightened. She let the silence go on long enough to be an answer.

“I can’t help you,” she said. “I’m sorry. Go to the Knotwrights’ Hall and beg a remittance like an honest man. Come away from the rail; that plank’s rotten.”

He came away from the rail. He stood there a moment with his hands empty and his barbed cord whining in the cold, and then he nodded, the way people nod when they have used up their last idea, and he turned and started back along the low walk with that same creeping, trustless tread.

Isla watched him go. She went back to the wreck and fit her hook under the grey coil and did not cut it, because her hand had stopped working. She could hear the cord whining even now, thin under the city’s hum, the specific note of a man being slowly killed by his own kept word.

“Isla,” Coll said. “Isla, don’t.”

“Stay here,” she said. “Pick. If a Knotwright comes, you never saw me.”

“Isla —”

“Pick, Coll.”

She caught the man at the throat of an alley where two tenements leaned together and the walkway narrowed to a single plank slung over the dark. It was a bad place and a good one — bad to stand over, good for privacy, because no one lingered above the Underbreath who did not have to. He turned when he heard her, and hope came up in his face so raw she had to look away from it.

“Hold the ropes,” she said. “Both hands. Whatever you feel, don’t let go, or you’ll go down. Do you understand me? This will not feel like being saved.”

He gripped the ropes. She drew the other knife.

It did not look like a knife. It looked like a coil of pale cord wound tight to a folded edge, greyish, wrong in the eye — a thing that was somehow cold and warm at once, that hummed and was silent at once, so that even Coll flinched when she took it out. It had been her mother's. It was turned cord, the only substance in the world that could cut a living promise without the promise killing you back, and there was perhaps a handful of it in all of Osmark, and the making of it was a thing she did not let herself think about, because thinking about it led to the night her mother died.

Isla set the edge against the barbed cord and did not cut. First she opened herself. That was the part no one could teach and no one could bear to watch — the sever's whole art, which was not cutting but catching. She reached into herself and found the place the recoil would go, and she made it ready, the way you brace before you take a great weight, except that the weight would be paid not in muscle but in some piece of her she would not get to choose.

"Now don't move," she said, and cut.

The barbed cord parted, and its two hundred pounds of stored coercion came off the man and went for a heart to stop. It found hers waiting. She had known it would; she had offered it. The recoil went into her like cold water poured down the inside of her skull, and she rode it the way she'd learned to ride it, redirecting, absorbing, letting it burn through her and out — and it took its price on the way, the way it always did, reaching into her and closing its hand around something and pulling it out by the root.

She felt it go. She always felt what went, in the instant it went, which was the cruelty of it: you got to say goodbye and never got to keep the goodbye.

Her mother's hair. The smell of it. Warm and a little of woodsmoke and a little of the tallow-soap they'd used in the Underhang, the smell of being small and safe with her face pressed into it. She reached for it as it left — reached the way you reach for a cup going off a table — and it went through her fingers and was gone,

and where it had been there was a smooth blank nothing, a shape with no thing inside it. She would know, forever after, that her mother's hair had had a smell. She would never again know what it was.

The man made a sound she had heard before and would hear again — the sound of a body that had braced against a weight for years and felt the weight, all at once, lift. He sagged against the ropes and wept without any shame at all, and the two grey ends of the cut cord hung from him and from the dark, already going quit, already cooling, already only material.

"It's done," Isla said. Her voice came from far off. The alley tilted and steadied. "You owe no one now. Get off Lowspan before someone reads you and wonders why. Don't thank me. Don't ever say my name."

He didn't thank her. He did something worse: he looked at her the way you look at something holy, and she turned from it and walked, because she had cut a man free and she could not remember the smell of her own mother's hair, and both of those things were true and neither would ever now be otherwise.

She was three spans along and back among the sound of the living city before she let herself feel her hands shake.

It was there, at the mouth of the Tallow stair where Lowspan handed you up toward the markets, that she felt the eye on her. She knew the weight of a watching eye the way she knew rotten plank. She looked up.

A Knotwright stood at the head of the stair in the guild's grey and brass, a reader's glass on a chain at his breast, and he was looking at her with the particular stillness of a man whose whole trade was seeing what was tied to what. His glass would show him the tiers webbed in gold. It would show him every soul on the stair dragging its bright life behind it.

And it would show him her: a woman walking up out of Lowspan trailing nothing at all, no live cord to any person in the world — and,

at her wrist, one fresh grey thread, cooling, the unmistakable cut-end of a cord that had been severed not an hour past.

He did not call out. He did not need to. He only watched her pass, and lifted the glass to his eye, and Isla felt herself be seen and known and filed, and she went up into the crowd and the noise with her face giving nothing and her heart going like a cut cable, and behind her the city hummed on, keeping every promise but the ones that mattered.

CHAPTER TWO

The Sound Below

Onil Sump kept his nook in the underthroat of the Midspan market, in the angle where two great bridges met and a person could set up a stall in the shelter of the joint and be rained on by the whole city's business without ever being seen doing his own. He was a big man gone soft, with a fringe of white hair around a bald brown crown and three fingers missing off his left hand — two to a bad haul in his picking days, one, he claimed, to a woman in Highspan, though the story changed each telling. When Isla ducked under his awning he was weighing quit-cord on a brass balance and haggling with a rope-maker, and he did not stop haggling, but his good hand found a stool and pushed it out toward her without his eyes leaving the scale.

“Sit,” he said. “You look like a dropped span.”

“I’m well.”

“You look well the way weather looks well.” He tipped the last of the grey coil onto the maker's side of the balance, took the coins, and sent the man off with a benediction of insults. Then he turned the full warm weight of his attention on her, and she felt, as she always did, the pull of him — not a cord, he'd never trapped her into one, but the plain gravity of a person who had decided long ago to be glad of you and never reconsidered. “Where's the boy?”

“Selling this morning’s pick at the low market. I sent him the long way.” She set her own bundle on the counter. “That’s yours if you want it. I don’t want to carry it up.”

Onil looked at the bundle, then at her, and his face did a thing she didn’t like — went careful. He had heard, then. He heard everything; it was his trade and his nature. “There was a man on Lowspan this dawn,” he said, mild, “walking around free as a bird with two cut ends on him and no notion to keep his mouth shut about the angel that did it. By noon it’ll be a story. By tomorrow it’ll be a story with your shape in it, if you’re not careful, and you’re never careful, that’s the whole trouble with you.” He leaned close. His voice dropped under the market’s noise. “You said you’d stopped. You told me. After the last one you swore you’d stopped.”

“I didn’t swear anything.” It came out sharper than she meant. “I never swear anything. You know that better than anyone.”

“I do know it.” He held her eye. There was old grief in his, familiar as a coat. “I’m the man you never swore it to. I’ve had thirty years of your never-swearing. I know exactly what it’s worth, which is everything, which is why it’d be a shame to see you hang for a stranger’s nine years of grain.” He straightened. Let it go, the way he always let it go, being wiser than his own worry. “What did it take this time?”

She didn’t answer. He nodded slowly, as if she had.

“One of these days,” he said, “it’s going to take something you need to walk home with. And you’ll cut some poor soul free and forget where you live, and I’ll have to come round the whole of Lowspan calling your name like a lost dog.” He said it gently. It was the nearest either of them ever came to saying the real thing, which was that he was frightened for her all the time, and had been for thirty years, and would be until one of them fell.

“You’d find me,” Isla said.

“I’d find you.” He said it like a vow and it wasn’t one, and they both let it not be one, and that was the shape of the only love she allowed herself: everything meant, nothing tied.

She stayed an hour. It was the closest she came to rest. Coll turned up midway with the morning’s coin and a grievance, as he generally did, and the grievance today was the old one, worn smooth by handling.

“Barrow the tanner’s boy got his journey-cord this week,” Coll said, to the awning, to the air, to anyone but her. “He’s a season younger than me and he can’t read a knot to save his life and he’s a journeyman and I’m — I’m nothing. I’m a boy who follows a picker around. Because you won’t tie the cord, so the Hall won’t register me, so I’m nothing on paper, I’m nobody’s apprentice, I’m just — “ He ran out. His ears were red.

“You’re alive on no paper,” Isla said. “There are worse things to be than nobody’s.”

“That’s what you always say. That’s what people say when they’ve decided a thing for you.” He looked at her, and for a moment there was something in his young face older than his years and harder than she wanted it to be. “You could tie it and it’d cost you nothing. One cord. Me to you. That’s all a body has to do to say I’ll teach you and I’ll not leave you. Everybody in the whole city can do it. You cut a man’s chains off this morning and you can’t do the one thing that a — that a family does.” The word cost him. He’d never used it before. “I felt you come back this morning with a hole in you. I always feel it. And you’d rather have the holes than have me on paper.”

The market roared softly around them. Onil had found something very absorbing to do with his balance.

“When you’re a wright in your own right,” Isla said, at last, evenly, “you’ll thank me that you were never tied to a hanged woman. Take your coin to the guild-clerk and pay the reading-fee. I’ll get you registered without the apprentice-cord. There are ways. I’ve been finding ways my whole life.”

It was not what he'd asked for. He knew it and she knew it. He took the coin.

She went up onto the Concord Bridge because she needed the air and the height, and because it was the one place in Osmark she went to be reminded why she did what she did.

It was the oldest bridge and the widest, the Trueknot the old people still called it, its two great cables thick as a man is tall and woven all through with the civic oath-cord of the Great Concord, so that walking it you walked inside the loudest kept promise in the world — two hundred years of a whole city's word not to let each other fall, humming up through the boards and into the soles of your feet until your own teeth seemed to sing with it. Over the head-gate at the Highspan end, two words were carved and worn to a shine by two centuries of hands reaching up to touch them for luck: HOLD FAST. She had touched them herself, as a child, before she understood that a promise was a thing that could kill you.

She stood at the mid-span rail where the drop was greatest and the Underbreath came up cold, and she breathed, and she listened to the city keep its word.

And then, under it, she heard the other thing.

It came on an updraft out of the Sile — a slow warm gust lifting the fog-smell and the void-cold together — and it carried, for just the length of that breath, a sound beneath the sound. Below the bright civic hum, below all the ten thousand promises, there was another note, so low it was less a sound than a pressure, a great slow throb like something enormous and far down drawing breath and letting it go. In. Held. Out. She had never heard it before. She stood absolutely still and strained after it, and the updraft died, and the fog sank back, and it was gone, buried again under the ordinary hum, and she could not be sure she had heard it at all.

Isla did not startle easily and this had startled her to the bone. She looked around the bridge. A hundred people crossed it — porters, clerks, a Highspan woman under a parasol, a knot of children daring

each other toward the rail. Not one of them had heard a thing. The bridge hummed. The city hummed. She was the only creature on the Concord Bridge who had, for one breath, heard something breathing under the world.

“You feel the drop, up here.” A voice at her shoulder, pitched to be pleasant. “Some people can’t stand it. I find it clears the head.”

The woman had come up beside her at the rail without Isla marking it, which by itself said a great deal. She was well made — a good coat, gloves, the soft boots of someone who did not walk on rope for a living — but the coat was a season out of fashion in a way that Highspan never was, and when she set her gloved hand on the rail she set it down the way you set down a hand that has known a working rope, checking the line without meaning to. Money on her, Isla thought, but the money smelled borrowed. Her cords told the rest: cut back, most of them, trimmed close, the way people trimmed their lives who did not want to be traced through them. Careful cords. Underhang caution wearing a Highspan coat.

“I don’t feel much,” Isla said, and made to go.

“They call you the mender.” The woman didn’t move, didn’t raise her voice, and somehow that held Isla still. “Not the mending of cloth. I have a cord I need parted. One cord. A small one — nothing, a private thing, an old bond gone bad that two grown people would both be glad to be quit of, only one of them can’t be asked.” She said it smoothly, but her eyes were not smooth; they were watching Isla the way Coll watched her, for the thing under the answer. “I can pay in Highspan weight. I won’t ask your name and you won’t ask mine. One small cord, and coin enough to register a boy at the Hall three times over, and buy him his tools besides.”

The offer was too well made. It knew too much. It named the exact size of the ache she carried and set a price on it, and that — the neatness of it — was what decided her.

“You’ve the wrong mender,” Isla said. “I sew rope. Try the Hall for the other thing; they’ll tell you it can’t be done, and they’ll be telling you the truth.”

Something crossed the woman’s face — not surprise. Patience. The look of someone who had expected no, and had time. “Of course,” she said. “Forgive me. If you change your trade —” she did not finish, only inclined her head, and turned, and was three people into the crowd and gone before Isla had decided whether to watch her go.

Isla put both hands on the rail. Below her the fog moved, and did not breathe, or breathed too low to hear.

She had almost talked herself out of the whole morning — the man, the Knotwright’s glass, the sound that wasn’t there — when the bridge shrugged.

That was the only word for it. A long slow shrug ran up the great cables from somewhere below Lowspan, a shudder that was not the wind, and the humming of the Concord oath-cord hitched — actually hitched, skipped, the way a held note skips when the singer’s breath fails — and for half a heartbeat the loudest kept promise in the world went uncertain under her feet. The children by the rail shrieked with the delight of children who have never fallen. A porter cursed and steadied his load. Somewhere down at the Lowspan market a whole stall went over the edge — she heard the small human cry of it, the clatter, and then the long nothing as a season’s goods went down into the Underbreath and were never going to be seen again.

Then the bridge steadied. The hum smoothed. The oath caught itself and held, and the people laughed, the shaky laugh of the spared, and told each other it was the wind, only a gust, the old bridge settling, and went on across.

Isla did not go on. She stood with her hand flat on the singing cable and felt the place where, for half a breath, the city had forgotten its word — and, far below, under the fog, she thought she felt the great slow breathing quicken, just once, like a sleeper in pain.

No one else had felt any of it. That was the part that would not let her go. Not the woman with the borrowed money, not the Knotwright with his glass, not the breathing dark — but this: that the whole crossing had heard the city stumble and had already, by the far gate, decided it was nothing.

She went down to the Lowspan market to see whose stall had fallen. It was old habit; you looked, in Lowspan, because no one above you would. The gap in the row of stalls was already half-closed — the neighbors had shuffled their trestles wider to share out the space, the way a mouth closes over a pulled tooth — and a woman stood at the lip of it with her apron still full of the change she'd been about to make, staring down into the fog where her whole year had gone. A knot of people stood with her, not touching her, murmuring the useful lies. The wind, they said. The old cable. She should put in a claim to the Hall. She should be glad she wasn't leaning on the counter when it went. By tomorrow, Isla knew, they would need it to have been nothing, because a city that lived on rope over a bottomless dark could not afford to believe in the alternative and go on crossing its bridges. So it would be the wind. It was always the wind.

"It wasn't the wind," Isla said, but she said it only to herself, and low, and the woman did not hear her, and the fog gave nothing back.

She went to find Onil. She did not yet know that she had already, that morning, said no to the only person in Osmark who could have told her how right she was.

CHAPTER THREE

One Small Cord

Onil heard her out with his three-fingered hand flat on the counter and his good one worrying a length of quit-cord into knots he then undid, which was what he did instead of pacing, being too big a man to pace in the space he had.

“Say the coat again,” he said.

“A season out of fashion. Good, but wrong. Gloves. Soft boots.”

“And under the gloves?”

“A working hand. She set it on the rail like she was reading the line.”

He grunted. “And the money?”

“Highspan weight. She said Highspan weight.”

“There it is.” He dropped the knotted cord on the counter and left it lying. “That’s your wrongness, and you felt it, or you’d not be sitting on my stool wearing that face. Highspan money doesn’t come down the tiers to find a Lowspan mender. It never has. Highspan money sits up top and makes you climb to it, and it makes you grateful for the climb.” He leaned in over the balance. “Money that comes down to you is running from something. And a hand that’s worked rope inside a Highspan glove — that’s a person who was born under a bridge and got a good coat somewhere between then and now. You know what we call that.”

“A climber.”

“A climber, or a body that wants to look like one. Either way it’s a person with a story they’re not telling, and the piece they left out is always the piece that hangs you.” He picked the knotted cord back up. “So. You’ll not take it.”

“No,” Isla said.

“Good.”

“The fee’s gone up.”

Onil’s hands went still.

“The clerk,” she said. “Coll’s clerk. A reading-fee gets him read, but a reading with no apprentice-cord on it, the Hall won’t register — you know that, you were the one told me that. So there’s a sponsor’s bond. A wright of standing puts up coin to say the boy’s real, the boy’s taught, the boy’s good for it, and the coin sits with the Hall as surety so that if the boy’s a fraud they’ve got someone to bleed. No wright of standing will do it for a picker’s boy for love.” She turned her cup on the counter. “The bond’s forty weight.”

“Forty.” Onil said the number the way you’d say a drop. “That’s not a fee. That’s a wall with a number painted on it.”

“It’s the number that keeps the Underhang under. Forty weight to make a boy real. Barrow the tanner’s boy is real because his father had a shop to borrow against. Coll’s real to me and to you and to no ledger in the city.” Her voice went flat, going toward the place it went when she was deciding a thing she didn’t want to have decided. “He paid his reading-fee this morning with the coin I sent him to earn. He thinks the reading is the thing. He doesn’t know there’s a wall behind it.”

“So tell him there’s a wall. Boys have hit walls before. It’s how they learn the shape of the city.”

“He’s fifteen,” Isla said, “and he used the word family this morning, to me, out loud, for the first time in two winters, and I gave him a clerk’s errand for an answer.” She set the cup down. “I’m not going to teach him the shape of the city by letting it drop him. Not this one thing.”

The market roared its soft roar around the nook. Onil looked at her a long moment, and what was in his face was not surprise — he was too old a friend to be surprised by her — but the particular sorrow of a man watching someone he loved walk toward a thing he could not talk them out of, because the thing was made of love and you cannot argue a person out of that.

“One small cord,” he said quietly. “That’s what she called it.”

“One small cord.”

“Nothing’s one small cord, Isla. You of all the souls in this city know that. You pull the smallest thread there is and you never know what’s tied to the other end until it’s in your hand and moving.” He reached across and, for the space of a breath, laid his three-fingered hand over hers, which he almost never did, because touch between them was a currency they spent carefully. “If you go and look — and you’re going to go and look, I’ve known you thirty years — you look with your eyes. You don’t take the shear out of your coat. You trace where the thing runs before you so much as think about parting it. A cord that comes with a coat that wrong is a cord that leads somewhere wrong. Promise me you’ll look first.”

“You know I won’t promise you.”

“I know.” He took his hand back. “Look first anyway.”

* * *

She found the woman by not finding her. That was how it was arranged: Isla went back onto the Concord Bridge at the failing end of the day, when the lamps were being lit down the tiers like a slow fall of sparks, and stood at the mid-span rail, and did not have to wait long before the good wrong coat was beside her again, both of them facing out into the dark as though the dark were a thing worth looking at, which it was, if you were the kind of person who did not want to be seen speaking.

“You changed your trade,” the woman said.

“I’ll look at it,” Isla said. “That’s all. I make no promise to cut. I look, and if it’s what you say — one bad private cord between two grown people — we talk again about weight. If it’s anything else, I never saw you, and you never saw me, and you find another fool.”

“Fair.” The woman did not smile, but something eased at the corner of her mouth. She was pleased, and trying not to show she was pleased, and that was another wrong note that Isla filed and did not speak. “You’ll want to know where it surfaces.”

“Surfaces.”

“The cord. It comes up under the Lowspan fish-lift, on the dark side, where the old loading gallery hangs out over the Sile. You’ll find a bollard down there, iron, sunk into the cliff itself — old work, older than the lift. A cord runs to it.” The woman’s voice stayed pleasant and low, but her eyes had gone somewhere Isla could not follow, somewhere down and back. “You’ll know it when you see it. It’s the one that doesn’t go anywhere you can look. Everyone else’s cords run out into the crowd. This one runs down.”

Cold went through Isla that had nothing to do with the updraft.

“Down to what,” she said.

“To the other party,” the woman said. “The one who can’t be asked. I told you that part was true.” She pushed off the rail. “Look tonight, if you’ve the nerve for the under-gallery in the dark. The lift-men go home at the last bell and there’s no one down there after but the ones who don’t want witnesses. Which suits us both.” She was already two people away. “I’ll find you,” she said, over her shoulder, the way Onil said it, except that in Onil’s mouth it was a comfort and in hers it was a hook, and then she was only a good coat among coats, and gone.

Isla stood at the rail until the last light went out of the fog. Then she went down.

* * *

The fish-lift was the throat of Lowspan — a great creaking cage of quit-cord rope and counterweight that hauled the day's catch up from the netting-galleries where men dangled over the Underbreath and took the pale blind fish that lived in the fog. By the last bell it was still, the cage hung empty and dripping at the top of its run, and below it the loading gallery stretched out over nothing: a long slung platform of plank and slack net, smelling of fish and tar and the cold mineral breath of the void coming up through every gap in the boards.

Isla went out onto it with no lamp. A lamp would have made her a thing to be seen from every tier above, a single bright question mark hanging over the dark, and besides, she did not need one. She had grown up in the Underhang. Her feet knew slack plank from sound the way her hands knew live cord from quit. She went out to the dark side, past the silent lift, to where the gallery elbowed around a shoulder of the cliff and hung out over the deepest part of the drop, and there, sunk into the raw stone of the Sile's own wall, she found the bollard.

It was iron, black with age, thick as her thigh, and it was old the way the woman had said — older than the lift, older maybe than Lowspan, a piece of work from a time when someone had reached this far down the world and driven a ring into the living rock and meant it to hold forever. And to it ran a cord.

She saw it before she felt it, which never happened. Cords were a thing she felt — the pull, the hum, the whine — and only the sensitives like Coll truly saw them. But this one she saw: not with her eyes exactly but with some sense underneath the eyes, a line of deeper dark against the dark, running to the bollard and then down, over the lip of the gallery, into the Underbreath, going down and down past any place a cord had business going. It was thick. It was thicker than the Concord Bridge's own great cables, and it did not run out to any person in any crowd. It ran to the bottom of the world.

And it hummed.

She knew the hum. She had heard it that morning on the Concord Bridge, on the updraft, the note under all the notes — the great slow throb she had strained after and lost. Here it was not lost. Here, this close, with her hand hovering over the black iron, she could feel it come up the cord out of the deep: In. Held. Out. Slow as tide. Vast as weather. A breathing. She had told herself all day that she had imagined it, the way you tell yourself about a thing too large to be allowed, and now she stood over it in the dark and it breathed against her palm and she could not tell herself anything at all.

Look first, Onil had said. She had looked. She should turn now and go back up the slack planking and never come down again, and tell the good wrong coat that the cord was not one small private bond but something she would not touch, and take the loss of the forty weight, and find another way, because there was always another way; she had been finding them her whole life.

But there was an offshoot.

She saw it the way you see the one loose thread on a whole woven wall — a small thing, a fraying tendril branching off the great down-running cord just below the bollard, where the huge line passed over the iron and rubbed and, over years, had shed a strand. It hung there half-quit, greying, a dead-and-dying wisp no thicker than a bootlace, going to nothing, holding nothing. A splinter off the main. If she cut it — only it, only the frayed dead wisp and not the great living line — she would learn what the line was made of. What it answered like. Whether the wrongness she felt was the truth or her own fear dressed up. One small cord, the smallest there was, already mostly dead.

She should not. She knew she should not. She took out the shear.

Even here, alone, the drawing of it changed the dark — the pale wrong coil of it, cold and warm at once, humming and silent at once, her mother's whole death folded into an edge. She set it to the frayed offshoot. She opened herself the way the art required, and because the thing was small and mostly quit she opened herself only a little,

braced for only a little, made ready a small cupped place inside her for a trickle of dead recoil.

She cut.

And the world poured in.

It was not a trickle. It was the Sile itself. The frayed wisp was nothing, was a dead bootlace, but it was tied — everything is tied, Onil, you were right, God, you were right — it was tied to the great down-running line, and the great line was tied to the breathing at the bottom of the world, and when she parted the wisp she did not part a dead thing from nothing, she opened a mouth between herself and all of it. The recoil came up the cord out of the deep like the tide coming into a hole in the rocks, and the small cupped place she had made could not hold a thousandth of it. It overran. It filled her to the eyes in the space of a breath, cold water down the inside of her skull and then not water, then flood, then a sea with no far shore, pouring up out of the dark and into the one small door she had been fool enough to open, looking — she felt this, she would swear to this — *looking for the way in*.

And the hum answered.

Down in the deep, the slow breathing changed. It hitched — the way the Concord oath had hitched under her feet that morning, the way a sleeper hitches when a hand touches them in the dark — and then it turned. Something vast and far below turned its attention up the line toward the small mouth she had opened, up toward her, and for one whole terrible instant Isla Venn was not a woman cutting a cord. She was a thing being noticed. She felt herself seen from the bottom of the world, seen and known and — this was the part that would not let her sleep for nights after — *reached toward*, as if the breathing thing were as starved for her as she had been, all her life, for everything she would not let herself want.

She wrenched the shear back.

It was the only thing that saved her, and it was not skill, it was terror — the animal yank of a hand off a stovetop. The edge came

away from the wisp and the mouth she had opened slammed, and the flood cut off, and she was on her knees on the slack planking over the Underbreath with the shear clutched to her chest and her own heart slamming so hard she thought for a moment it was the breathing, come up out of the dark to find her.

The offshoot hung parted, its two ends already going quit, already cooling, already only material, as if nothing at all had happened. As if she had cut a bootlace.

She knelt there and shook. And when she could stand she stood, and when she could walk she walked, back along the gallery past the silent lift, up the slack planking, up toward the lamps and the living, and it was only when she reached the head of the fish-lift stair and put her hand out to steady herself on the newel that she understood, with a slow spreading cold that had nothing to do with the void, that something was gone.

She had not felt it go. That was the wrongness on top of every other wrongness. Every cut she had ever made had taken its price and let her feel it leave — you got to say goodbye, that was the one mercy in it — but this thing had reached into her while she was too full of flood to notice, and had taken something and left, and she stood at the top of the stair with her hand on the cold iron and groped after the shape of what was missing the way your tongue goes to the hole where a tooth was.

Home. The room.

She knew she had grown up in a room in the Underhang. She knew there had been a stove, and a window, and her mother, and Yrsa, and the smell of — no, the smell was already gone, that was the morning's price. But the room. She reached for the room, for the slant of it, for where the stove had stood and how the one window had let the grey light in and the exact geography of the small safe place that had been the whole world before the whole world went, and there was nothing there. A shape with no thing inside it. She knew the room had

existed. She would know it forever. She would never again be able to stand inside it in her mind.

The breathing thing at the bottom of the world had taken her the way home, and had not even let her say goodbye.

She got herself up the last of the stair and out among the lamps, and she did not weep, because weeping was a cord you tied to the moment and she had spent her life not tying them. But she stood a while against a lamp-post in the living noise of Lowspan, and understood two things, both too large for the size of her.

The first was that the woman in the good wrong coat had not hired her to cut a bad private bond. There was no bad private bond. There was only the great down-running line and the breathing at the end of it, and the woman had known — had sent her down here to learn it, or to test whether she could cut it, or both.

The second was worse, and it settled into her slowly, the way the truth of the fallen tenement had settled that morning, silence first and meaning after. She had gone down to the root of the city and cut a frayed dead splinter off something enormous — and she did not think, standing there with the way home gone out of her and the shear like ice against her ribs, that a thing that size shed a splinter without the whole of it feeling the loss.

Somewhere above her, or below her, or through her, the city hummed on. But she stood in the noise and listened, now, the way you listen at a sickbed, and she was almost sure the hum was not quite steady, and would not, ever again, sound to her like nothing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Inspector's Knot

By the time Isla woke, the city had decided it had been the wind. But the two men were still dead, and that was the whole difference between the city and Isla: the city could afford to be wrong.

She learned it from Coll, who had it from the low market, where by first light everyone had it. A netting-cable under the Lowspan fish-lift had slipped in the night — not snapped, slipped, its splice gone soft as if something had gone out of it — and old Teviss and his sister's boy, who were down in the galleries after the blind fish because the blind fish ran best in the cold dark hours, had gone with it into the Underbreath. No bodies. There were never any bodies. There was a widow and a mended net and a gap in the netting-crews that the other men would close over by the week's end the way the market had closed over the fallen stall, because a city on rope could not do otherwise and go on.

"They're saying the splice was old," Coll said. He was crouched by the stove feeding it chips of quit-cord, which burned slow and gave a mean grudging heat, and he did not look at her while he said it, which was how she knew he was watching her with everything but his eyes. "Teviss spliced his own lines. Thirty years. Nobody spliced tighter than Teviss." A chip went in. The little flame took it. "Funny, isn't it. A splice that tight, going soft in one night. Like something reached in and loosened it."

“Splices go,” Isla said.

“They do.” He fed the stove. “You came in late.”

“I went to look at a thing. It was nothing. I told the woman no.” Two lies laid end to end, and the second one so bald that she heard it land wrong in the small room, and could not call it back.

Coll turned then and looked at her, and his young face had the thing in it again, the thing older and harder than she wanted, and worse than that it had hurt in it, plain and undefended, because he was still young enough to show it. “You came in with a hole in you,” he said. “I felt it. I always feel it. You went out with — you went out with your usual nothing on you, and you came back with a place scooped out. You cut something last night.” His voice cracked in the middle of it and he hated that, she could see him hate it. “You said you went to look. You don’t take a hole home from looking.”

She could have told him. That was the thing she would turn over later, in the long nights: that there had been a door there, in the mean heat of the little room, and she could have gone through it and told the boy everything — the down-running cord, the breathing, the way home gone out of her, all of it — and been not alone with it for the first time. And she shut the door, because telling him would have tied him to it, and a thing this size, tied to a boy, would drag him over the edge.

“I cut a splinter off something I shouldn’t have touched,” she said. “And you’re not to ask me about it again, and you’re not to say the word cut in this room or any room, and if a Knotwright ever asks you what I do, you say I mend rope and pick quit and you’ve never in your life seen me do another thing. Do you hear me, Coll. This is the one thing I will ever ask you to swear.”

“You don’t ask people to swear,” he said. “You don’t believe in it.”

“I’m not asking you to tie it. I’m asking you to mean it.”

He looked at her a moment longer, and something in him — the eager, romantic, headlong something that wanted so badly to be let all

the way in — folded itself down and away, and what was left was a boy being careful, which she had never wanted to teach him and had just taught him anyway.

“I mean it,” he said. “I always meant it. You’re the one who won’t.”

He went out to sell the morning’s pick. She waited until his tread was gone off the low walk, and then she took the shear out of her coat, and she stood in the middle of the room with it, this thing that was her mother and her mother’s death and now, it seemed, a key that fit a lock at the bottom of the world. She could not carry it. Not now, not with a Knotwright’s glass having filed her at the Tallow stair and a fresh slip under the fish-lift and the whole grey machinery of the guild waking to the smell of a sever. To be taken with the shear on her was to be taken as what she was. To be taken without it was to be a barren woman with an odd absence of cords, which was strange but not a hanging.

She pried up the third board under her cot, where the damp got in, and inside the coil of good quit-rope she kept there against the winter she fed the shear down into the heart of the coil until it was only one more grey length among grey lengths, cold cord in cold cord, hidden the way you hide a thing among more of itself. Then she set the board back and stood on it.

The room did not feel safer. But it was the room, and she noticed — with the small dull shock she would keep noticing for days, at odd moments, like biting down on the gap of a pulled tooth — that she could not have said whether it looked like the room she grew up in, because she no longer had the other room to set beside it.

* * *

Onil was not weighing anything when she came. That by itself frightened her more than the news had. He sat behind his counter with his balance folded and his good hand over his ruined one, and when

he saw her he did not say *sit*, he said, low and fast, “Not here. Come round,” and took her by the sleeve into the back of the nook, into the shadow of the joint where the two bridges met, where the noise of the market fell away and it was only the two of them and the cold coming up through the boards.

“You went down,” he said. “Under the lift.”

“Onil —”

“Teviss and the boy are in the fog and the whole of Lowspan can feel there’s a wrongness even if they’re calling it wind, and you come to me this morning with your face gone to stone, so don’t. Don’t tell me you looked and left.” His voice was not angry. That was the terrible part. It was afraid, all the way down, the fear worn smooth by thirty years of use. “What did you cut.”

“I don’t know what it was.” She heard her own voice shaking and let it. He was the one person she let hear it. “It ran down, Onil. Just like she said. There was a bollard sunk in the cliff, old iron, older than the lift, and a cord ran to it thicker than the Concord’s own cables, and it went down into the Underbreath and it didn’t stop. And it — “ She made herself say it. “It was breathing. The sound I told you about, on the bridge. The one under the hum. It was coming up that cord. I cut a dead splinter off it, just a splinter, to know, and the recoil nearly took me into the fog. And it — something down there — it felt me. It turned and it felt me cut it.”

She had thought she would sound mad, saying it aloud. She did not. She sounded like a woman reporting weather. And Onil did not tell her she was mad. He had gone very still, the stillness of a big man who is holding himself still on purpose, and in his old face there was something she had not seen there in thirty years of knowing him, and it took her a moment to name it, because she had never had cause to name it on him before. It was dread. Not worry, which he wore like a coat. Dread, which he had kept locked somewhere she’d never seen.

“You cut down toward the root,” he said.

“Onil, what is it. What’s down there.”

“I don’t know what’s down there. Nobody knows what’s down there and lives on my side of the counter.” He leaned close. The white fringe of his hair was damp with the fog-sweat that came up through the joint. “But I know what happens to the ones who go looking. I’ve picked quit forty years, Isla, and I’ve known a fair few cutters — worn ones, spent ones, the kind that end up down here because there’s no up left for them. And every so often one of them gets an idea about the deep cords. The old ones. The ones that don’t run person to person but run down.” His three-fingered hand closed on her wrist, hard. “And I want you to hear me. Every single one of them is gone. Not hanged — you’d hear about a hanging, a hanging’s a show, a hanging’s the Hall telling everyone what not to be. These ones just stop. They’re at their pitch one day and gone the next, and their gear’s still there, and their quit’s still on the line, and nobody comes asking and nobody’s allowed to ask, and the ones who do ask stop too. We don’t have a word for it. The pickers. We just don’t go down. You learn it before you learn your letters: you don’t cut down.” He let go of her wrist. “Somebody keeps the deep cords, girl. And they don’t hang the ones who touch them. They unmake them.”

The cold came up through the boards and into her and did not stop.

“The woman knew,” Isla said. “She sent me to it. She knew what it was and she sent me to cut it.”

“Then the woman is either a fool or she wanted exactly this, and I’ve never in my life met a fool who trimmed her cords that careful.” Onil straightened, scrubbed his good hand down his face. “Find her. Before whoever keeps the deep cords finds you, you find her, and you make her tell you what she aimed you at and why. I’ll put word out. Careful word.”

But there was no word to put out, and they both learned it by the day’s end. Isla went to the three places a person went to leave a message for someone who’d said *I’ll find you* — the deadletter stone by the low market, the chandler who took names for a coin, the

notice-post at the Tallow stair where the unlettered paid a boy to chalk a mark. And at every one of them there was nothing, because you cannot leave a message for a person who has arranged, with great and deliberate care, to be unreachable. The woman had trimmed her cords close for exactly this. She had come down the tiers trailing almost nothing, made her offer, and gone back up into the crowd like a dropped coin into deep water, and there was no more finding her than finding Teviss in the fog. She would find Isla. That had always been the shape of it. Isla had been the one who could be found, all along; that was what the bareness she was so proud of had made her — not free, but easy to aim.

She was turning that over, sick with it, in the blue last light at the head of the Tallow stair — the same stair where the Knotwright's glass had filed her the morning before, a lifetime before — when she felt the eye on her again. The weight of a watching. And she looked up expecting grey and brass and the reader's loupe, and it was grey, but it was not the Knotwright.

The figure stood where the stair-lamps did not quite reach, at the mouth of a service-run between two warehouses, and it was grey from head to foot — not the guild's grey-and-brass but a flatter, plainer grey, the grey of a thing that did not want to be a colour at all — and its face was covered. A half-mask of grey felt, plain, without device, leaving only the eyes and the mouth. Isla had lived her whole life in Osmark and she had never seen the like, and yet something in her that was older than her memory of the room knew it, the way the pickers knew not to cut down: a thing you were taught to fear before you were taught what it was.

"Don't run," the figure said. "If you run I have to chase you, and if I chase you the ones behind me catch us both, and then it's out of my hands." The voice was a woman's, younger than the dread the grey carried, and tired — tired in a way that did not fit a hunter who had cornered her quarry. "You're the sever who cut under the lift."

Isla said nothing. Her hand wanted the shear and the shear was under a board in her room, which was, she understood in that moment, the first wise thing she'd done in two days.

"You're not going to answer. That's sense." The grey woman came a half-step nearer, into the edge of the lamplight, and Isla saw the eyes above the mask — grey too, of course, grey as the rest, but not flat like the rest; there was a person in them, watching her back, and under the person a fear that mirrored her own. "I'll answer for you. Yesterday a splice under the fish-lift went soft and two men fell, and a splice does not go soft, and the ones I answer to know that a splice does not go soft. There's a clean sever loose in the low tiers — clean, they keep saying that word, clean — and a report from a Hall inspector who filed a barren woman at this very stair with a fresh cut on her the morning before it happened. It is not a large city, in the end. It has a great many bridges and only so many people." She stopped. "They will have you by tomorrow's dusk. Not the Hall. The Hall thinks they're hunting an ordinary cutter for the ordinary crime. The ones behind me are not the Hall, and they are not hunting you for the two men. They're hunting you for what you cut *toward*. Do you understand me?"

"No," Isla said, which was true, and the first word she'd given, and it came out of her before she could keep it.

"Good. Keep not understanding it out loud." The grey woman's tired eyes flicked once to the stairhead, to the tiers above, and back, quick, a hunted flick, and Isla understood that this woman was, impossibly, more afraid than she was. "There's a chandlery on the second Lowspan reach, past the rope-walk, sign of a blue funnel. Below it, a cellar that opens on the underwalk. If they come for you — and they'll come — you go there, you say the word *slackwater* to the man, and you don't come out till someone comes for you wearing this grey and saying it back. That's all I can give you. It's more than I should."

"Why," Isla said.

Something moved in the grey woman's eyes — not softness, exactly. Something worse and more useful than softness. The look of a person who had guarded a thing her whole life and had begun, lately, in the dark, to be unable to stop asking what it was she guarded.

“Because I’ve heard the same thing you have,” she said, very low, “and I don’t think a splice that keeps the whole city up should sound like it’s begging. Go home, sever. Kiss your boy. And when they come, run to the blue funnel, and not before, or you’ll take me down with you.”

And then she was gone — not into the crowd, there was no crowd here, but backward into the service-run, into the flat grey dark between the warehouses that had made her, three steps and swallowed, the way the woman in the good coat had been swallowed by the crowd, the way Teviss had been swallowed by the fog, the way everything in this city that Isla most needed to hold onto was, lately, being taken back into the dark before she could get her hand around it.

She stood alone at the head of the Tallow stair with the lamps hissing and the word *slackwater* sitting strange in her mouth, and above her the tiers hung webbed and golden and humming, ten thousand kept promises holding the city up, and somewhere below all of them a splice that should not sound like anything sounded, if you knew how to listen, like a thing that had been begging for two hundred years and had just, last night, felt someone reach down and hear it.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Chosen Sort

The tying-yard at Coper's Reach was the one place in Osmark where a boy with no cord to his name could still be somebody for the length of an afternoon, and Coll went there more often than he could afford, and always with the same hunger.

It hung under the Knotwrights' Hall like a tray slung beneath a table — a broad plank floor pinned between four stone piers, railed along the drop-side with a fence of old hawser gone furry with wear, and open at the bottom to the Underbreath, so that the cold came up through the seams in the boards and moved among the boys' ankles like a cat looking for a lap. Journeymen came to practise their showy knots where a master might glance down from the Hall gallery and take note; menders came to trade off-cuts and gossip. And on the good days there was the drop-line, and Coll forgot that he was hungry, and that he was no one, and that the woman he would have called his mother if she'd let him had lied to his face across the stove that morning and told him not to ask why.

He had no business stopping. The morning's pick was still knotted in a sack against his hip — good grey quit to sell before the low market thinned — and Isla's shut face waited for him at home. But the yardmaster was calling for takers, the drop-line hung rigged off the drop-side rail, and Coll's hands wanted what they always wanted. On a cord they knew things his mouth couldn't say. Here,

only here, a boy could set them to a line in front of the whole yard and be, for as long as the count ran, exactly as much as he could hold.

The drop-line was a proof and a dare and the nearest thing the low apprentices had to a festival. A length of good quit-rope ran over the rail with a stone lashed to its end, and you let it down into the fog hand under hand. But the quit was only the body of the thing. The soul of it was the vow. Before you took the line you gave the yardmaster your word, palm to palm and the whole yard for witness — *I have it, I'll not drop it* — and that made a cord, small and gold and live, running from your hand to his; and he married it to the drop-rope with a running hitch, so that the pull of the stone in the fog dragged not on your arms but on your promise itself.

That was the cruelty and the beauty of it. Anyone could hold a rope. The drop-line made you hold a *word*, and let the whole city's hunger down there in the fog test how true it was.

A weak vow whined — every apprentice in Osmark knew the sound before he knew his letters, the thin rising note of a wet finger walked round a cup's rim as the promise wore thin against the weight. Then the gold went pale; then, if you held past the pale, it frayed and snapped back at you, and a snapped vow-cord over the drop had put more than one boy on his back with a welt across his cheek, his stone gone into the Underbreath for good and a laughing-stock's month ahead of him.

The rope was knotted at every fathom so you could feel your depth in the blind fog. Most boys let go at the second knot; the third was good. Barrow the tanner's boy — a season younger than Coll, registered now, sponsored, somebody — had once held to the fourth and been carried round the yard on shoulders for it, while Coll watched from the rail with his ears gone hot, holding nothing, tied to no one at all.

"Picker's boy," said the yardmaster when Coll stepped to the line. He was a broad old journeyman named Hobb with a drinker's nose and a fair way about him. "You've no journey-cord."

“I’ve a word,” Coll said. “That’s the rule. Any word’ll do for the drop.”

Hobb looked at him a moment, and something in the look was not unkind, and he put out his palm.

Coll set his hand to it. “I have it,” he said. “I’ll not drop it.” And he felt the little cord take between them, thin and warm and absurdly gold, live for as long as he chose to keep it; and Hobb married it to the drop-rope with a flick of his fingers and stood back.

Coll fed the line out over the rail, and the fog took the stone, and the promise began to pull.

First knot. Nothing — a small child hanging off his wrist. He paid out more. Second knot, and now the Underbreath had the weight and the Underbreath wanted it the way it wanted everything, and the pull came up the rope and into the gold cord and dragged on the vow, and the journeymen leaning on the rail made the low mocking sound they made and waited for the whine.

Third knot. This was where the note always came. Coll paid out the line, and the vow drew tighter and tighter, and it made no sound at all.

He did not notice at first. He was busy with the strange good feeling that had come up in his chest and down his arms, the one he had never had a word for and had never told Isla about because it sounded mad in his own head: that the pull did not frighten him. That the more the fog took, the more he found he had to give it. The strain came up the line and instead of tearing at him it seemed to *settle*, to sink into some room in him built the right shape to take it. He paid out past the third knot, into water no picker’s boy had a right to, and the vow over the rail stayed warm, stayed gold, and stayed silent.

That was the thing. That was what turned the yard.

A loaded line was *supposed* to sing; the whole yard tuned itself to that thin rising note without knowing it did, the way a room leans toward a kettle coming to the boil. And Coll’s cord, drawn tighter

than a promise had any business bearing, made no note at all — a held breath, a gold vow under killing strain and quiet as quit.

The mocking sound at the rail died. Someone said, “—the *hell*,” soft.

“Fourth knot,” said Hobb, and his voice had changed.

Coll heard it change, and only then looked up, and saw the yard looking at him.

He should have stopped there. Fourth knot was Barrow’s mark; fourth knot was shoulders and a month of being somebody; fourth knot was enough. But the looking was a thing he had wanted so long and fed so seldom that it went to his head like the first swallow of strong drink, and the room in his chest still had acres of space in it, and so he grinned his big helpless grin and paid out to the fifth knot, past the end of any story the yard had told itself. The stone hung in the deep fog. The cord did not sing. And Coll Venn — for he thought the name at himself, right then, *Coll Venn*, though she had never given it to him — held the whole weight of it and felt only that good settled fullness, as if he had at last been asked for something the size of what he had to give.

He was grinning at the yard, and so he was not watching the next rail down, where a journeyman named Reck, who had been the yard’s best before a picker’s boy walked in, had rigged his own drop out of spite to take the crowd back, and overloaded it, and let the fog have too much too fast.

Coll heard the whine start. Wrong pitch, wrong rail. He turned his head and saw it in the half-instant before it went — Reck’s vow-cord gone paper-pale and past pale, fraying open strand by strand, and standing at that rail, too close, hauled in to watch the picker’s boy, a small taker of maybe nine with his hands still on the fence — and Coll knew the sound of a cord a breath from recoil the way he knew his own name, and he knew that when it went it would go sideways into the little one’s face and maybe into the little one’s chest and maybe over the rail with him, and there was no time to shout.

So he did the thing he did not decide to do.

He kept his own line in his right hand — kept it, would not drop it, *I'll not drop it* — and with his left he reached across and caught Reck's fraying cord in his bare fist as it let go.

It let go into him.

He had a half-breath to be afraid, and then the recoil came up his arm — the stored fury of an overloaded broken promise, the thing that put boys on their backs — and it came into him and it *found the room*. It poured in and it settled, the way the drop had settled, the way everything settled, into that place in him that had no bottom he had ever reached; and Coll stood with a live drop-line singing silent in one hand and a broken cord's whole recoil soaking harmlessly into the other, and felt, distantly, the little one's fists still gripping the fence, safe, and thought, with the part of him that was always a half-step behind his hands: *huh. So that's what it's for.*

The yard had gone entirely quiet now. Even the fog seemed to have gone quiet.

"Boy," said Hobb, and he came and took the drop-line out of Coll's right hand himself, gently, the way you'd take a full cup off a child, and unhitched the vow, and the little gold cord between them guttered and died as Coll let the promise go at last, kept to the end. "Boy, what's your name."

And before Coll could answer, a voice from the Hall stair said, warm and unhurried, "His name is Coll, Hobb, and I'll thank you not to wear him out. I've come a long way to watch him do exactly that."

* * *

The man who came down the Hall stair into the yard was not a Knotwright. Coll saw that at once, because Coll saw cords, had seen them since before he could remember, gold where they were strong and pale where they were wearing and grey where they had gone to quit; and a Knotwright of standing came trailing them like a barge

trails weed, a lifetime of oaths and appraisals and guild-bonds hung all over him. This man came down the stair wearing almost none.

He was plump and pleasant and past fifty, dressed in good sober Midspan grey — wool and quiet money, nothing of the flat dead grey the pickers whispered about — with a soft clean-shaven face and an air of having all the time there had ever been. And where another man of his weight would have worn a hundred cords, he wore perhaps four, cut back so close that Coll could not follow one to its far end. Trimmed. Careful. A man who owed almost nothing and could not be pulled on. A free man.

Coll, fifteen and hungry and just now the whole yard's wonder, looked at that beautiful barrenness and felt not the smallest breath of warning. He felt the opposite. He thought: *that is what I want to be.*

"Master Sowe," the man said, and put out one of his soft hands, and Coll shook it, and no cord took between them, because Sowe offered no word and asked for none, and Coll was too dazzled to think that strange. "I assess. For a house that keeps an interest in rare hands — rarer than the Hall has the wit to want. And you, Coll, are the first genuinely interesting thing I have seen in this yard in three years of looking."

"I held to the fifth," Coll said, and hated how young it came out, how much it wanted the man to have seen.

"You held to the fifth, yes, and that was very fine, and any fool of a talent-scout would offer you a mender's ticket for it and think himself clever." Sowe's eyes were mild and did not blink quite as often as eyes did. "But I was not watching the fifth knot. I was watching you take Reck's recoil in your bare hand and stand there wondering what the fuss was. Do you know what happens to a boy who catches a broken cord like that? An ordinary boy?"

"It'd break his arm," Coll said. "Or worse."

"It would kill him," said Master Sowe, pleasantly. "It has. Twice, in yards I've stood in. The cord doesn't care that you meant well. The cord discharges into whatever's fool enough to touch it, and an

ordinary hand is a cup too small for that much water, and it drowns him.” He tilted his head. “You caught it and it *fit*. Didn’t it. It came in and it found room.”

Coll’s mouth had gone dry. Because that was the mad thing, the thing he’d never told anyone, said back to him by a stranger in the second minute of knowing him, plain as a weather report. *It found room.*

“There’s a word for you,” Master Sowe said. “Not a nice word, in the low tiers — they teach you to be afraid of it, the way they teach you to be afraid of a good many things that would be the making of you. You’re a *holder*, Coll. Your cords don’t fray. Your word, once given, doesn’t wear. And you can take strain that would kill three ordinary men and stand there asking politely for more. It is the rarest gift in Osmark, rarer than a clean sever, rarer than gold, and the city has *need* of it. Real need. More than the Hall will ever tell a picker’s boy.”

He said *need* the way another man would say *love*.

“I can’t register,” Coll said, and there it was, the shame of it, out before he could dress it up. “I’ve no journey-cord. I’m not tied to a wright. It takes a sponsor’s bond — forty weight — and no one’ll post that for a—” He stopped.

“For a picker’s boy. For love.” Sowe nodded, unoffended, as though Coll had confirmed a small sum. “No. They wouldn’t. Forty weight is a great deal to stake on a boy’s promise, and a wright wants the boy *tied* — to a master, to the Hall, to something he can pull on if the boy goes bad. That’s what the bond is. A leash with a price on it.” He smiled. “But we don’t ask that, where I come from. We don’t want you leashed. We would post the forty weight ourselves, gladly, and ask for no apprentice-cord in return — because the last thing you do with a thing as strong as you is *tie it down small*.”

Coll stood in the cold coming up through the boards and felt the whole shape of his life tilt.

Forty weight. The wall. The thing Isla could not climb — that she had gone out into the dark and come back from with a hole scooped in her for trying. He had *known* the money that morning had something to do with him, with his cursed registration, and it had made him sick. And here was a soft pleasant man offering to lift the whole wall away and ask nothing tied in return. Above his station. Chosen. A house that had *need* of him.

“Who’s the house,” Coll said, because Isla would have asked it, because some cooler thing in him that lived under the hunger made him ask it.

“A quiet one,” said Master Sowe. “Old. It keeps to itself, and it keeps the city, in ways the city’s forgotten to thank it for.” The mild unblinking eyes rested on him. “Who holds *your* cords, Coll? Whom are you tied to? Truly.”

And Coll opened his mouth to say *Isla*, and found that he could not, because it wasn’t true. She had never let it be. She had fed him and taught him and called him nothing and let him call her nothing, everything meant and nothing tied, and he had ached two winters to be tied to her and she would not — and so the honest answer, the one that fell out of him now in front of a stranger like a coin from a hole in a pocket, was:

“No one. Not really. No one at all.”

Something moved behind Master Sowe’s mild face — satisfaction, though Coll was too young and too flattered to name it, the quiet satisfaction of a man who has reached into a stream and closed his hand on exactly the fish he came for.

“Good,” said Master Sowe softly. “Good. That’s very good, Coll.” He drew from his coat a token — a disc of pale worked cord, cut and set and gone to permanent grey, a made thing, beautiful — and pressed it into Coll’s big careful hand. “Think on it. Tell no one yet — not because it’s a secret, but because a thing this good, other people will want to talk you out of, out of fear, out of the smallness the low tiers teach. When you’re ready to stop being no one, you

bring this to the chandler at the head of the Concord Bridge and you say you've been chosen. That's all. *You've been chosen.* And the wall comes down."

Then he went back up the Hall stair the way careful men go, without hurry, wearing almost no cords, owing almost nothing, and Coll stood in the tying-yard with the whole watching weight of it — the fifth knot, the caught recoil, the grey disc warm in his fist — and for the first time in his life felt himself to be somebody, and did not once think to be afraid of a man who had told a fifteen-year-old orphan that the very best thing about him was that he belonged to no one.

* * *

He did not sell the pick. He walked home with the sack still full against his hip and the disc in his other fist, turning it, and by the time he reached the low walk he had built the whole thing in his head the way you build a warm room to stand in: he would take the offer, and not tell Isla until it was done — the forty weight posted, the register inked, his name in the Hall's book where no one could scratch it out — and then put it in front of her, *done, finished, mine, and it cost you nothing, you never had to tie yourself to me at all*, and she would look at him the way she never looked at anyone, and the hole in her would close, because he'd filled it himself, because he'd been enough.

That was the story he walked home inside.

Isla was at the stove when he came in, and she turned, and her face did the thing it did — checked him over, quick and total, the way she checked a cable for the strand about to go — and he felt her read the good feeling still lit in him, not understand it, and decide, wearily, not to ask. Two nights running she had come home with a hole and lied about it. Now he came home lit up and full of a secret, and he watched her choose to let him keep it, the way she wanted hers kept, and understood with a small cold turn that they were doing it to each

other now, both of them, over the same mean stove: keeping the worst of it back, each to spare the other, each pulling the knot tighter by refusing to be tied.

“You’re late,” she said. “You sell?”

“Slow up top,” Coll said — his first lie to her, ever, and how easy it went, how it slid out gold and whole and did not whine at all. “I’ll clear it tomorrow.” He put the sack down and kept his fist closed on the disc and did not tell her he had been chosen, and Isla turned back to the stove, and neither of them said the thing, and the room held them both and their two silences, warm and lied-in and, for that one last evening, still standing.

CHAPTER SIX

Highspan

Everyone with any sense would have told her to go down, so Isla went up.

Down was where they'd look. Down was the blue-funnel chandlery and the cellar on the underwalk and the word *slackwater*, a hole to pull in after herself and wait in the dark to be either forgotten or found; and the grey woman had been plain that she was to run there only when they came, *not before, or you'll take me down with you*. So Isla did not go down. She had spent her whole life being easy to find, she saw that now, bare and still and predictable in her little room; and a person who is being hunted along the bottom of a thing can sometimes buy an hour by climbing, because no one thinks to look for the drowning up in the light.

And the trail — what little trail there was — ran up. The woman in the good coat had come *down* the tiers to make her offer, trailing Highspan money and Underhang caution both, and gone back up into the crowd like a dropped coin into deep water. The men who kept the deep cords and unmade the curious did not sit in the Underhang; you did not guard the root of the city from its gutter. Whatever had aimed her at that bollard had aimed her from above. So Isla put on the one disguise that let a low woman move up through the tiers without a story — she went as what half her cover already was, a cord-mender with a hook and a kit and a frayed-work face, called up on a job —

and she climbed, before dawn, up out of Lowspan toward the Crown, to go looking for the hand that had reached down and used her.

She left the shear under the board. That was the second wise thing.

The climb was its own long argument. She had made it before, on real mender's jobs, but never with her whole skin listening for a step behind her, and never seeing it as she saw it now: a machine for sorting people by the weight of what they were allowed to owe. In Lowspan the cords ran pale and overloaded and frayed, thin promises stretched across too much need — a woman's word to feed four children on two children's bread, gone the grey of a thing about to go. In Midspan they thickened and warmed to working gold: guild-bonds, marriage-cords, the honest hawser of people who kept what they swore because the keeping fed them. And then she came up through the last gate onto the Crown, into the flat clean early light that Lowspan never got, and the cords —

The cords up here were *gilded*.

She stood a moment at the rim, a mender with her hook, and made herself breathe. She had heard the Crown's cords were gilt and had thought it a figure of speech. It was not. The great houses wound their oath-cords with beaten gold-leaf and coloured thread, dressed them, wore them like jewels — and worse, to her eye, half of them were *slack*. Purely ornamental. A fat councilor came by with a servant behind him wearing three magnificent cords looped at the shoulder that bore no strain at all, that had never borne strain, promises made to be seen and never to be tested, worn the way a lord wears a sword he will never draw. In Lowspan a cord was a thing you could die keeping. Up here it was a brooch.

And every cord in sight ran *from* these people and *down*. Nothing ran up into them. They were owed; they did not owe. She had known it her whole life the way you know the weather, but had never stood inside the fact and felt it as a physical arrangement of the world — the

vertical truth of Osmark laid out in gold thread: the weight always, always ran downhill, onto the people who lived closest to the fog.

This is what I could never say to Coll, she thought. That the cage isn't the cord. The cage is which way the cord pulls.

She found the machine of it by accident, looking for the woman.

She had reasoned that a person hired to be careful and untraceable would be hired *through* somewhere — a house that dealt in quiet work, quiet money, the trimming of inconvenient cords — and so she'd drifted the mender's drift toward the counting-district under the Concordat towers, ears open, and instead of a broker she found a bond-hall: a wide bright room open to the street with a queue outside it, and over its door, carved cheerful and civic, GRACE & VESSIMER, ADVANCES AGAINST HONEST LABOUR.

The queue was Lowspan and Underhang. Of course it was. They had come up in their best, which was terrible, to sign for grain against the coming winter, or rent against a bad month, or a physician against a dying child, and Isla stood across the little bridge with her hook in her hand and made herself watch, because she was in danger of forgetting that the thing under the city had two hundred years of company down there in the different dark of the debt-bound.

A family reached the front. Man, woman, a girl of perhaps eight holding the woman's skirt. A clerk in Midspan grey read them the terms in a bored civil voice, and the man made his mark, and the woman made hers, and Isla — forty feet off, across open air — felt the cord form and had to put her hand on the rail.

It came up *barbed*. She saw it take, saw it hook into the man and the woman both — a debt-cord for a house's grain, and it should have been an honest ugly hawser, hard but clean, a thing you could sweat off in nine years. But it went in barbed, hooked so it would tear if they ever pulled to leave, dressed with just enough true agreement to be legal and shot all through with the fine cruel wire of *no other choice*, which the law did not call coercion because the law up here had been written by the people the wire fed. It was the exact make of

cord that had gone into her mother. She had cut one out of a stranger three nights ago in an alley and lost the smell of her mother's hair paying for it. She knew this cord in her hands and her teeth and the empty place where a room used to be.

The little girl watched her parents sign, and did not understand, and would understand, and Isla stood with her hook and could do nothing at all — could not cut it here, in the open, on the Crown, forty feet off, with the guild waking to the smell of a sever and a grey woman's warning ticking down toward dusk — and she made herself turn away before her face could cost her, and walked on into the Crown with her hands shaking and the child's uncomprehending face going down into her like a stone let off a rope, down and down and not stopping.

She did not find the woman. She found the shrine instead, and the shrine was worse.

* * *

It stood at the head of the Concord Bridge, where the great span met the Crown under the worn HOLD FAST head-gate — a place she had crossed a hundred times, going the other way, coming up from below to touch the carving for luck like everyone else. She had never come at it from *above*, and she had never stopped at the little monument set into the gate's eastern pier, because from below you did not see it, and because it was the kind of civic holy thing your eye slid off.

A figure in worn stone, kneeling, arms lifted and open as if to take a great weight onto her shoulders. Below her, cut deep and gone shiny under two hundred years of reverent thumbs:

THE FOUNDER GAVE HERSELF THAT THE CITY MIGHT
STAND. HOLD FAST.

And around the kneeling stone woman, threaded through iron rings set into the pier for exactly this, hung the votives.

Isla had seen votive-cords before — everyone had, little grey loops of quit tied at shrines, the small change of the city's faith. She had never looked at these ones with a sever's eye and a head full of breathing. She looked now.

They were not quit.

They were *live*. Dozens of them, hundreds, small gold hopeful cords tied on by the pious of the Crown — *I lend the Founder my strength, I add my thread to hers* — a gesture, a nothing, a coin in a box; except that a cord is never a nothing, a cord is the physics of a meant thing, and these were meant, tied by people who truly wished the sainted Founder well, and so they were *real*. And Isla stood in front of the shrine in the clean high light and followed the little live cords with her eye the way she'd followed the deep line under the fish-lift, and saw that they did not stop at the stone.

They ran *through* it. Down through the iron rings, down into the pier, down through the Crown and along the great cables and down, gathering, thickening, joining — down toward the root of the city, toward the bollard, toward the deep line, toward the thing that breathed. Two centuries of Highspan piety, tied on a thread at a time by people who thought they were being generous to a statue, and every last thread of it running down and *loading the woman at the bottom*.

They were not lending the Founder their strength. There was no Founder. There was a living holder buried at the Cinch under the whole city's weight, and the good and gentle people of the Crown had been, devoutly, gratefully, for two hundred years, tying their small extra weights onto her back and calling it prayer.

Isla stood very still. The horror of it went through her in a cold flat sheet, and under the horror, unbidden, unwelcome, came the other thing — the thing that would not leave her afterward, that she would carry down every stair of the rest of this: that the gesture *worked*. That a person could stand at a rail and tie one small chosen thread and lend a real weight to the holding of the city. That the machine for sharing

the load was not lost or impossible or unknown. It was *right here*, worn smooth by two hundred years of thumbs, hiding in plain sight as a prayer — pointed, all of it, the wrong way, down onto one buried spine, when it might have been pointed anywhere. When it might have been pointed at *everyone*.

You could aim it out instead of down, said the cold clear thing under her horror. *You could untie every one of these and tie them to each other*.

She was so deep inside the thought that she forgot the first rule of being bare on the Crown, which was to keep moving, and she stood too long in front of a shrine with no cord on her at all, a woman made entirely of absence in a place where everyone dripped gold — and that was how they found her.

“You.” A Knotwright, grey-and-brass, a reader’s glass swinging up on its chain, three strides off and coming — and behind him, worse, unhurried, flat dead grey with a felt half-mask, *not* the Hall, one of the ones the pickers had no word for, drawn to the shrine the way a spider is drawn to the far end of the web when something with no business there touches a single thread. The Knotwright’s glass came up. “Woman. Show your cords. *Where are your cords.*”

She ran.

She should not have been able to; there was nowhere to run, on the Crown, in the open, with the drop on every side — but two winters of teaching Coll the ladder-streets meant her body knew the seams of the city the way her mind knew cords, and she went off the shrine-step sideways into the crush of the morning market and let the crowd close over her, low and quick, hook up her sleeve, and behind her she heard the Knotwright shout for a way to be cleared and heard the crowd not clear it fast enough, and had four strides’ grace, then three.

The flat grey did not shout. That was the terror of it. The Knotwright blustered and the crowd balked at him, but the grey one simply *came*, and the crowd, without knowing why, opened for it —

some old animal knowledge parting them out of its path — so that Isla, glancing back once, saw it gaining through a lane the people made for it themselves, and knew, with the cold arithmetic of the cornered, that she had climbed into the trap after all, that up had been the wrong way, that there was no way off the Crown a bare woman could take with a masked grey coming and the whole tier owing it obedience.

She turned down a high bridge toward a cabled stair — no good, it dead-ended at a house-gate — turned again, wrong, penned, the drop yawning under a plank-span to her left and a wall of Concordat stone to her right and the flat grey coming steady up the middle, and she thought, with a strange still clarity, *the shear is under the board, at least they won't take me as what I am, at least Coll won't—*

A hand closed on her wrist out of a seam in the stone she had not seen was there.

Not the grey. The grip came from a black slot between two piers, a mender's crawl, a nothing-gap — and it was hard and sure and it *pulled*, and a low voice said, "Don't fight me, sever, in," and Isla, with no better choice in the world, went sideways off the penned span into the dark of the slot, and a hand behind her did something quick to a hidden line and a counterweighted gate of old hawser dropped across the gap with a soft enormous thud, sealing the light and the grey and the Crown away on the other side of it.

Dark. Cold coming up. Two people breathing in a space the width of their shoulders. Out beyond the dropped gate, muffled, the flat grey reached the seam and stopped, and Isla heard it stand there, patient, working out the trick of the gate, and heard her rescuer breathe once beside her, unhurried, as if a masked unmaker were not a hand's breadth off through a foot of old rope.

"They'll have the gate up in a minute," the voice murmured, close in the dark. "Long enough. This way. Mind the drop on your left; it's a real one."

Isla did not move. Because the voice.

There is a register beneath knowing, older than the face, older than the name, laid down before you have language and never once overwritten — the sound of the person who was there before your first memory. Isla had not heard this voice in twenty years, and had spent those years being certain, with the flat certainty you build over a wound so you can walk on it, that she would never hear it again, that it had gone into the dark like everything else the Venns had ever had. And here it was, in a mender's crawl on the Crown, telling her to mind the drop, in the exact cadence — *mind the drop, it's a real one* — that it had used to use, going down the ladder-streets of a lower, older city, with a smaller Isla's hand held hard in its own.

She turned. There was almost no light — a grey blade of it coming under the dropped gate — but it fell across the other face, and Isla looked, and the years fell out from under her like a slipped span.

The woman was five years older than she should have let herself imagine, hard where their mother had been soft, cropped hair gone salt at the temples where it had once been the same dark as Isla's own, a rope-burn scar drawn shiny up the left side of her jaw that had not been there on the girl of sixteen who had held an eleven-year-old back from a body on a plank and screamed. She wore almost no cords — bare, like Isla, the family barrenness, except that at her throat hung a short close loop of grey quit-ends, a dozen cut stubs strung like beads, the discharged ends of promises somebody had severed, worn deliberately, the way another woman might wear the hair of the dead. She was thinner and colder and more dangerous than the sister in Isla's memory, and she was, past any lie Isla had built to walk on, unmistakably, impossibly, alive.

And she had their mother's eyes. The Venn eyes, tea-dark and warm in all that grey, the one un-grey thing in the whole of Osmark, the eyes Isla did not look for in mirrors because she could not bear to find them looking back — and they were looking at her now, out of a scarred stranger's face in a hole in the wall of the Crown, with something in them that was not surprise, that had never once been

surprise, that had known exactly who it was reaching into the dark to pull to safety.

“Hello, Isla,” said Yrsa Venn, her sister, twenty years dead. “You’ve grown up bare as me. I did wonder if you would.”

Beyond the gate, the flat grey found the counterweight, and the hawser began, softly, to rise.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sister

The gate rose a hand's breadth and jammed on its own counterweight, and in the borrowed minute while the grey out beyond it worked at the trick of the thing, Yrsa was already moving.

"Now," she said, and did not look back to see whether Isla came.

Isla came. The alternative stood a foot away through a wall of old rope, patient, taking the gate apart one pin at a time, and a body that has spent its life on the ladder-streets does not stand still with an unmaker breathing on the far side of a door; it goes. She went, into a black so complete it pressed on the eyes, on Yrsa's heels, her hook up her sleeve, one hand out and reading the walls the way she read cords. The walls read back as timber and tarred rope and the raw cold stone of the Crown's own underside — a warren of crawls no wider than a mender's shoulders, threaded through the guts of the tier like worm-track through a beam.

The mends, she understood, three turns in. The maintenance seams a rope-city has to leave in itself so that someone can crawl in and splice what frays. And someone had mapped them, all of them, and could move through them at a dead run without a lamp — which meant someone had been living inside the walls of the Crown the way Isla lived in the margins of Lowspan, unseen inside the very thing that would have unmade them for being seen.

Yrsa went down a long slope of them, and the drop announced itself on the left as a change in the cold, the particular emptiness the Sile breathes up any shaft that opens to it; and Yrsa said, without slowing, in the dark, in the voice, “Mind the drop on your left. It’s a real one.”

Something in Isla that she had spackled over and stood on for twenty years, so that she could walk, gave very slightly — like a plank taking one more winter than it was built for. Because their mother had said it. And then Yrsa had said it, coming down behind their mother with the little one’s hand crushed in her own, *mind the drop, Isla, it’s a real one*, down the ladders of a lower, older city that was gone now into the fog with everything else. It was a Venn thing to say. It was the thing you said to the child you were keeping alive. Isla had not heard it in twenty years and here it was, wielded — and she was sure now that nothing this woman did was accident — to open exactly the seam it opened.

She did not answer it. She minded the drop.

They came out at last into a pocket where a person could stand: a dead winch-house, a squat stone cell built into the pier to hold a counterweight-drum that had been still so long its cable had gone the grey of quit, hanging slack and dead down a shaft in the floor into nothing. Yrsa struck a light — a stub of candle in a tin, close-shuttered — and the little flame put her face together out of the dark, and Isla, who did not look for faces, looked at this one because she could not make herself stop.

The scar first, because it was new: the rope-burn drawn shiny up the left jaw, an old cruelty long healed. Then the cropped hair with its salt, where it had once been the dark Isla still, absurdly, thought of as *theirs*. Then the throat — that short tight loop of grey quit-ends, a dozen severed stubs strung and worn like beads, like the hair of the dead. And last, because she had been saving it and dreading it, the eyes: tea-dark and warm, the one un-grey thing in all of Osmark, their

mother's eyes in a stranger's face, looking back at her with no surprise in them at all.

"You've been watching me," Isla said. Not a question. Her voice came out level, which was a small private victory she took no pleasure in.

"For a while." Yrsa set the tin on the dead drum and did not come closer, which Isla marked; she knew how to handle a bare and frightened thing, she gave it room. "You made it hard. But a woman who wears no cords is the easiest person in the world to find, once you learn to look for the hole instead of the thread."

"The woman in the good coat." Isla kept her hands loose and her weight ready. "A season out of fashion. A working rope-hand under a fine glove."

"Senna." Yrsa said the name the way you set a stone on a table. "She's mine. She's good."

"She sent me down to a bollard under the fish-lift to cut a cord with no bottom."

"Yes."

"There was no bad old bond gone sour. There was no party who couldn't be asked." Isla let the cold come into her words. "It was a test. You aimed me at the deep line to learn whether I could cut it and live."

"Yes," Yrsa said again, unhurried, unashamed, and the candle-flame stood straight up in the still air between them. "And you did. You cut a splinter off the spine of the whole city, and it should have killed you the way it kills the worn ones, and it didn't. It scooped a room out of your head and let you run. You cut *clean*. Do you understand how rare that has become? I have buried four severs who tried less than that. You did it and walked home and lied to your boy about it."

Isla's stomach turned at *your boy* — at how much this woman knew, at Coll held unspoken in the dark between them like a hostage

— but she did not follow the flinch, because there was a worse thing in the room and she made herself say it instead.

“Teviss died.”

Yrsa’s face did not move.

“An old man who spliced netting thirty years, and his sister’s boy with him. The cable I strained went soft in the night and took them both into the fog. For your test.” Isla took a single step and stopped herself, because a step was a thing you did not give away for nothing. “You spent two men to interview me.”

“His name was Teviss,” Yrsa said quietly. “I know. I know all of them. I keep them.” Her hand rose to the loop at her throat and touched it, once — and Isla understood the beads then, and wished she did not: not trophies. A count. A woman wearing the weight of what she had spent, strung where she would feel it every time she swallowed. “You think carrying them makes it cleaner. It doesn’t. It only means I won’t lie to myself about the price. That’s the one thing I will not do, little sister. Lie about the price.”

“You sound like them.” Isla heard her own voice go flat and certain. “The grey ones. The ones who unmake the curious. *One life, spent right, holds up the many.* You’ve only chosen a different one to spend.”

“No.” And for the first time something moved under the hardness — not hurt, but a terrible eagerness, the zeal of a person who has found the single true thing and built her whole ruined life around it. “They spend one *so that the thousands never learn they are standing on her.* I mean to make everyone learn. I mean to end the spending.” She leaned toward the little light. “You saw the shrine today. I watched you see it. Your face in front of that statue was the first honest thing I’ve seen on a Venn in twenty years.”

So she let her say it, because there was no use anymore for the flat certainties Isla had built to walk on.

“There’s a person at the bottom of the city,” Isla said. “A holder. Bound at the Cinch under the whole weight of the Concord. And the

good pious Crown ties little live cords onto her and calls it prayer.” Saying it aloud in the dead winch-house made it heavier than the horror at the shrine had — made it true in the mouth and not only in the eye. “That’s what the Founder is. That’s what *hold fast* means. Hold *her* fast.”

“Two hundred years of her.” Yrsa’s voice had gone almost gentle, which was worse than the hardness. “One after another. The Cinchguard find a strong holder — or make one, which is uglier — and bury them alive in the city’s obligations until they wear through, and then they find the next. The one down there now is finishing. Failing. You’ve heard her; I know you have, you always had the ear. That great slow breathing under the hum.” She let it sit. “In a fortnight, maybe less, she lets go. And when she lets go the Concord has to catch on a new spine within days, or it cascades and the whole city goes into the Sile in an afternoon. So the grey ones are hunting, tonight, right now, for the next back to break.”

Isla stood very still and did not let herself look, yet, at the thought that had stood up at the back of the room — the thought with a name in it, too big to turn and face. *A strong holder. Or one they make.*

“And the Fallen,” she said instead. “What do you mean to do.”

“Cut it.” Yrsa said it as clean as Isla cut. “Before they can bind the next one. Cut the Concord at the root and let it fall.”

“*Let it fall.*” The words came back out of Isla cold, and under them she felt the drop open — the real one, the one with no floor. “There are a hundred thousand people on these bridges.”

“There are a hundred thousand people *owed to death* on these bridges,” Yrsa said, and now the eagerness had teeth in it, “living and dying in the Underhang so the Crown can wear its promises like jewellery. Signing barbed grain-debt for their children exactly the way our mother signed for us. Falling first, always first, every single time a span lets go. And it will keep on, Isla — the whole rotten vertical lie of it, forever, on the back of one buried woman after another — unless somebody is willing to end it. A clean city or

none.” She was not shouting. That was the horror of her; she never once had to shout. “But it need not fall on everyone. Cut clean — *aimed* — and you could drop the Concord and shear the Cinch free and let the ones who can run, run, and bring down the Crown that built the thing instead of the Underhang that has carried it. One cut. The right cut. The cut only a clean sever could make.”

And there it lay at last, on the dead drum in the candlelight: what Isla was for. The reason for the watching, the test, the two drowned men, the hand out of the black. Yrsa had not come to find her sister. Yrsa had recovered a tool.

“Where were you,” Isla said. It came out before she could stop it, small and twenty years old. “All that time. You let me think you were in the Sile with everyone else.”

“I was becoming something that could do this.” Yrsa did not even look away when she said it, and that was the whole of her tragedy in one breath: the girl who had held the child back from the drop had spent every year since turning herself into the blade that could cut the thing that made such drops — and had let the child grieve her as dead the entire time, because a dead sister could not be used against the cause, and a living one could. “I looked for the lever long enough that I became one. Don’t grieve it. I didn’t.”

“No,” Isla said. “I don’t think you did.”

For a moment Yrsa only looked at her. And then she did the thing Isla had been braced against since the voice first said her name in the dark — the true reason for all of it, the lock that Ault and the bollard and the mends had only ever been the road toward. She reached, without moving at all, the whole way back to the plank.

“You’ve done it before,” Yrsa said.

The winch-house went very quiet. Far down the dead shaft, the Underbreath moved.

“You cut a person you loved free of a barbed cord once,” Yrsa said, and her voice did not rise and did not soften; it simply went on, level and unbearable, setting down at last the thing neither of them

had ever said, “and it killed her. You were eleven. You got Mother’s shear out of the box while the cord-lord’s men were on the stair, and you cut the debt-oath they had forced into her, because you could not stand to watch her caged one more day — and the recoil went into her heart and stopped it, on a plank, over the drop, with me holding you back by the arms so you would not go over after her. I have never once said that aloud to another living soul. Neither have you. We have carried it apart for twenty years.” Their mother’s eyes did not blink. “You have already spent the person you loved most to cut one barbed cord, little sister. I am only asking you to let it mean something. What is one more, beside that? What is a city, beside *her*?”

It went in exactly where it was aimed, the way a good cut goes, and for a moment Isla could not breathe around it — the stair, the box, the cold small weight of the shear in an eleven-year-old’s fist, the sound her mother made, which Isla still had, which she had not spent, which she would have given every other thing she owned not to own. Yrsa watched it land with the patience of a woman who had waited two decades to make it land. And Isla understood, watching her watch, that her sister had kept this — all of it — not as a grief they might one day set down together, but as a *tool*: turned and honed and saved in the dark for the single lock it would open.

That was what broke it. Not the cruelty. The *use*.

“You want to know what I learned that day,” Isla said, and her voice came out low and terribly steady, the steadiness she always paid for later. “I learned that cutting the cage can kill the thing inside it. That a freedom you don’t build, that you only *slash* into being — it is just one more way to drop a person into the dark. You learned to spend. I learned the price. We are not the same, Yrsa, and I will not be your shear.”

She turned to go, and found she did not know the way out, and had to stand there in the indignity of it, bare and shaking with her

back to her sister, waiting to be shown out of the trap she had been carried into.

Yrsa did not stop her. That was the last and worst of it. She did not even rise. She let the silence run until Isla had to turn back, and then she picked up the shuttered tin and held it out — a light to leave by — and said, in the cadence from the ladder-streets, the one laid down before Isla had language:

“Go home, then. Mind the drop; it’s a real one.” And, as Isla took the light and would not take her hand: “But you crossed the Crown today with the shrine in your eyes, so you already carry the thing I brought you here to know. There is a body at the bottom of your city, holding you up while you sleep. It is dying, and they are already choosing the next one.” The candle lit the tea-dark eyes from below. “Go home to your careful little room, and your careful silent boy. And ask yourself *whose*.”

Isla went out through the mends alone, with the borrowed light, upward and then down the long tiers toward her own, and the question came the whole way with her like a cord she could not cut, drawing tighter at every turn — *whose, whose* — and she did not yet let herself hear, running underneath it, low and slow and patient, the answer that had already begun to breathe her apprentice’s name.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Cinch's Shadow

Warden Sesta Marrow went down to the Anchor at the hour she always went, alone, because some things a Warden does not delegate and some griefs she does not let another watch her carry, though she would not have used the word *grief*, even to herself. She would have said *duty*. She had spent forty years teaching herself to say *duty* until the other word stopped surfacing, the way you teach a cord to bear a load by loading it, daily, past the point where it remembers being slack.

The long stair to the Cinch dropped out of the Hold — the Cinchguard's warren of grey cells pinned to the cliff below the roots of Lowspan, below where any picker had ever cut, below the last lamp the city admitted to owning — and became, past the third gate, no stair at all but iron rungs down the raw throat of the Sile, cold breathing up out of the dark. Marrow went down without a rail, at sixty-three as she had at forty and at twenty-three, and did not hurry and did not slow. She was tall and spare, upright as a plumb-line, her iron hair cropped to the exact half-inch of practicality, her face composed into the stillness of a closed ledger, her eyes a pale grey that gave a subordinate nothing to hold. Her hands were the only unguarded thing about her: the palms seamed white and shiny with old cord-burns, forty years of tending the Anchor's live bonds with her own skin and no glove between, never once letting herself flinch

from the fire of it. As Warden she went unmasked — a Warden answers for her face — and at her wrist she wore a single cord of office, plain and grey and gold-hearted, the one promise she had made and kept above every other: *hold the city*. It was the tautest cord in Osmark. It never whined.

The vault opened below her the way it always did, and the way it always did it stopped her breath for the space of one rung, though she would have died before she showed it.

The Cinch was where the city came to a point. Every great cable of the Concord, every load-bearing hawser off every tier, ran down and inward through the stone throat and gathered *here*, into a knot the size of a house, a woven convergence of two hundred years of civic oath — and in the heart of the knot, cradled in the anchor-harness where the tension crossed itself and cancelled and became bearable, was the woman who had been holding all of it since before Marrow's own memory had properly begun.

She was small now. That was the thing that ambushed Marrow every time, that no report prepared her for: how small a person is who has been carrying a city. The harness held her more than she filled it, a slight veiled figure webbed in gold and grey light, the cords running into her at the shoulders and the spine and the open palms as if she were the loom and not the cloth. She breathed. In. Held. Out. The vault breathed with her, the whole convergence swelling and easing on that slow tide, and far up through the stone the note of it went, the great low throb beneath the city's hum that Osmarkers stopped hearing before they were weaned — that a very few, on an updraft, on the Concord Bridge, still caught and called *the sound below*, and shivered, and did not know they were hearing a person.

"You always come at the ebb," the Anchor said, without turning her veiled head, in a voice like something drawn up from a great depth. "When I'm low. You think I don't notice, Sesta. I notice everything down here. It's all I do."

“You should rest,” Marrow said. She had come to stand — she did not sit, in the vault; she had never in forty years sat while the Anchor bore the weight — beside the harness, and she looked at the cords where they entered the thin shoulders, and did not let her face do anything at all.

Three of them were failing.

She saw it the way a lifetime had taught her to see it: three of the great convergence-cords gone from gold to a strained pale, whining so faintly under the general hum that only a Warden’s ear, pressed to this exact silence for four decades, would catch it. The holder in the harness was letting go. Not by choice — no one held longer or harder than this one had; sixty years, the longest anchor-tenure in the order’s records, a strength that the Cinchguard spoke of in the tones other orders kept for saints — but the body was ending, and when the holder ended, the cords she carried would come loose and go looking, all at once, for something else to catch on. And find nothing. And recoil, up the throat, into the tiers, and take the city down in a single afternoon of falling bridges, the way the old city had fallen, the way it had sworn on the bones of everyone it dropped never to fall again.

A fortnight. Marrow made the arithmetic without wanting to and could not unmake it. Three cords already gone pale; the rate of a holder’s failing was a curve she had watched to its end more than once in her long service. A fortnight, and generous. Perhaps less.

“You’re counting,” the Anchor said. “I can feel you counting. You get cold in the hands when you count.” A sound came out of her that in another woman, in the light, might have been a laugh. “You had cold hands as a child. You’d put them on my neck to warm them and I’d let you, because a mother lets you, even when you’re ice.” The veiled head turned, at last, the smallest degree, and though Marrow could not see the eyes she felt them. “I’m not going to give you a name, Sesta. I know that’s what the counting is for. I’ve held two hundred years of this city’s word and I have earned one word of my own, and it is *no*. Let me be the last. Let it stop with me.”

“It cannot stop with you,” Marrow said, and her voice did not shake, because she had spent a life on the discipline of it. “If it stops with you the city stops with you. A hundred thousand people, and every promise between them, into the fog. You have held them your whole life. Do not, at the end, drop them to make a point.”

“To make a point.” The Anchor breathed. In. Held. Out. The vault swelled and eased. “Is that what you think it is.” She said no more, and turned her veiled face away again, back to the immense inward labour of not letting go, and Marrow stood beside her in the cold and the gold light with her scarred hands loose at her sides and permitted herself, for the length of one of those long slow breaths, to lay two fingers against the veiled shoulder — lightly, where no cord entered, where it would not disturb the holding — the single tenderness she allowed herself in the year, and told herself, as she always did, that it was homage, that it was the reverence any of the order might pay the holy thing they guarded, and did not let the other word up out of the dark where she kept it, and then took her hand away and climbed back up the rungs to do what a Warden does, which is choose whose turn it is to be buried.

* * *

The Hold received her the way it received everything, in grey silence. In the map-room a lamp burned over the candidate ledger, and Marrow stood at the long slate table and read what her people had brought her while she was below.

The ledger of holders was the oldest and best-kept register the Cinchguard owned, and it did the one thing the order existed to make possible: it knew, at any hour, where in the vertical city the strong backs were. Every wright who tested a natural load-bearer, every yard-master who watched a boy hold a drop-line past the fourth knot, every quiet recruiter working a guild floor in proper wool — all of it ran uphill, in the end, to this slate, so that when the day came, as it

had now come, the order would not be caught searching. A born holder is one in tens of thousands, and one *strong enough to anchor* rarer still, not to be conjured on a fortnight's notice. Unless you have kept the ledger for two hundred years. Then you simply read.

There were four names under fresh ink. Marrow's eye went down them and stopped at the second, because a hand she trusted had written three words beside it that the ledger did not often see.

Held the fifth.

She read the entry twice. A boy. Fifteen. Midspan yard, Coper's Reach, under the Knotwrights' Hall. Untied — no apprentice-cord, no guild registration, an orphan out of the Underhang living rough with an unlicensed cord-mender, which meant no house, no leverage-cord, no one whose consent would have to be bought or broken — *convenient*, the ledger's margin did not say and did not need to. He had taken a drop-line in front of a whole yard and held it silent to the fifth knot, where the yard's own best had crested at the third; and then, when another journeyman overloaded a drop out of spite and the cord broke and recoiled, the boy had caught the recoil bare-handed off a smaller taker and *absorbed* it, and walked away with his hand unmarked. A cup, the recruiter had written, in the shape a Warden would understand, that does not run over. *It finds room.*

The recruiter's name at the foot of the entry was Sowe, who did not exaggerate and had marked more anchors in his career than any three others, and Sowe had written, under the assessment, the plainest praise the man ever gave: *The strongest raw hand I have read in thirty years. He wants to be chosen. He will come to the disc on his own feet.*

The boy's name was Coll.

Marrow stood over the slate a while. She was not a woman who let herself feel the weight of a name — that was precisely the discipline: a candidate was a *strength*, a load-rating, a solution to an arithmetic that had no other. And yet she had guarded the holy thing at the bottom of the city for forty years, and she knew, better than any

soul alive except the woman in the harness, exactly what she would be doing to the owner of that name. She let herself know it for the space of one breath, because the lie that costs you is the one you don't admit you're telling. Then she set it down, the way she set everything down, and thought: *he is untied, and willing, and the strongest hand in thirty years, and the Concord does not care whether I flinch.* And that was the end of the deliberation, because there was truly none to be had. A fortnight. Perhaps less.

She had turned to call for the writing of the order when the last report caught her — a single leaf set apart from the ledger, in the careful hand of one of her own field officers, and she picked it up because the officer who wrote it was among the best she had, a clear cold reliable woman named Vora Keel who did not waste a Warden's time.

A clean sever is loose in the low tiers.

Marrow read it standing very still.

The Hall thought it was hunting an ordinary cutter — a fish-lift cable had slipped, two men lost, and the Knotwrights wanted the sever who strained it and would settle for hanging whoever they could catch, because a hanging is a public thing and the Hall loved a public thing. But Keel's report, meant for the Warden's eyes and no other, said what the Hall could not read: the cut had gone *down*. Toward the root. A frayed offshoot of a deep line, cut and survived — and cut *clean*, the tell-marks of it unmistakable to an officer trained to know them, no worn stumbling smear of a used-up cutter but a single true stroke that had taken its price and closed. A barren woman, no cords on her at all, first filed by a Hall inspector at the head of the Tallow stair and now gone to ground somewhere in the low warren.

Two feelings arrived in Marrow at once, and she was old enough in her office to hold both without letting either move her face.

The first was the old clean alarm, the one the order was built on. A clean sever, loose, in the very fortnight the Anchor was failing, was the single most dangerous object in Osmark. The Fallen — she did

not flatter herself they had stopped existing merely because the order kept unmaking them — had dreamed of exactly this for a generation: a cutter fine enough to sever the Concord at the root and *aim* the fall. If the thing loose in the low tiers found its way to them, it would not matter how strong the boy's hands were, because there would be nothing left to anchor. The curious severs who cut toward the root did not get hanged; the gallows were for frightening the public, and this was not a matter for the public. The order *unmade* them — quietly, wholly, gear left where it lay and the asking stopped at the source — and Marrow had signed the doing of it more times than she kept count of, and called it, in the ledger of her conscience, mercy: better a clean nothing than a public horror, better one cutter gone than the secret loose. She reached, almost, for the pen that would do it again.

And the second feeling stopped her hand above the paper.

Cut clean, the report said. *Took its price and closed*. Marrow of all people knew what that meant, because the reason a sever cannot cut the deep line and live is that the recoil of a thing that size will not fit inside an ordinary person; it kills them, the way the boy's caught recoil would have killed the smaller taker. To cut clean off the spine of the city and walk home was not the work of an ordinary sever at all. It was the work of someone who could *carry* what she cut — who could open a place inside herself large enough to take the weight and not be killed by it.

A sever who could hold.

Marrow had served the Cinch for forty years and had never once, in all the order's records, read of such a thing; and she stood over the slate table in the grey lamplight and understood, with the cold falling clarity that had made her Warden, that the most dangerous object in Osmark was also, if she reached it before the Fallen did, the answer to a prayer she had not dared to pray. A holder who was also a sever could do more than take the Anchor's place. She could *cut the old Anchor free and take the whole weight onto herself in the same breath* — a clean succession, no gap, no fortnight of terror, no failing curve

to race. The boy was a strong back for the ordinary way; but the thing loose in the low tiers, if it was what the tell-marks said, was something the order had waited two hundred years without knowing it waited for.

She would not choose between them. She had been a Warden too long to stake the city on one road when she could send two.

“Bring me the writing-kit,” Marrow said to the grey shape waiting at the door, and her voice was perfectly even, and her burned hands had gone quite still. She wrote two orders in her exact upright hand, and sealed them each in grey.

The first went to Sowe, and it said: *Let the boy come to the disc. Gently. On his own feet, believing he is chosen, and he is. Bring him to the Hold within the week.* For a willing anchor holds longer than a broken one, and the order had always preferred, when it could, to be loved by the thing it buried.

The second went to Vora Keel, whom Marrow trusted as she trusted few, because Keel was clear and cold and had never given the order a reason to doubt her; and it said: *The clean sever is not for the Hall and not for unmaking. Find her before the Fallen do. Take her alive and whole and bring her down to me. Whatever she is, she is mine.*

She did not know — how could she; the woman had never given her the smallest reason — that the officer she trusted with the second order had, a night or two before, stood masked at the head of the Tallow stair and let the clean sever go, with a warning and a word and a place to run. She sealed the grey and gave it to be carried, and turned, alone in the map-room, back toward the dark stair and the small failing woman at the bottom of it whom she would not name even to herself; and she told herself, as she had told herself every day for forty years, that a city is worth a single life, and did not let up out of the dark the question the woman in the harness had breathed into the gold light behind her — *is that what you think it is* — because a

Warden answers for her face, and there was no one left in all of Osmark she trusted to answer for it if it ever, once, let go.

CHAPTER NINE

What Runs Beneath

The stove had burned down to a red eye, and Coll was awake in the dark, pretending not to be, and Isla stood inside her own door and let him keep the pretence, because she had come home from her sister with a thing in her chest too large to set down in a small warm room in front of a boy.

He lay on his side by the stove with his knees drawn up, too long for the space the way he was too long for every space now, his big hands folded under his cheek like a much younger child's. His breath came a shade too even — a boy holding a line steady and hoping you would not see him strain at it. Two winters she had known that breath: known it for the fevers he would not own to, the lost hooks he dreaded confessing, the things Barrow's boy said on the ladder-streets that Coll would carry a week and never repeat. Tonight it meant he was holding something. She had known it for days and told herself it was the ordinary weather of a boy growing away from the woman who fed him.

She could have knelt at the stove and said, *Coll. What is it.* It would have worked; it nearly always did — he could not hold a thing and be looked at with kindness in the same moment; it came out of him like water from a split hose. She did not. She had a person breathing at the bottom of the city and a sister's voice in her ear saying *ask yourself whose*, and she did not trust herself, that night, to

kneel into the small true trouble of a fifteen-year-old without spilling the enormous one all over him. So she banked the coals and laid her hand once, lightly, on the jut of his shoulder — the thing she did instead of the words she would not make — and felt him hold still under it, keeping his false sleep with the same care he would keep a drop-line.

“Bar the door behind me,” she said, to the room, to a sleeping boy who was not asleep. “I’ll be back before the first bell.”

She should have felt the night bend there. She had spent her whole life reading the small change in a cord that meant it was about to go. She read nothing at all. She went out to learn what her boy had been chosen for and left him awake and holding it, and did not ask, and that was the last ordinary minute they would have, and in the time to come she would spend a great deal of what she had left trying to buy it back.

* * *

Onil Sump kept the night the way old fences keep it, dozing over a lamp turned to its last thread, the brass balance before him and his three-fingered hand laid across it as though to stop something getting away. At that hour, the stalls above him shuttered, you could hear what daylight drowned: the whole slow chord of the city’s kept word, the sound a person born in Osmark stopped hearing before they had teeth.

He woke the moment her shadow crossed his lamp, and his soft ruined face made the journey she had watched it make ten thousand times — gladness first, helpless, before it caught itself, and then the fear that had stood behind the gladness for as long as she had known him.

“No,” he said, to the ceiling, to the balance, to her. “Whatever’s put that face on you, the answer’s no. Sit down. Are you hungry?”

“Onil.”

“I’ve a heel of good bread and a worse story about how I came by it.” He was already shifting his bulk on the stool, reaching for the cloth over the loaf, making the small hospitable racket a frightened man makes to fill a room so nothing worse can get in. “Sit. You look like the underside of a bad week.”

She sat. She laid her hands flat on the cold table so he could see them empty of the shear, and said, “I need the oldest story you have. The one you don’t tell.”

The cloth stopped moving under his hand.

“I’ve a great many stories.”

“You have one you’ve never told me. Thirty years, and there’s a shape in your talk you steer around every time, the way the ferrymen steer the slack under the Trueknot and never say why. I’ve felt you do it my whole life and I let it be, because I don’t ask a person for the thing they’re keeping.” She held his eyes, which were brown and frightened and kind. “I’m asking now.”

For a while he did not answer. He turned the balance a quarter-turn on the table, and back, the way another man might turn a ring. Then he said, low, “Who told you there was a story.”

“No one told me. I went up to the Crown today and I saw a shrine, and the votive-cords on it were live, and they ran down. And then I heard—” She stopped, because Yrsa was a door she would not open in this room. “I heard it named. And I need to know if it’s true, or if it’s only the thing pickers say to frighten the new ones off the deep cordage. I need it from you, because you’re the only man alive who’s never once lied to me.”

Onil put both hands over his face — the whole one and the ruined one — and drew them slowly down, and when they came away he had aged five years in the lamplight, and she understood that she was doing to him exactly what Yrsa had done to her: setting down at last a thing carried in the dark so long that saying it aloud felt like a kind of falling.

“You learn it before your letters, down here,” he said. “*You don’t cut down*. I taught it you myself, and you thought it was about the recoil, and it is, but that’s the little half of it. The big half is the one nobody says the words to, because the ones who said the words too loud aren’t here to be pointed at.” He wet his lips. “There’s a story older than the Concord, girl, that says the Concord doesn’t hold itself. That a promise that big can’t. That it’s tied off, down at the root, to a body. A living one. A holder strong enough to carry the whole city’s word on their own two shoulders so the rest of us never feel the weight of it — and when that one wears through, they find another, and they tie the city off fresh, and the ones up top light a candle to the Founder and never know they’re lighting it *to a person*.” His voice had gone to almost nothing. “That’s the story. The Founder never went anywhere. The Founder’s still down there. She’s just not the same woman she was two hundred years ago, because you can’t ask one back to last that long.”

Isla found she was not surprised, and the not-being-surprised was its own cold horror, because it meant she had already believed it, in the eye, at the shrine, in the winch-house; she had only been waiting for a voice she trusted to make it heavy enough to keep.

“How do you know it’s true and not a story,” she said.

“I don’t. That’s the mercy of it. Nobody down here *knows*.” He leaned in, and the fear in him sharpened to something urgent and pleading. “And that’s what you’ll not undo, Isla, so hear me. The ones who go looking to *know* — the curious ones, the ones who go down to listen — they stop. Not hang. Hanging’s the Hall’s trade, hanging’s a show. These ones just *stop*. Their gear turns up where they left it and nobody’s allowed to wonder and after a while nobody does. I knew a picker called Wend when I was your boy’s age. Sharp lad. Went down to the old sounding-brace under the fish-lift one slack night to put his ear to the great cable and settle it for himself, one way or the other.” He spread the ruined hand flat on the table, three fingers, a gap where the world had taken the rest. “His hook’s still

wedged in that brace. Forty years. Nobody's touched it. Nobody will."

"The sounding-brace," Isla said.

"No."

"Where under the fish-lift."

"No," Onil said, and it cracked in the middle. "I didn't tell you thirty years so I could hand you the map tonight. The dark side, past the last netting-gallery, there's a strut runs out over the deepest drop in Lowspan — the Splint, the old ones called it, because it's the brace that keeps the great down-cable from working itself loose where it turns for the root. You get out on the Splint at the dead slack of the night and put your ear to the cable, and — " He stopped. He looked, for a moment, like the young man who had had all his fingers and chosen, at the last, not to climb out onto that strut himself. "And they say you hear it. The heart of the city. And they say it isn't a machine. That's all I know, and I only know it because I'm a coward, girl. I got as far as the mouth of the gallery and heard Wend's story in my own teeth and turned around, and I have been turning around ever since, and it is the reason I am alive to feed you bad bread. Be a coward with me. Just this once. Turn around."

She reached across the table and put her hand over his ruined one, over the gap, which she had never once done in thirty years, because he had never tied a cord to her and she had never wanted to owe one; and she felt him go still under it the way Coll had gone still under her hand at the stove, two people that night holding what they could not carry and letting themselves, for a breath, be touched.

"Thank you for telling me," she said, which was not a promise to turn around, and he knew it, and his face broke very quietly, the way a span breaks — not all at once, but along a line that was always going to be the line.

* * *

She went down.

The fish-lift stood dead and dark at the end of its run, the cage resting empty at the top the way it did after the last bell, and there was a new thing on it that had not been there before her cut: a Hall seal, grey-and-brass wax on a cord across the loading gate, and a boy in Hall livery asleep at his post beside it with a cudgel across his knees, set to guard the place where two men had gone into the fog on a splice she had strained. She was about to break back into the scene of the worst thing she had done since she was eleven, to learn whether it was also part of the worst thing anyone had ever done.

She went around, the long way, the picker's way, down through the netting-galleries where the working lines hung slack and cold over nothing, past the last lamp, out along a rib of old timber greased black with forty years of fog, until the structure thinned and thinned and there was only the one brace left running out ahead of her into the dark, no wider than a plank, furred with frost, over the deepest drop in Lowspan. The Splint. Somewhere out along it, wedged and waiting, was a dead boy's hook.

She did not let herself think about the width of it. She had crossed worse for less. She went out on hands and knees, and the cold of the strut came up through her palms and into the long bones of her arms, and the Underbreath moved below her, patient and immense, breathing its mineral breath up the drop. And there, running down the near side of the brace, was the cable — the great down-cable, thick as a man is tall, turning here for the root of the world — and she knew it, because she had cut a splinter off a thing like it under the bollard and it had scooped a room out of her head; and she made herself lie along the frozen strut with her arm around it like a lover and lay her ear against the cold woven skin of it, at the dead slack of the night.

At first only the general chord, the city's whole kept word coming down the cable to the point where all points met.

And then, under it, the way a single voice comes up out of a crowd once you have learned its pitch — the slow thing. The great

low throb she had first caught on the Trueknot and thought was the city's engine, if the city had an engine. In. A holding. Out. She had heard it three times now, each time from far off — through fog, through stone, a rumour of a sound. Here, with the cable against the bone behind her ear, there was no fog and no far. It was close. It was a body. Threaded through the throb she could hear the smaller sounds a body makes and cannot help — a catch at the top of the breath, a faint dry effort in the holding, the least sound of a person bearing a weight so long that bearing it has become the whole of what they are. The breath was old. And — this was the thing that went into her and did not come out — the breath was *tired*: between one slow tide and the next a hitch, a place where the holding faltered and caught itself, the exact sound a picker's own arms made in the last hour of a haul too heavy, the sound of a person who has decided to let go and has not yet been allowed to.

Belief landed on her then, all at once, and it did not land as knowledge. It landed as grief. She had known it in the head since the Crown, confirmed it in the head in the winch-house; and none of that was anything beside this, which was not knowing but *hearing* — a person, alone, in the cold under everything, breathing the city up on the last of herself while a hundred thousand slept warm on her exhaustion and called it virtue and lit her a candle, one holder after another, for two hundred years. Isla lay along the frozen Splint with her face against the cable and wept, without sound, the way she had trained herself to weep, the tears running sideways off the bridge of her nose and falling the long way into the fog; and far down, in the holding between two breaths, she felt what she had felt once before under the bollard — the least turning, the sense of being *noticed* from the bottom of the world, a tired attention brushing up the line toward the small warm weight that had come, at last, to listen. It did not frighten her this time. That was the worst of it. It felt like being recognised.

Ask yourself whose, Yrsa had said. And Isla had come down here to answer *whose is the body*, and had her answer, and it was terrible enough. But lying on the strut with the tired breath in her bones, she felt the other question turn over at last and show its face — not *whose is the body that holds us now*, but *whose will be the next*. A strong holder. Born, or made. Hunted tonight, while she lay here weeping into the fog. A back young enough to carry two hundred years. And the thought she had refused in the winch-house, the one too large to turn and face, stood up in the dark and said its name — and she would not, even now, even here, let herself hear it, because to hear it was to have to move, and she was not sure, yet, that her arms would hold her on the strut if she did.

She crawled back off the Splint. She did not touch the dead boy's hook. She went up through the cold galleries and past the sleeping guard and the grey-and-brass seal, up the long tiers toward home, and the tired breath came with her the whole way, threaded now under the city's ordinary hum where she would never again not hear it, and she went faster, and faster, because the closer she came to her own door the louder the un-heard name grew, until she was very nearly running when she reached the top of her own stair and found the door standing open on the dark, and the stove cold, and the boy gone.

There was a note. He had weighted it on the cot with the reading-fee coin she had given him for the guild-clerk, the whole of it, unspent, returned. He had printed it large and careful in the hand she had taught him herself, letter by letter, over two winters, and it was not a long note, because he did not have many letters yet and had spent them all on the thing that mattered:

dont tie yourself to me. i went and got it done myself. im chose isla — a real house, a real cord, a real wright, no fee off you and no leash on you. i wanted to bring it home done so youd never have had to. dont be angry. ill come back and youll see. — C

She stood in the cold room a long time, the coin in one hand and the note in the other and the tired breath going on under the floor of

the city, and did not need to be told the rest. *Chose*. A house that wanted rare hands and asked no cord in return, that prized a boy tied to no one, an orphan no one would come asking after. A strong young back — the kind a person hunts in the fortnight an old one fails. She had lain all night with her ear to the proof of what they did with such a back, and come home to find they had taken hers — had come up the stair, in fact, the very night she went down to learn the word for what he would become, the two of them passing in the dark of the city like a cut passing through a cord, and she had left him awake and holding it and had not asked.

She put the coin in her pocket. She folded the note once and put it against her chest, inside her shirt, where the shear used to ride before she hid it, in the place a person keeps the thing they will not set down. Then Isla Venn, who wore no cords and made no promises and had spent her whole careful life making certain she was tied to no one so that no one could ever be used to break her — Isla went to the third board under the cot, and took out the shear from its coil of quit, and put it back where it belonged against her spine; and went out into the last of the dark toward the second Lowspan reach, and the rope-walk, and the sign of the blue funnel, to say a word to a stranger and start down after her boy.

CHAPTER TEN

Above His Station

The words that changed everything were only two, and Coll gave them to a Chandler at the head of the Concord Bridge on a bright hard morning, with his heart going like a hauled line and the grey disc hot in his fist from being held too tight all the way up from Lowspan.

The Chandler was a mild grey man weighing tallow behind a counter of good dark wood, and he had not looked up when Coll came in, which was ordinary; Coll was used to being a length of boy that rooms declined to notice. So he set the disc on the counter, the way Master Sowe had told him to, and he said the words, and his voice cracked in the middle of them the way it still did when it mattered, and he hated it.

“You’ve been chosen.”

The Chandler set down his weights. And he looked up, and he looked at Coll — properly, the whole of him, the way you look at a thing you have been told is valuable and are checking against the description — and something happened in the grey man’s face that Coll had waited fifteen years to see somebody’s face do about him. It went *careful*. It went respectful. The Chandler came round the counter and he did not take the disc; he took Coll’s hand, the great clumsy one, in both of his, and he bowed his head over it a little, and he said, “We’ve been hoping for you. Come in out of the wind. You must be tired, coming all this way. You’ll never be tired again if we can help

it,” and he said it warmly, and Coll’s ears went hot with a pleasure so total it was almost like shame.

That was how it started, and Coll would think back on that morning many times in the days that came after, on how *easy* it had been to walk through the door, how they had made the door the loveliest thing in the world.

* * *

He had meant to bring it home *done*. That was the whole of the plan, turned over so many nights by the stove while Isla thought him asleep that it had worn smooth as a river-stone. Isla would not tie the apprentice-cord — not because she didn’t love him, he knew now she loved him, she just couldn’t make the knot, the same something that kept her bare and alone and flinching from her own reflection — and the Hall wouldn’t register him without it, and no wright would post the forty weight for a picker’s boy for love. So the wall was a wall. Then Sowe had come along the yard-rail in his good soft wool with all the time in the world, named Coll a holder of the chosen sort, and offered to take the wall down with his own hand and ask no cord in return — *because we don’t leash a thing as strong as you* — and Coll had seen, all at once, the way out of the trap that had held him and Isla both.

He would go and get it done himself. Secretly. He would come home a registered wright with a real house behind him and set it in front of her like a fish he’d caught, the biggest of his life — for once *he* the one who took a weight off *her*, and she would never have had to make the knot she couldn’t make. He had written the note with all the letters he had. He had left the coin. He had thought it through like a man.

It did not once occur to him, on the bright morning with his hand in the chandler’s, to wonder why a great house that wanted rare strong hands would send its chosen ones *down*.

* * *

Because they went down.

He had thought — a house, a real house; he had pictured Highspan, sunlight, a tower with his own cot in it up where the cords were gilded. Instead the grey people, more of them all the time, quiet and courteous, walked him back across the Concord Bridge and down, and down, past Midspan, past the last of the markets, down the throat-stairs into Lowspan and then past even that, down a guarded stair he had never known was there, below the lowest lamp he had ever seen the city admit to owning, into a warren of grey stone cells pinned to the raw cliff where the cold came up off the Sile through every seam. He kept waiting for the down to turn into up. It never did. And when he said, trying to make it a joke, because a joke was how he checked a thing he was afraid of, “Thought chosen meant I was going up in the world,” the grey woman walking him only smiled and said, “The old foundation is the deepest part of any house. The strength is always at the bottom. That’s where we keep what matters most,” and it was such a kind answer, and it was the first time the cold got properly into him, and he could not have said why.

They called the place the Hold, when they called it anything.

* * *

They were so good to him. That was the thing he could not fit anywhere. He had braced, without knowing he was bracing, for the world’s usual treatment of a length of Underhang boy — the shove, the short word, the eye that slid off. He got the opposite, and it undid him a little every day. They gave him clothes that fit, warm and grey and new, the first new-made things he had ever put on a body that had only ever worn what the dead were done with. They fed him — not scraps, not a picker’s cold heel, but hot food, meat, pressed on him, *eat, eat, you’re all bone, we’ll put some weight on you yet*, until he was fuller than he had ever been in his life and then full again the next

day. They gave him a cell of his own with a cot and a brazier and let him sleep as long as he liked, and were pleased when he woke ashamed at how late it was. *Rest*, they told him. *Your only work here is to get strong and be well. Leave the lifting to smaller men.* And they laughed, fondly, as though a boy resting were a fine and precious thing.

He kept trying to be useful, out of old habit, and they kept, gently, not letting him. He offered to haul; they turned him from it, smiling. He picked up a loaded coil once, just to move it out of a doorway, an easy weight, nothing, and a grey man crossed the room quite fast and took it out of his arms — not roughly, never roughly — and said, “No, no. Not you. We don’t spend you on coils,” and set it down himself, and looked at Coll afterward with something Coll wanted to call pride and could not quite, because pride looks at what you *did* and this looked at what you *were*, at the meat of him, the way Onil looked at a good haul of quit before he weighed it.

We don’t spend you. He turned the word over that night on the too-soft cot. It was a strange word to use about a person. You spent coin. You spent quit. You spent a thing by *using it up*.

* * *

They did let him do one kind of work, and it was the only work that did not feel like rest, and it was the strangest of all.

They tested his holding. Kindly, always kindly, with a soft-handed old wright who had a voice like the chandler’s and endless patience. They would give Coll a live cord — a small vow made up between two of the grey ones for the purpose, palm to palm — marry it by a running hitch to a weight, lower the weight, and ask Coll only to hold. And he held. It was the easiest thing he knew, easier than talking, easier than not talking; where another taker’s cord would whine and heat and pale, his stayed quiet and gold, the load going into him and finding room, always room, more than the weight

ever needed. The old wright would watch the cord not-whine and his eyes would go bright and wet, and he would murmur *there, there it is*, and lower more, past any knot Coll had heard of a person holding; and Coll would hold it unbothered and feel, under his unease, the one clean pleasure of the place: that here, at last, the thing he was good at for no reason was wanted, was marvelled at, was the point of him.

And then one day the old wright lowered the weight past everything, past the far end of the counting, and for the first time in his life Coll felt his hold reach the bottom of its room — felt, very far down inside himself, a floor, and the weight come to rest on it, immense, and himself take it and take it and go on taking it — and the old wright made a sound like a man in chapel and wrote something down with a shaking hand, and would not tell Coll the number, and Coll saw, before the man covered it, that he had underlined it three times.

That night they gave him honey in his milk and two of them sat with him while he drank it, watching him drink it, the way you sit with someone you love who is going on a journey.

* * *

There were others.

That was the wrongness he could not stop picking at, once he'd found the loose end of it. He was not the only one being kept. There were others in the Hold — six, seven, he never got a clear count — some of them grown, and they had the run of the same grey comfort, the food and the rest and the tests, and they had all been chosen, and none of them ever left. He asked one, a broad soft-spoken young man called Pell who'd been kind to him, how long he'd been down here, and Pell had to think about it, actually think, his face working like a sum he'd lost the top line of, and then said, "A while now," and smiled, and there was nothing behind the smile at all, a lamp with no flame in it, a cord gone to quit. Coll had thought at first the ones who

never left were lucky, kept safe and warm forever. He looked at Pell's smiling empty face and understood, with a lurch, that safe and warm forever was a thing you could do *to* a person. That some of the doors in the grey warren were locked, and that not all of the locks were to keep things out.

He started, after that, to hear the reverence differently. The grey people spoke of the Hold's purpose in hushed and shining tones, of *the city*, of *what we carry*, of *the ones who came before and gave everything*, and Coll had drunk it down at first like the honey-milk because being spoken to like scripture was new and warm. Now the words turned in his stomach. *Gave everything*. Everyone gives some things. Nobody good, in Coll's experience, wanted you to give *everything*, and the ones who asked it of you smiling were the exact ones Isla had spent two winters teaching him to run from.

There was one who would not look at him at all.

An officer, grey like the rest but harder-made, her field mask pushed up off her face in the warmth of the Hold so that he saw her plain: not old, tired careful eyes, a mouth trained to say nothing. The others met his eye gladly, hungrily, the way you meet the eye of good news. She never once did. She brought his supper twice and both times looked somewhere past his shoulder — the wall, the floor, anything in the cell that was not the boy in it. When he tried to talk to her, because talking was the thing Coll could not help, he asked her name and she gave it, *Keel*; he asked was she low-tier born, because she had the low-tier way of standing — and she went still, and set the bowl down, and said, not quite to him, "Eat it while it's hot. You'll want your strength." Then she was gone, fast. And Coll understood that everyone in the Hold was pleased with him except the one who could not look him in the face; and that in the whole of his hard life, the people who could not look at you were never the ones who meant you harm. They were the ones who knew what the harm was going to be.

He saw the tall woman once.

She came through the map-room while he was being walked to a test, and the whole warren changed around her the way a yard changes when the Hall gallery fills — everyone straighter, quieter, the courtesy gone hard and true. She was old and grey and upright as a plumb-line, cropped iron hair, a face like a shut book, and her hands, when Coll's eye caught on them, were seamed all over white and shiny, burned and burned again and healed wrong, the hands of someone who had held live cord bare-handed for a lifetime and never let go. She looked at Coll as she passed. Just once. And it was not unkind, and it was not kind; it was the look the chandler had given the disc — checking a valuable thing against its description — except that where the chandler had been hoping, this woman was only *counting*. She looked at him the way you look at a number you are relieved to have. Then she was gone through a grey door that shut, and Coll found he had stopped breathing, and one of his minders said, warm and proud, "That's the Warden. She came up to see you. Do you know she came up *herself*, to see you? You've no idea, lad, what you are to us," and Coll smiled and said something and his ears did not go hot, for once, they went cold.

What you are to us. Not who. What.

He lay awake the whole of that night with the tired old fear he'd carried out of the Underhang, the one Isla had almost taught him to set down, and he let himself, finally, think it plainly, in the dark, the way you make yourself look at a wound to see how deep: *They are not making me a wright. They are being kind to me the way you are kind to a beast you are keeping sound for one particular morning. I have been chosen. And I do not know what for, but I have watched them not-spend me for days now, and a thing you refuse to spend is a thing you are saving up.*

And Isla did not know where he was. He had seen to that himself. He had lied to her and left her a note with all his letters in it and slipped off to be the hero of his own plan, and now he was folded up warm and fattening at the bottom of the world where no one would ever come asking after an orphan tied to no one, and the only person alive who loved him thought he was up in a tower learning knots.

He had to reach her. Not to be saved — he did not, that night, let himself want as much as *saved* — but to *warn* her, because whatever this house was and whatever it wanted, it had wanted a strong untied hand very badly and very quietly, and Isla needed to know there was a house like that in the world, hunting.

* * *

The trouble was that they had taken the disc, and there were no cords on him — they were so pleased he had no cords — and you cannot send word to anyone in Osmark without a line to send it down.

Except that Coll was Underhang, and the Underhang did not run on the fine live cords of the tiers above. The poor had no runners and no gilded promises; what they had was quit — the dead grey rope that was the only thing they were ever given enough of. Strung through the underside of every low tier were the quit-lines, dead ropes threaded gallery to gallery, carrying no promise and no weight, good for nothing the wrights could tax — except that a dead rope pulled tight will carry a *tap*. Every Underhang child knew it before their letters, the same way they knew you didn't cut down: you found the quit-line and knocked it, in the old code, long and short, and three galleries over another child felt it hum under their hand and knocked it on. *Come. Danger. Low gate. Wait.* A poor child's whole telegraph, run on the one material the city thought was safely dead.

And the Hold was built, like everything down here, of the city's cast-off make — and low in the grey warren, in a cold seam behind the brazier-store where they did not think to watch a boy who was

only resting, Coll's picker's eye found it: a hand-thick line of old quit run down through the stone to brace something, dead as a doornail, taxable by no one, forgotten. It went *down*, which was wrong; everything here went down. But a rope carries a tap both ways, and if this one joined the great dead web of the low tiers anywhere at all, a knock set into it would run out through the bones of the Underhang the way word had always gone down there, hand to hand, for free — until it reached a picker who knew a mender named Onil, who knew the one woman in Osmark who wore no cords.

Coll wedged himself into the cold seam in the dark, and put his great clumsy hand flat on the dead line, and felt it take his palm the way a held cord took a weight — room in it, a long dead patient road running away into the stone. He did not know if it reached anything. He did not know who, if anyone, still slept with a hand on a quit-line these nights, or whether the knock would die three galleries out against a cut he couldn't see. He knew only the code, and that it was the one thing they had left him that they didn't know was a thing, because they thought quit was safe, they thought dead rope was dead.

He knocked. Long, and short, and short. *Danger*. And then, because he had few words in the old code the way he had few letters, and had to spend them on what mattered, he knocked the only two that could tell her everything if it ever reached her — the two that meant *a boy is taken*, and under them, low and steady and over and over into the patient dead line, the name of the low gate where an Underhang child, when the worst came, was taught to go and wait to be found.

He knocked it until his knuckles split. Somewhere far below him, under all of it, so faint he told himself he imagined it, something enormous breathed, and held, and let the breath go; and Coll did not know what it was, and pressed his bleeding hand to the dead rope, and sent his small warning out into the dark after it, up toward the light, toward her, and waited to learn whether anything in the world still listened to the poor.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Descent

The blue funnel over the chandler's door had been a real funnel once, tin, for lamp-oil, and some owner two proprietors back had painted it the flat drowned blue of a thing hauled up too late and hung it out as a sign. It knocked on its hook in the pre-dawn wind on the second Lowspan reach, past the shuttered rope-walk, and it told those who needed to know that here was a door a person could bring a word to. Isla had passed it a hundred times in her working life and slid her eyes off it every time, because the first rule of staying free in Osmark was to need nothing you would have to ask a stranger for. She stood in front of it now with Coll's note folded against her breastbone and the shear cold along her spine, and she made herself lift her hand and knock.

The man who opened it was long past sleep, aproned, tallow under his nails, and he looked at her the way chandlers look at everyone, which is to say at her hands. "We're shut."

"Slackwater," she said.

Nothing moved in his face, and that was how she knew the house was right; a wrong house would have frowned. He stood back the width of a body. She went past the dark counter and the hanging coils into the honest reek of pitch and fish-oil, and he barred the door and tipped his head at a hatch behind the weighing-table. "Down. You wait where I put you, you keep your hands by the lamp, and you don't

come up till it's said back to you." He had seen already what she was — or what she wasn't, the barrenness of her, no cord anywhere on her, which in his low world marked her as plain as a brand. "I take folk down there," he said to her back, not unkind. "Mostly they come up again. That's the most I'll swear to."

The cellar was a stone throat that opened at its low end onto a slice of the underwalk, the plank gallery slung beneath the reach with the fog coming up grey and steady through the seams. He left her a stool and a lamp turned to its last thread and went up, and she sat in the cold with the void breathing at the gap and did the hardest work she knew, which was to wait and not think, because the thought standing just outside the lamplight was her boy at the bottom of the world.

She was still not thinking it when the chandler's girl came down.

A child of nine or ten, all elbows, carrying a heel of bread she'd plainly been given as an excuse to come and look at the stranger. She put it on Isla's knee and did not leave. She had the flat, watchful eyes of the low-born, and she studied Isla's empty wrists with a picker's frank interest before she said, in the offhand way children hand you the end of the world, "You're the mender's one. Onil's. Da said say nothing, but there's a knock been running two nights and everyone says it's for you and no one can get it to you. So." A shrug with a whole philosophy folded into it. "So I'm saying it."

Isla went still. "What knock."

The girl rapped it on the stool, competent, the way she would have set it into a quit-line — long, short, short. Then a second cluster, careful, a child reciting a thing she'd been trusted with. Isla did not breathe. Every low child in Osmark carried the code in their hands before their letters; she carried it herself, thirty years on and never worn out. *Danger*. And then the cluster the girl leaned on, frowning to get it right — *taken, one taken* — and under it, over and over, patient, the way it had come to her hand across the dark underside of the tiers: *the low gate. The low gate. The low gate.*

“It’s coming up from deep,” the girl said. “Deeper than anyone runs. Two nights and it won’t quit.” She watched Isla’s face with the pitiless attention of the young. “Is it yours?”

Coll. Coll at the root of the city with no cord on him and no letters to spare, spending the only telegraph the poor had ever been allowed, knocking a dead rope until — she saw it and wished she hadn’t — until his knuckles split, because that was her boy; he would knock till the rope ran wet before he’d believe no one was there. He was alive. He had been alive two nights running to send it. And he had spent his few stolen words not on *save me* but on *the low gate* — the place a low child is taught to run to when the worst comes, the place you go to be found — because even taken, even frightened, Coll was trying to tell her where to look, or only that he remembered there was a place in the world where a person went to be found, and he wanted her to know he was thinking of it.

“Yes,” she said, when she could. “It’s mine.”

She caught the girl’s wrist before she could bolt — gently, the way she did all things with the young — and turned the small hand palm-up and knocked back into it the only answer she had. Short, long, *Coming*.

The girl looked at the word sitting in her own knuckles as if Isla had pressed a coin there. “That’s a promise word,” she said, wary, because even the children down here knew what the mender’s woman was famous for — the one who never swore. “*Coming*’s a promise.”

“I know what it is,” Isla said. “If it runs back down the way it came, and only that way, with no one carrying it who’ll be hurt for it — send it.”

* * *

The word came back to her an hour later in a voice, said aloud, from the foot of the cellar stair.

“Slackwater.”

Isla was on her feet with the lamp between them before the second breath. The grey was the flat dead grey she had been taught to fear before she had known what it was, head to foot, and the felt half-mask was pushed up off the face in the cellar's stillness, and the eyes above it were the ones from the Tallow stair — tired, careful, a whole person living behind them, and under the person the same fear that lived behind Isla's own. The officer who had cornered her once and, instead of taking her, had given her a word and a door.

"You," Isla said.

"Me." Vora Keel came down the last steps slow, hands open at her sides, showing them empty the way you show them to a dog you've frightened before. "I told you to run here when they came for you. Not to walk in the front door on your own feet with a shear on your spine." Her mouth did something that was almost the ghost of dry humour and could not hold it. "You've made it very easy for me to do the thing I was ordered to do."

"Which is."

"Take the loose sever alive and bring her down to the Warden." Vora let that sit in the cold. "The order's real. It came to me sealed. And it's the only reason on this earth I can walk you down through our own people without the two of us dying at the second gate — because to every grey coat between here and the root, you'll be my catch, and I'll be an officer doing as she was told." She reached slowly into her coat and drew out a hank of dead grey rope, a plain quit-loop, and held it up. "Which means you let me put this on your wrists. You. Who wears nothing." Something moved in her face that might have been pity and might have been apology. "It's a dead cord. It binds nothing, it promises nothing, it'll fall off you in an hour. But you'll have to hold your hands out and let a grey coat loop it on and lead you by it, all the way down, and look like a woman who's been caught."

Isla looked at the loop of quit in the officer's hand — the harmless dead stuff she had scavenged her whole life, the safe grey

nothing the city spun its ropes from — and understood that Vora had found the one binding in Osmark that would cost her nothing and everything at once: nothing, because it was dead; everything, because she would have to put out her hands and let herself be tied.

“The boy,” Isla said, not moving. “Before I put my hands out. There’s a boy they’ve taken. Down there. A big one, too tall for himself, hands like a pair of hooks he trips over, and he talks — he can’t stop, it’s the first thing you’d notice and the last thing you’d forget. Untied. No cords on him, none; they’d have loved that about him.” She watched the grey officer’s face the way she read a strained cord for the place it would go. “You’ve seen him.”

She had. Isla saw it land — saw the careful eyes flinch off her own and fix on the lamp, exactly as, three tiers down, they must have fixed on a wall rather than meet a boy who would not stop talking. Vora Keel stood in the cellar with the quit-loop in her hand and for a moment could not say anything at all, and in her silence Isla had the whole of it: that this was the one grey coat in the Hold who could not look at Coll, and that she could not look at him because she alone knew, and was ashamed, what all their kindness was fattening him for.

“I bring him his supper,” Vora said at last, to the lamp. “He asked me was I low-born. He’s the only one of them down there ever asked me a thing about myself.” She lifted her eyes, and they were wet and steady. “Put your hands out.”

Isla put her hands out.

* * *

They went down.

Not the guarded stair — Vora took her the officers’ way, the maintenance runs that shadowed it, a descent Isla had not known was in the world though she had lived her whole life two tiers above its head. Down ladders bolted to the raw cliff of the Sile, down through

under-galleries where the last working lines of Lowspan hung slack and grey, and then past even those, into a country of stone and iron with no lamp the city admitted to and no floor anywhere, only the drop and the patient breath of the Underbreath coming up it. Isla had spent her life on the thin edges of the city and thought she knew the fear of falling. This was another thing. Here the drop was not beside you; it was *under* everything, total, the whole reason for the ladders, and she went down it hand under hand with a dead cord on her wrists and a grey coat below her holding the other end, and she kept her eyes down because she had been told to and because if she lifted them she would have to measure how far there was to go.

Vora talked as they climbed down, low, in the flat careful voice of someone reciting a thing she had believed all her life and was hearing new. She did not talk like a captor. She talked like a woman walking beside a coffin.

“You’ve heard it now,” she said. “Haven’t you. That clean cut you made off the deep line — you’d not have lived through it unless you’d heard what you were cutting. So you know it’s a person.” A rung, a rung. “They teach us the whole of it, in the guard. Not the way they teach the city, candles and a stone woman with her arms up. The true thing. That after the Slip, when half of Osmark had gone into the fog, the ones left learned the terrible lesson: a promise big enough to hold a city can’t hold *itself*. Someone has to hold it. And the highest thing a soul can do — higher than any vow, any gift — is to *be* that someone. To go down into the dark and take the whole weight off everyone else and never once set it down.” Her voice did not mock it, and that was the worst of it; she said it the way you say a thing that once made you weep for its beauty. “The Founder gave herself. Every one since has given herself. A city is worth a single life. I’ve known that sentence longer than I’ve known my own mother’s face.”

“And now,” Isla said.

Vora was quiet for three rungs. “And now I’ve stood in the vault,” she said. “And I’ve heard the single life the city’s worth. And

a thing that holds the whole world up—” her hand stopped on the iron, and Isla stopped above her, the two of them hanging in the dark over the drop— “a thing that holds the whole world up should not sound like it’s *begging*, sever. It should sound like a hymn. Ours sounds like a person who wants to be let go and can’t ask it, because there’s no one down there to ask, we saw to that. I’ve started to think a love you must keep locked and guarded so no one can refuse it isn’t love at all. It’s only the weight, with a kinder word tied round it.” She began to climb down again. “I don’t know what you are — a sever who can hold a cut that should have killed her. I don’t know what that’s for. But I warned you on the Tallow stair because I couldn’t stand in that vault one more night and not tell one single soul on the outside that the hymn was a scream. So I’ve stopped asking whose side I’m on. I’m for the begging stopping. Wherever that leaves me.”

Isla, above her in the dark, with the note against her breastbone and the dead cord on her wrists, found she had no answer that was not the grief itself. She had heard the same beg with her own ear against the cable and it had unmade something in her, and she still did not have the shape of the third thing — the door that was neither *cut it and let them fall* nor *bind another and call it holy*. She had only the certainty, growing with every rung, that both those doors were made of a body, and that she would go down far enough into the dark to learn whether there was a third, because her boy was the body they meant to fit to one of them.

They never finished the descent together.

The patrol came up out of the dark below without warning — three grey coats, a lamp hooded to a slit, the challenge low and fast. Vora’s hand tightened once on the quit-line, a whole sentence in the grip of it: *now you are my catch, say nothing, look caught*. And then she was an officer again, her voice gone flat and certain, giving the sealed order, the loose sever taken, the Warden’s own claim upon the prize — and it might have carried them both through, except that one of the three lifted the hooded lamp to Isla’s bare wrists showing under

the dead loop, to the barrenness of her, the very thing every grey coat had been told to bring in, and Isla felt the moment tip. Vora felt it too. And Vora did the thing that told Isla, once and for all, which way the officer had turned: she let go of the quit-line, and stepped down and out along the ledge toward the patrol, drawing their lamp and their challenge and their three bodies after her onto the narrow way, away, buying with her own grey coat a stretch of empty dark and one word thrown back over her shoulder, hard as a flung hook—

“Down. Go.”

And Isla went down.

Alone now, past where any picker in the history of the trade had ever gone, past the last thing that could be called a gallery, onto iron rungs driven into the raw throat of the Sile with no rail and no floor and the cold breathing up hungry and immense — down toward a faint changing of the dark far below that was not light and was not not-light, the way the inside of a shut eye is not black. And threaded up through the stone to meet her, closer now than it had ever been, no longer a rumour on an updraft but a thing in the bone of the world, came the slow enormous breath. In. A holding. Out. She climbed down toward it with her boy’s note over her heart, and the tired breath drew her the way a lit window draws a person lost, and she did not count the rungs, and she did not look up, and she went to find the one who was breathing the city.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Fallen's Bargain

Sarn had been a beautiful cutter once.

Yrsa had it from people old enough to have watched him work before the trade wore him down to the felt: a sever so clean, they said, that he could take a soured marriage-cord off a woman and leave her still fond of the man — cut the binding and not the love, which most severs could no more do than a butcher could lift one bone out of a living leg. That was forty years gone. The man on the upturned crate in the dead cistern now turned a cold clay pipe over and over in fingers that had lost the reason for it, and could not always find Yrsa's name, or his own, or recall which of the grey stubs knotted at his throat had been which severed promise. Every cut takes its piece; he had cut for the poor for two generations because someone had to and no one else could, and it had drained him the slow way a leak drains a cask, and what was left was a worn place in the shape of a man. He was the most useful thing the Fallen owned. A person with almost nothing left to lose will spend the last of it gladly on anything you can still make him believe in, and Sarn believed now in exactly one thing, having forgotten the rest: that the buried woman under the city should be let go, and no one made to take her place.

"He can reach it," Doss said, low, at Yrsa's shoulder. "That's not in question. We've walked him to it twice in the dark and his hand's still good — his hand remembers when the rest of him don't. He can

put a shear to a Concord-thread and cut.” The big man’s jaw worked. “It’s the *after* I keep choking on.”

They stood at the lip of the dead cistern, a great dry stone tank cut into the cliff back when the Underhang had let itself dream of clean water piped down from the tiers, abandoned half-finished, now the nearest thing the Fallen owned to a hall. Forty-odd of them below in the bowl of it, in the smoke of tallow-dips: worn severs, the debt-bound with their barbed cords cut to weeping stubs, the grieving, the ones the city had dropped and forgotten to finish dropping. Her people. Yrsa looked down at them and felt the two things she always felt, love and arithmetic, and made herself keep them apart, because the day she let them run together was the day she’d be no good to anyone.

The cistern was full of lesser Sarns, if you had the eye for it: severs worn halfway to the nub who had cut the poor free one barbed cord at a time and paid for every stroke with a piece of themselves, until the pieces were most of what they’d been. That was the Fallen’s grief and the Fallen’s whole argument, sitting there together in the tallow-smoke. The city had made severing the only mercy it left the low — and then made the mercy cost the merciful everything, and outlawed it, and hanged it in the markets, and named the ones who did it anyway a plague on decent order. You never had to tell these people the system was cruel. You only had to tell them it could be made to stop.

“The after is why we’re not fools,” she said, loud enough for the bowl to hear, because a leader who whispers has already lost the room. She went down the worn steps into the smoke and they turned to her the way they always did, and she let them, and hated a little how well she had learned to be turned to. “Say it plain, Doss. You’re right to. If Sarn puts his shear to that thread and cuts it the only way he can cut anything now — worn, over-fast, a break and not a stroke — then two hundred years of held weight comes up that cable all at once, with nobody to catch it. And the first thing it takes is us. The

Underhang's in the fog before the Crown feels its floor so much as tilt. I know it. I've always known it." She let the quiet widen. "I'm not asking you to pretend the sum away. I'm asking you to look at the *other* sum — the one they never chalk up, because it's paid in the dark. A body. Every generation, a body: taken down, burned out, swapped for a fresh one, forever, so a city built on a debt-machine can go on calling its cruelty virtue and sleep warm on somebody's screaming. Highspan never falls for that one. It's only ever us, paid slow instead of all at once. I would sooner we paid it once, in the daylight, and *ended* it, than keep feeding it into the dark till the sun goes out."

"Then we cut." That was Rhee, up on the rim, arms folded, the hardest of them and the youngest, a debt-child who'd watched a barbed cord take her father's arm off at the shoulder when he'd tried to break it. "Tonight, this week, while the old anchor's still failing and they've no new one fixed in. Every night we stand here weighing it, a candle burns to a buried woman and another poor fool signs his life away at Vessimer's counter. You want it clean, Yrsa? There's no clean. There's only *over*."

"There's a difference between over and *everyone*," Doss said. "You want to end the Slip by doing the Slip. Drop the low city into the fog to save it. Listen to yourself."

"I've listened to myself for twenty years," Rhee said. "It's the waiting I can't stand the sound of."

Yrsa let them go a round, because a room that isn't allowed to argue stops believing it chose, and then she cut it clean across. "Sarn can make the cut," she said. "He can't aim it. A worn sever breaking the Concord isn't a cut — it's a bomb with a man's arm for a fuse. It goes where it goes and it takes what it takes, and there's no message in it, nothing the Concordat can't blame on the wind and a bad splice by morning, and no survivors to carry the reason. If we do it Sarn's way we don't end the sacrifice. We just add ourselves to it and let them light a candle to us too." She turned slowly in the smoke so the

whole bowl had her face. “For it to *mean* anything — for the fall to be a thing we *chose*, aimed, timed, with people walked clear and the truth shouted loud enough that no candle can cover it — we need a clean sever. One who can take that recoil and not die of it. One who can hold the cut open and choose where the weight goes.” She did not have to finish it. Every worn face in the cistern already knew that Osmark held exactly one such sever, and whose blood she was.

The mends gave up Senna Ault then, out of the black crawl at the cistern’s high mouth, grey with rope-dust, breathing hard from a long run through the guts of the tiers. She came to Yrsa’s ear and said it low, for her alone, the way Yrsa had taught her.

“She’s gone down.” Ault’s untold-story face gave away nothing to the room. “Your sister. She went to the blue-funnel at first light and said the word and let a grey officer put a dead loop on her wrists and lead her *down*. Toward the root.” A breath. “She’s not coming to us, Yrsa. She’s gone after the boy.”

Of course she had. Yrsa stood in the smoke and felt the old exhausting truth of her sister settle over her like cold fog: Isla would not lift the shear for a cause, had never once lifted it for a cause; she cut for the one caged soul in the alley and then ran, and left the thousand caged souls to the dark because a thousand was a number and the one had a face. She would climb to the bottom of the world to pull one boy off a hook and call all the rest not her weight to carry. She had spent her whole life making certain she was tied to no one so that no one could ever be used to move her.

Which meant there was only one thing in the world left that could move her, and Yrsa had spent twenty years learning exactly what it was.

“Then we don’t ask her,” Yrsa said aloud, and heard her own voice go flat and certain and did not like the sound of it and used it anyway. “We make her a cut she can’t refuse to finish.” She looked at Rhee. “The footing thread — the one that surfaces in the mends under the Trueknot’s Lowspan heel, where the great cable comes down to

take the span. That's the one. Not because it's the easiest reach. Because of what hangs off that span." She made herself say it plainly, because a thing you won't name aloud is a thing you haven't the right to do. "The low reach. Where the old fence keeps his nook. Where the children sleep three galleries deep with their hands on the quit-lines. Her people. We start that thread failing where her people are, and we make sure she's near enough to feel it go, and my sister will do the thing she has done since she was eleven years old — she'll put her own body between the drop and the people she loves. And to do it she'll have to take the recoil and aim it. And once Isla Venn has aimed one cut for us, she is ours. She'll never manage to stand aside from the next."

The cistern had gone very quiet. Even Rhee, who wanted the cut more than she wanted her own breath, was looking at Yrsa now with something gone careful in her face.

"That's your sister's whole family you're setting on the fire," Doss said quietly, "to light her with."

"Yes," Yrsa said.

Her hand had gone, without her leave, to the throat-loop she wore — the dozen grey stubs, the tally, the severed ends of the promises spent for the cause, the two newest of them a netting-man called Teviss and his sister's boy, who had died on a splice she'd had Ault strain to see whether Isla could cut the deep line clean and live. She kept the tally because someone should. She kept the names because forgetting them would be the moment she became the Warden entire, and she needed to believe there was still daylight between herself and the plumb-line woman who spent one soul forever in the dark. There was daylight. There had to be. She was spending them *toward* an ending; the Warden spent hers to keep the thing that ate them running. That was the whole of the difference, and it was real, and it was thin, and Yrsa had lain awake more nights than she would ever admit measuring exactly how thin.

And underneath it all, in the box where she kept the last lever, the oldest one, the one she had never yet spent: the thing she alone in the world could say aloud to Isla — what her sister's own hand had done on a plank over the drop the night their mother's heart stopped; the truth she could forgive and lift away, or hang round Isla's neck like a stone, and which had always, always been the one weight that could move the unmovable woman. She set it back in the box. Not yet. Last. You did not spend the deepest cut first.

"Rhee," she said. "The footing thread. Prime it, don't cut it — I want it a hand's breadth from going, no more, so it goes when I say and where I say and not before. Ault, you bend my sister's road. Whatever way she climbs back up out of that root, she comes up under the Trueknot's heel, and she comes up in time to feel it start. Sarn—" she crossed to the old sever and crouched to his level, and he looked up from his cold pipe with the mild wrecked patience of a man who had given the trade everything but the last of himself and had come, gladly, to give that too. "Sarn. Not yet. Soon. You'll have your cut."

"The buried one," he said, finding the single thing he still held. "We let her go."

"We let her go."

He nodded, satisfied, and turned the cold pipe over — and then something surfaced in him, a shelf the trade had not quite taken yet. "You've a sister," he said. "Someone told me. A clean one. Nothing spent off her." He looked at Yrsa with a sudden, brief, awful clarity, an old man reporting the weather from the bottom of a well. "Don't set her at a thing that size. A cut that big doesn't take a memory off you, girl. It takes a *person*. It'll have everything she is, and leave a shape behind to be grateful about it — the way it did me." His hand rose and touched his own throat, the grey stubs of every cord he'd cut and every piece it had cost. "I kept the one thing I did right, and I gave away every face I ever loved to keep it. Let her stay clean, if she's yours to keep clean. Don't make her me."

“No,” Yrsa said gently, because it was kinder than the truth. The truth was that she meant to make her sister exactly that, or worse; that she had already weighed the city against Isla’s whole self and set the city heavier, which was the Warden’s own sentence turned inside out and worn as her own.

She stood. The clarity was already guttering out of Sarn like a dip at the end of its oil, and he was turning the pipe again, gone back down the well. Yrsa touched the tally at her own throat once — Teviss, the boy, the dozen before them, and the low reach behind her that she was about to lay across the fire next — and said the thing their mother had said on every swaying plank of Yrsa’s childhood, to Sarn, to the smoke, to the sister climbing down alone toward the root beneath them all.

“Mind the drop,” she said. “It’s a real one.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Beya

The iron rungs ended at a lip of worn stone, and past the lip was the Cinch.

She had built the place a hundred ways in her head on the way down and got it wrong every way. A machine, she had thought. A temple. Once, in the worst stretch of the climb, with the cold coming up hungry and her hands going stupid on the rungs, a spider's larder — some fat grey purse of silk with a shape hung dead inside it. What she came out onto was none of those, and worse than all of them, because it was *tender*.

The vault was a throat in the rock, where the two cliffs of the Sile leaned in until they nearly kissed, and into that near-kiss came the whole city. Every great cable of Osmark — she knew them the way she knew her own veins, the Trueknot's twin hawsers, the Highspan mains, the long grey Lowspan lines she had picked quit off her whole life — every one of them ran down out of the dark overhead and gathered here, drawn in and woven and brought down and down to a single point, a knot the size of a house, a convergence so dense the eye slid off it. And it was not grey. That was the thing that stopped her breath. The city overhead droned its flat grey million-promise drone, but here, gathered, the cords *burned* — gold where they were kept, a sick pale where they were failing — and the whole vault was lit soft and terrible with the colour of promise, and it swelled, the

light, it rose and sank, slow and enormous, in time with the breath she had followed down the bones of the world.

Because the knot was not the anchor. At the heart of the knot, where all that woven weight crossed itself and cancelled and became, for one impossible instant of each breath, *bearable*, there was a harness. And in the harness there was a person.

Small. That was the first true thing and the worst of them. Onil had said it once and Isla had not understood it: how small a person is who has been made to carry a city. The cords entered her. Isla made herself look and go on looking — the gold lines ran into the woman at the shoulders, at the curve of the spine, and, worst, into the upturned open palms, as though she were not the thing tied but the loom the cloth was strung on. A veil of grey had been laid over her head, out of what someone had told themselves was reverence, and it had slipped. Under it was a face.

Eighty years old and sixty of them here. The face was folded fine as a letter read a thousand times, and the hair had gone the white of cold ash and no one had cut it in a lifetime, so it drifted long and stirred in the updraft coming up through the harness. The eyes were open. They were the pale grey of fog at the top of its climb, the breath before it turns and sinks, and they were fixed on Isla with a lucidity that had nothing failing in it at all.

The mouth moved. A voice came out of the small woman in the enormous harness, cracked, unhurried, plain as bread.

“There you are,” she said. “I’ve been holding you a place, the way you’d hold a place in a queue. Sixty years is a long while to keep a spot.” The breath took her mid-word — In, and her whole face gathered, and the vault swelled gold, and the words waited for it with the patience of long practice and came again on the Out. “Come where I can see you, clean one. Mind the rungs. It would be a stupid thing, to come this far and fall.”

Isla came off the last rung onto the ledge that ran the vault’s rim, a mender’s walk no wider than her two feet, a slack line for a rail, and

she could not make herself speak — she, who had made a discipline of silence. She had come down here armoured in the only thing she owned, the not-needing, the not-asking, and this breathing woman had looked at her once and it had come off her like the dead loop had come off her wrists somewhere in the climb, unnoticed, gone.

“You know what I am,” Isla said at last.

“Better than you do, I should think.” Another breath. The vault rose, held, sank. “You’re the one who cut the deep line clean and lived. I felt it — a handful of nights ago, off the old bollard under the fish-lift. A little frayed offcut, and instead of dying of the recoil the way any sane person would, you opened a room inside yourself and rode it down and *held* it. Not one soul in forty years has been able to do that.” Something crossed the pale eyes, fierce and glad and grieving all at once. “I felt you the way you feel a hand laid on your back in the dark. I have felt every promise made and broken in this city for sixty years, girl. I feel the Crown lie and the Underhang go hungry. Two nights ago I felt a boy knock a dead rope down at the bottom of the world, where nothing is ever supposed to answer, until the rope wept. And I felt a woman who never swears anything send the word *coming* down the dead line after him.” The mouth moved into something very nearly a smile. “So. You came.”

Isla’s throat had closed to a thread. “You heard that.”

“I hear everything. It is the one mercy and the whole of the horror, and they are the same thing.” The eyes did not leave her. “You have his look about you. Not the blood — I don’t mean the blood. You have the look of someone he belongs to.”

“They never told me your name,” Isla said, because it was the only thing she could reach that was not the grief. “Up above. On the shrine. The stone woman with her arms lifted. She hasn’t got a name.”

“No. They take the name when they tie the knot. It’s part of the giving, they say — as if a woman were a coat you empty the pockets of before you hang it up.” For the first time the plain voice went hard,

and the gold light jagged with it, a flinch running out along a hundred cables. “It was Beya. It is Beya. Whatever they carved. Say it back to me, clean one. No one has said it to my face in longer than you have been alive, and I find, at the end, that I am greedy for it.”

“Beya,” Isla said.

“There.” The vault breathed. “Now we are two women in a room, and not a saint and a sinner, and we might do some good before they come.”

Isla found she had knelt without deciding to, down on the cold lip of the ledge, close as the harness would let her come. Up near, the failing was plain. Three of the great convergence-cords had gone from gold to the pale of a scar, and they whined — a thin, rising, terrible sound under the deep drone, the sound of a promise being tested past its strength — and Beya’s breath, when it reached the *held*, snagged on it, a hitch, a catch, the sound Isla had heard through the cable at the Splint and known, without wanting to, for what it was: a body that has decided to set the weight down and has not yet been given leave.

“You’re letting go,” Isla said.

“I am eighty years old and I have held this city since before your mother was a girl, and I am *tired* in a way that has stopped having a bottom to it.” Beya said it without self-pity, the way she might report the weather. “Yes. I am letting go. Slowly, because I cannot do it fast without dropping half of them into the fog, and I will not do that. But I am letting go. And I have earned it. I have held two hundred years of this city’s given word, and I have earned one word of my own, and it is *no*. Let me be the last. Let it stop with me.”

“Then the city falls.” Isla heard the flatness in her own voice and could not soften it. “That’s what they all tell me. That’s what the grey coat told me on the way down — that you’re the only thing between Osmark and the fog. Cut you free and the whole thing cascades.”

“That,” said Beya, “is what they have needed everyone to believe for two hundred years, and it is a lie so old it has grown a beard and a

chair by the fire.” She drew a breath, and this one she spent on getting up onto an elbow of will inside her stillness, on leaning toward Isla though her body could not move. “It is not one or the other. Cut me and let them fall, or bind another and call it holy. Those are the only two doors they have ever let anyone see. I have spent sixty years in the dark finding the third.”

Isla went very still. The wind moved in the harness.

“You feel this?” Beya said, and something shifted — a single gold thread among the thousands, one of the small ones, a Lowspan line by the colour of it, brightened for a heartbeat and then *divided*, its light running out into two dimmer threads that had not been there, that took up its shine between them and held it easily, and the whine of one of the failing cables eased, just slightly, just for that breath. “There. That weight was resting on me. Now it rests on two small kept promises out in the city — a woman who swore to feed her neighbour’s child, a man who swore to mend a stranger’s line — who have no idea they are holding up a corner of the world tonight. They think they are only being decent. That is the whole secret, girl. That is the thing the Cinchguard have killed severs for two centuries to keep buried. *The weight does not have to sit on one back*. It can be paid out — a thread here, a thread there — across every soul who is willing to keep one true small promise on purpose. A city can hold itself.”

“Then why—” Isla’s voice cracked and she let it. “Why are you still down here. Why is anyone.”

“Because a thing that belongs to everyone answers to no one.” The pale eyes were merciless and kind at once. “A single buried woman can be guarded, and moved, and replaced, and *owned*. A city that holds its own weight belongs to the people who hold it, and no council on the Crown could put a boot on that. They didn’t keep me down here because it was necessary, clean one. They kept me down here because it was *convenient*. Sixty years I have known it, and I could not lift my own hand to prove it — I am the one point I cannot unpick, because I am the hand and the knot both, and there has never,

in all that time, been anyone who could stand where you are standing and be the other hand. A sever, to cut me free. Strong enough to be a holder, to take the weight in the same breath she cuts, so there is no gap for the city to fall through.” The breath took her, held, gave her back. “I have been holding your place in the queue, Isla. I only did not know your name.”

Isla knelt on the cold stone with the whole thing turning over in her at once — the votives on the shrine that ran down instead of out, the aimed-wrong prayer, the thing she had half-seen on the Crown and called impossible — and under it, rising, the reason she had come, the only reason, the boy with the note against her breastbone.

“I didn’t come to save your city,” she said. “I came for my boy. They’ve taken my boy.”

And she watched the pale eyes change — watched grief come into them that was older and more particular than all the city’s grief, and understood, a half-breath before Beya spoke, that the old woman already knew.

“Yes,” Beya said softly. “I have felt him these past nights. Up in the Hold, over my head. The new one. They have finally brought me my replacement, though I told them I would not have one, told them for the last time only a month ago — but the Warden does not listen to *no*, she never could, not even as a—” The breath took her, and she let the sentence go into it, and did not finish it. “A holder. Strong as a bridge is strong. Stronger than me; stronger than anyone they have found in a hundred years. They are feeding him and resting him and keeping him from lifting so much as a cup, the way you keep a thing sound for one particular morning. And he will not stop talking, even in his sleep — I feel him down here, chattering into the dark, brave as a boy who has never once been let understand what bravery costs.” The pale eyes lifted to Isla’s, and were wet, and were steady. “He is too tall for himself. He carries his hook the wrong way. His hands—”

“Coll,” Isla said. The name came out of her like something torn. “His name is Coll.”

The vault breathed, and swelled, and the gold light rose over the two of them and the small woman in the harness and the boy's name where it hung in the cold, and far above, over their heads, in a warm grey room, the thing they meant to bury in Beya's place was asleep with his split knuckles under his cheek, talking to no one.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Weight, Shared

For a while Isla could not speak at all, and Beya, who had waited sixty years, let her keep the silence.

Then: “They mean to put him in there.” She could not look at the harness when she said it. She looked at the pale failing cords instead, at the whine of them. “In your place. When you let go. They mean to fold my boy into that and take his name and feed him and never let him lift a cup, for sixty years, until he’s—” She stopped. Until he was small. Until he was a folded letter with the words worn out of it.

“Yes,” Beya said. “That is what they mean. And it is why I have not let go yet, though I have wanted to for ten years. I have been holding on out of spite, girl, holding this whole ungrateful city up on nothing but the refusal to die before I’d found a way to make sure no one takes my place. And then a handful of nights ago I felt a clean cut off the deep line, and I thought — there. There she is. The other hand. Late, but here.” The breath took her, held, gave back. “So listen. Because they will come, and I do not know how long I can keep them from hearing you, and this is the only thing in the world I have left worth teaching.”

Isla listened the way she had never listened to anyone.

“There are only two things they have ever let a sever imagine,” Beya said. “Keep the cord, or cut it. Hold the weight forever, or drop it and let the fall have everyone. Every argument in this city for two

hundred years has been between those two doors, and both those doors are made of a body — mine, or ten thousand of theirs.” The gold light gathered as she breathed. “But a cord is not only a thing you keep or break. A cord can be *turned*. Changed into another thing while it still bears its load. You know this, though you have never had the word for it — you carry the proof of it on your own spine.”

Isla’s hand went, without her leave, to the shear cold against her back. “The shear.”

“Whatever it is, it should not exist. A thing kept and broken in the very same breath. A knot that is a cut. It is the only tool that can hold two truths that ought to cancel, and not discharge, because it *is* the not-cancelling — do you see? That is what you are, too. A sever who is also a holder is a person who can cut and carry in the same instant. Who can take the Concord off me” — the pale eyes burned — “and not let it fall, because in the same breath she cuts it free of the one back, she pays it out into ten thousand.”

“Ten thousand,” Isla repeated.

“That is the whole of it and the hardest of it.” Beya moved another gold thread as she had before, split its light into two lesser lines and let them take up the shine, easily, unknowing. “Every promise this city keeps is a hand under some part of the weight. You don’t need one great back. You need every small one — a thread here, a thread there, each person holding the little bit their own kept word will bear, and no more, so that no single soul carries what would break them. Cut me free and pay the weight *out* — out and out, across the whole city, into every promise a person is willing to truly, freely make. Then the loom is everyone. Then there is no one at the bottom of the city. Then it holds itself, the way a rope holds — not because one fibre is strong, but because ten thousand weak ones are twisted true.”

It was so simple, said plain like that, that Isla understood at once why they had killed to keep it buried. It took the city out of the council’s hands and gave it back to the people who lived in it. It made

the Underhang a load-bearing thing. It ended the need for a saint in a cellar and a boy fattened for a morning, both at one stroke, and it belonged to no one because it belonged to all of them.

“You said it’s the hardest part,” Isla said. “Not the cutting. The other.”

“The choosing.” And here, for the first time, the plain voice grew heavy, and the vault’s light dimmed with it. “A cord only forms where the promise is *true* — meant, mutual, marked, given free. You cannot decree ten thousand cords. You cannot order a city to hold itself; an ordered promise is a barbed one, and barbed cords strain and recoil, they do not hold. Every thread of the new weave has to be a thing a person *chooses* — chooses knowing it will cost them, chooses out loud. And this city.” She breathed. “This city has been taught for two hundred years that a promise is a leash and a broken one is a death, that the safe thing, the wise thing, is to swear as little as you can and trust no one and keep your own hands empty. They taught the whole of Osmark to be *you*, girl. Bare. Unbound. Owing nothing, holding nothing. It is the cleverest thing they ever did — they made a people who would never volunteer to hold each other, and then told them the only alternative to falling was one buried woman and a locked door.”

Isla knelt with that landing on her like cold water down the inside of the skull, the way the recoil came, because it was true of the whole city and it was true, most of all, of her. She had made a life out of being the unleashed one. She had thought it was freedom. Beya was telling her it was the shape they’d cut her to.

“Then it can’t be done,” Isla said. “You’d need thousands to choose in a night. People who’ve been taught their whole lives that choosing is how they get killed. You can’t build that in a fortnight. You can’t build it at all.”

“I have been building it for sixty years,” Beya said.

Isla looked up.

“Not from the top. The top is where they aimed it wrong — the Crown ties its votives to the Founder and thinks itself generous, and every one of those cords runs *down*, into me, a river of borrowed strength poured onto the one back it was never meant to sit on. No.” The pale eyes were shining now, and it was not the failing; it was sixty years of a secret finally, finally spoken. “From the bottom. All this time, down here, with everyone believing I could do nothing but hold — every time a poor woman kept a small true promise that no one made her keep, fed a neighbour’s child in a bad winter, mended a stranger’s line for nothing, waited at the low gate for a lost one because she’d said she would — every time, I felt it, and I let a thread of the city’s weight come to rest there. A breath. A corner of the world, set down soft on an ordinary kept word, and lifted again before anyone could feel the strain. Teaching the city to bear itself the way you teach a wasted leg to take weight again — a little, and a little, in secret, for sixty years.” The vault breathed, and the gold ran soft over the failing pale. “The Underhang is already holding more of Osmark tonight than the Crown has ever held, and not one of them knows it. The people with the least have been carrying the most for longer than you’ve been alive, because they are the only ones who never stopped making promises to each other for free. The loom is half-threaded, girl. I did not leave it all for you. I left you the last hand, and the cut, and the part I could never do from in here — the part where you go up and you ask them, out loud, to hold on purpose what they have been holding by accident. And where, to ask it, you have to be able to promise it first.”

There it was. Isla felt the whole thing close around her like a hand.

“I don’t,” she said, and her voice was not steady. “I don’t promise. Anything. Ever. It’s the one—”

“I know what you are, clean one. I told you. I have been holding your place.” Beya’s voice gentled, and it was terrible, the gentleness, because it did not let her go. “You cannot pay the weight out into a

web of chosen cords unless you are willing to be one of them. You have to hold before you can hand it on; you have to tie your own thread first, out loud, with your own name on it, or the whole weave has a hole in the middle exactly the shape of the woman who wouldn't. You, who have kept yourself bare your whole life so no one could ever use you — that same barenness is the one free-standing point the new Concord needs, the anchor that is not owned because it chose itself. But only if you *choose* it. Only if the woman who never swears anything learns, before the end of this, how to say *I will* and mean it enough to bleed for it." The pale eyes held her. "Can you?"

And Isla, who had a hundred times watched a strained cord for the exact place it would go, felt the word rise in her — the vow Beya was asking for, real, a live thing that would form a cord and tie her to this and cost her — felt it rise as far as her teeth, and could not push it past them. Not yet. Twenty years of never had a grip on her throat.

"I don't know," she said, which was at least true, and was the closest to a promise she had come in her adult life, and both of them knew it, and Beya — extraordinarily — smiled.

"That's further than you were a minute ago," she said. "It will do for—"

She stopped.

The whole vault stopped with her — the gold light held, unbreathing, and Isla felt the fear go through the cables like a current, a spike of it running down every line into the knot, the particular sick jangle of many people up above suddenly afraid at once, and Beya's pale eyes went wide and fixed on the middle distance the way a person looks at a sound.

"They've found the officer," Beya breathed. "The one who walked you down. Oh — oh, they've got her, and the alarm's running, they know there's a sever loose on the maintenance runs, they know she's *here*." Her gaze snapped back to Isla and there was iron in it now. "They are coming down the guarded stair. You have the length of the stair and no more. Listen to me. Behind you, where

the rungs came down — three spans left along the mender’s walk, low, there is a seam the wrights use to reach the failing cables. It is a shoulder’s width. It goes up inside the rock, away from the stair, and it comes out in the mends under Lowspan, and no grey coat living knows it because I have never once let them feel a mender use it. *Go.* Now. Up, and out, and do not come down here again — there is nothing left down here to save but me, and I am the one thing that does not need saving.”

Isla was already moving, and hating that she was moving, because moving meant leaving the small woman in the harness to the grey coats coming down. “They’ll know you talked to me. They’ll—”

“They will do nothing to me that the last sixty years have not already done, and I will be dead before they think of a new thing.” Beya’s voice had gone hard and bright and glad. “And they will not hear you go, because I am going to give them something else to listen to. Watch.”

And Beya breathed *wrong*.

Isla felt it happen — felt the old woman take the deep drone of the city, the vast In-Held-Out she had followed down the bones of the world, and bend it a hair off true, tip it into the whine, the beg, the failing-cord sound, and pour it up every cable at once so that to every ear in the Hold and on the stair the whole city seemed to lurch toward its ending in that instant, the Anchor faltering, the cascade beginning, all of it, here, now, *look down, look at her, she’s going* — and Isla understood that Beya had turned her own sixty years of suffering into a lamp swung the wrong way, was spending the very begging that had broken Vora’s faith as a thing to hide a running woman behind. It would cost her. Isla could see it costing her, the pale cords paling further, a lifetime spent faster to buy a stranger’s boy’s mender three spans of dark.

“Go,” Beya said, without breath to spare for more.

Isla went. Three spans along the mender’s walk, low, her hand finding the seam exactly where the old woman had said, and she put

her shoulder into the rock and climbed, up into the black throat of the wrights' crawl, away from the stair, away from the gold-and-grey light and the small breathing woman and the boy's name still hanging in the cold — and behind and below her she heard the grey coats reach the vault, heard the shout go up as they found the Anchor faltering and no one there, no one, the sever gone like smoke, and she climbed with her split-nailed hands in the dark and did not let herself weep until the sound of them was gone.

She came out an hour later in the mends under Lowspan, filthy, shaking, alive, with the whole third door open in her mind and no idea yet how to walk through it. And somewhere over her head, in a warm grey room she would never be let into, a kind-voiced minder would sit down that morning beside a boy who could not stop talking and set a cup of honey-milk in his split-knuckled hands and ask him, gently, the way you ask a child anything, who it was he kept saying in his sleep — *Isla, is it? Who's Isla, lad? The one who taught you your knots?* — and Coll, who had never once in his life been taught that her name was a thing worth guarding, who had only ever been proud of her, would tell them.

By the time the fog turned grey with the morning, the Warden of the Cinch had a name at last, and it was hers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Onil

She came up out of the mends into the grey of the morning with her mother's blade cold along her spine and no notion of what to do with everything she now knew.

The wrights' seam let her out through a split in the underboards of a Lowspan fish-cellar, and for a while she lay in the dark below the planking and let the Underhang wake over her head — a pot scraped, a baby fussed and was hushed — and under all of it, under the flat grey drone of the city's kept word, the other sound. In. Held. Out. The breath at the root of the world. She would never not hear it now. Beya had done that to her, the way you cannot unhear a name once you've said it to the face that owns it.

She had gone down to fetch her boy and come back up with a city on her back and no boy at all.

She went up through the Underhang toward the only person she could think to go to, and the low city woke around her as she climbed — a bad morning, the hum frayed in a way everyone felt and no one named, folk taking an extra beat at every junction to feel the planks before they trusted them, the low talk stopping when the bare-wristed woman went by.

She tried, once — stopped by an old woman splicing a rail-line that a dozen children used to steady themselves along, and said, awkward as a dropped stone, that it was a good thing she did,

mending a line for strangers' children with no one making her; that it held more than she knew. The woman looked at her the way you look at the touched. "It's a rail," she said. "Kids come off it if I don't." And bent back to her splice. The truest holders in Osmark, Isla thought, going on, are the ones who'd laugh in your face if you told them what they were.

That was the shape of the thing she carried now, and the size of the thing she could not yet do, and she was still turning it over, still failing at it, when she reached the low gate and found the old man waiting.

Of course he was there; it was the place you went. Every child slung under the low bridges learned it before their letters, alongside the knock-code and the sound a cable makes in the breath before it goes: if the worst comes, if you are lost, if the ones who love you are scattered and the grey is in the lanes, go to the low gate and wait, and be found. It was the oldest iron in Osmark, that gate — sunk in the raw cliff at the very underlip of the Underhang, where the last stair quit and the plank-walk went out beneath the enormous heel of the Trueknot and became, a few spans on, nothing at all. The lowest fixed thing the city owned. Below it there was the walk, and the fog, and the drop that gave nothing back.

He sat on the top step with his broad back against the cold bars, turning his brass balance over and over in his good hand, and when he saw her his whole soft ruined face came apart like a knot let go.

"You turned around," he said. His voice was wrecked. "Oh, girl. You went down and you turned around. I've sat here three days telling myself all the things a man tells himself." He got up the way big old men get up, in stages, and did not take her in his arms — they had thirty years of never quite doing that — but gripped her by both shoulders and held her at the length of them and looked, as if counting her to be sure the sum came out whole. "You've a hole in you. A new one. What did it cost?"

“Nothing,” she said. “I didn’t cut. It’s not that kind of hole.” And it was not: no smell this time, no shape of a room, only the loss of her belief that there was a bottom you could not fall past being able to do something about — a thing you could not scavenge back.

“Onil.” She sat down beside him. “They’ve got Coll at the root of the world. There’s a woman down there older than the Concord, and they’ve had her folded into the dark sixty years holding the whole of us up on her two hands, and she’s dying, and they mean to fold my boy into her place when she goes. Days. It’s days.” She heard how it sounded. She said it anyway, because he was the one person alive she had never had to make sound like anything. “And she taught me there’s a third thing. Not cut the city loose and let us all fall. Not bury another poor soul forever in the cold. A third thing.”

He was quiet. Below them the fog stirred in the gate’s mouth, unhurried, the exact colour of a held breath.

“Tell me the third thing,” he said.

So she tried. She was no good at it — she had spent her life keeping words back, not paying them out — and it came in pieces. That the weight need not sit on one back. That it could be let out across everyone willing to keep one small true promise on purpose. That the Underhang had been doing it for free so long the old woman could rest the city on them a breath at a time, in secret, for sixty years — and no one had ever told them what their kindness weighed.

Onil listened with his balance gone still in his hand. When she ran dry he made the low sound she knew, the huff that in a better hour would have been a laugh.

“Girl,” he said gently, “you went to the bottom of the world, and a dying saint taught you to be neighbours.”

“It’s more than—”

“I know it’s more than. I know.” He looked out through the bars at the fog. “But that’s the shape of it, isn’t it. Hold a bit of each other, on purpose. Say you will, and then do it.” He turned the balance. “I’ve held forty folks’ secrets and never let one drop. Spotted every

picker on this reach a meal in a bad week and never wrote it in the book. Never called it holding the city up. Called it not being a bastard.” The huff again, sadder. “And now you tell me not being a bastard was structural the whole time.”

“Yes,” she said, and something in her that had been clenched since the vault let go eased half a turn, because he’d walked to it in three breaths where Beya had needed sixty years to say it. “Yes. That’s exactly it.”

“Then it’s a good third thing.” He nodded, settling it the way he settled a weight on the pan. “It’s the first one anybody’s brought me in this business that didn’t need a body under it. All right.” He looked at her, mild and certain. “What do we do.”

We. He had said it without a heartbeat’s pause — an old man with three fingers on one hand and no reason left to be brave — and Isla had to look at the fog a moment before she could go on.

That was when the child spoke.

“Are you Isla?”

She was small even for the Underhang, seven or near it, all elbows and enormous eyes, crouched a few steps down where Isla had not marked her — the way you never mark the quiet ones, who have learned that being noticed is mostly how you come to grief. She had a quit-line runner’s raw knuckles, and a length of dead grey rope looped twice round her wrist like a thing to hold.

“That’s Pib,” Onil said, and there was warmth under the grief of it. “She’s kept me company at the gate. Somebody has to mind the drop while a fool waits on his friend.”

“I ran your *coming*,” Pib told Isla, with the grave pride of a tradesman. “Two nights back. Hand to hand, all the way up the low lines. Onil said it was for you.” She turned the loop of dead rope on her wrist. “Are you found now? He said when you were found he’d stop being sad.”

“I’m found,” Isla said. Her voice did an unreliable thing.

Pib weighed this and found it good. And then, because she was seven, and because she had spent three days watching a fat old man keep a vigil at the lowest gate in the world and had decided, in the enormous private way of children, that this was the finest thing a person could do, she said the thing that would outlast everyone on the step.

“I’ll wait for you at the low gate,” she told Isla. Solemn. Whole. A promise freely made and marked with a small grimy hand laid flat to the cold iron bar. “So you’ll always be found. I’ll wait right here.”

And Isla — who had built a life and a body out of never once saying *I will* to a living soul — felt the child’s promise reach across the gap for its answering half and find nothing there. Pib had thrown a thread. It hung in the cold, live and small and unanswered, waiting for Isla to say it back and make it a cord, and her throat closed on the two words the way it had closed her whole adult life, twenty years of *never* with its hand at her windpipe, and she could not.

“Pib.” She laid her hand over the child’s hand on the bar, the wordless thing, the only thing she had ever had. “That’s a big promise. You don’t have to—”

“I *know* it’s big,” Pib said, affronted. “That’s why I said it.”

And Isla was still hunting the shape of an answer that was not a lie and not a vow, still failing, her hand on the child’s hand on the oldest iron in the city, when she heard the thread begin to go.

She knew the sound now. She knew it as she had not a month ago — knew it from the vault, from Beya’s failing cables, the thin rising whine of a promise strained past what it could carry. But this was not that, and she knew that too, in the half-breath she had to know anything. A promise dying of age frayed slow; it went pale over days; it gave you the warning an old man gives you. This whine climbed fast and clean and wrong — a thread not dying but *pushed*, run to the very lip of breaking and held there and let go on a chosen instant. A cut rope sounds nothing like a chafed one; any mender’s hand knows it blind. And it came from above and behind them, up under the great

heel of the Trueknot, where the civic cable came down to take the whole weight of the span.

“Off the walk,” Isla said, and then she was screaming it, up the step and out through the gate to the plank-walk where four or five of the low children were strung over the drop at their morning game of dares. “OFF THE WALK — OFF THE WALK, NOW—”

The thread let go.

She felt it before she heard it — a great sick lurch in the fabric of things as two hundred years of stored word discharged at once up the heel of the bridge, and the footway’s own cords, robbed of what held them, recoiled. There was no cutting it. That was the horror that reached her a half-second ahead of the rest: her whole deadly art answered a question no one was asking. You could sever a cord that was whole. You could not sever a thing already broken; a recoil was not a knot, it was weather, and her mother’s blade was as much use against it as a knife against a landslide. She had gone to the bottom of the world to learn to cut and hold in the same breath, and here, with the children over the drop, she had nothing in her hands but the wrong tool.

The walk dropped.

Not all at once. It tilted — the far end let go and swung down into the fog like a trap on a hinge, and the children on it began to slide, and the whole thing filled in that instant with the one sound the Underhang dreads, which is not screaming. It was silence. The walk’s cords went to quit as they broke, dead and grey and soundless, and a falling span punches a hole of pure silence through the city’s hum, and into that silence the children slid toward the drop.

Pib was nearest the gate. Pib was almost safe. But Pib, being seven, being a runner who ran things careful, had let go of Isla’s hand and darted out onto the tilting walk toward the smallest of the sliding children, a boy no bigger than herself, because that was what you did, because a promise to wait for someone meant you did not let the drop have anyone your hands could reach. She had learned it from the old

man at the gate, in three days flat. And now she was out on the going walk with her arms round a boy too heavy for her and her bare feet losing the wet planks.

Onil went through the gate.

Isla would keep this. Of everything the cuts had taken from her and would yet take, she would keep this: the sight of a fat old man with three fingers on one hand going out through the lowest gate in the world onto a walk already falling, faster than his body had moved in twenty years, because the thing he had always been able to do — the only thing, the thing he'd done for forty people for thirty years and never once called by its right name — was hold.

He reached them where the walk pitched steepest. He got one arm round the boy and one round Pib and did not try to climb back — there was no back left to climb to, and he was picker enough to have measured it in a glance. He set his feet on the last plank that was still a plank, and threw them — boy and girl at once, a fence's whole soft strength spent in one heave — up and back through the gate onto the solid stone of the stair, into Isla, who caught them and went down under them with the wind knocked out of her and her face turned by the fall of them back toward the gate in time to see.

Onil looked at her through the bars. There was no fear in it. That was the thing she would keep, and the thing that would break her: no fear in his face at all, only the mild wrecked patience of a man who had spent his whole life turning around and had, at the last, found the one thing worth not turning around for. His mouth moved. She thought it made the shape of *mind the drop*. Their mother's line; he had heard her say it a hundred times and never known whose it was.

Then the last plank went to quit beneath his feet, silent, grey, and the fog took him as it took everything — without a sound, without a splash, without giving back so much as the brass balance from his hand — and Onil Sump was simply not there anymore, and the low gate stood open on nothing, and in Isla's arms two children were screaming loud enough for the whole silent drop.

She did not scream. She found, in the place where screaming should have been, something colder and more lasting. She held the children — Pib's face in her neck, the boy's fists knotted in her coat — and she made herself hear again the thing her ear had caught in the half-breath before: the whine that climbed too clean, the thread run to its lip and loosed on a chosen instant. Not age. Not the wind. A prime.

Someone had done this — spent Onil to make a point, or move a piece, or force a woman's hand. And there were not so many souls in Osmark who could reach a Concord-thread to prime it; Isla, holding two orphaned children over the drop that had her oldest friend, already knew which one.

The grief would come. She could feel it standing off at the edge of her like the fog at the gate, patient and enormous and sure of its turn. But ahead of it came the resolve, cold and certain — not the Warden's, to keep the machine fed; not the Fallen's, to smash it and everyone caught in it; but the third thing, Beya's thing, hers now. To make a city that never again needed a saint in a cellar or an old man at a gate. To end the need. She would not spend one more soul to hold the rest, and she would go and say so to the sister who had just spent Onil, with her mother's blade in her hand.

She kissed the top of Pib's head. She promised her nothing; she still could not; but she held her, which was the thing itself and not the word for it, and over the child's hair she watched the fog draw closed across the low gate, and she did not look away until it had.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Shear's Origin

She left the two children with the netting-woman from the upper reach — grief makes its own hard sense, and the one soul who would splice a line for strangers' children was the one to trust with two of them. Pib would not loose her coat until Isla knelt and set her brow against the child's and said, "I have to go and be a danger a while. Wait here. Not the gate — here." She did not promise it. She noticed that she did not, and hated it, and went down into the mends with her mother's blade naked in her fist.

The Fallen kept their hall in a dead cistern cut into the Underhang cliff, a great dry stone bowl from the years the low city had briefly dreamed of clean piped water and then remembered it was poor. Forty-odd of them sat in the tallow smoke — worn severs with their throat-tallies of quit-stubs, the debt-bound with their barbed cords cut to weeping grey nubs, the grieving, who were most of them. The talk died as Isla came down the last crawl into the light.

They knew her now: the bareness of her, the no-cords that in this room read not as danger but as promise, the clean sever their leader had hunted like a dropped coin. A few stood. She looked at none of them. She looked at Yrsa, at the cistern's low heart, a length of cord going still between her fingers — Yrsa, who had known from the set of her sister's shoulders coming down the dark exactly what had happened, and exactly why she had come.

“Onil’s in the fog,” Isla said.

The words went flat across the bowl, and the smoke seemed to thin around them.

“The Trueknot’s Lowspan footing let go an hour past. A primed thread — not frayed. Brought to a hair and left to trip.” She came down the last steps, and her voice did not rise, and she watched that frighten them worse than shouting, the hard low people of the Fallen giving back a half-step from a bare-wristed woman with the drop in her eyes. “There are maybe six souls in Osmark who could reach a Concord-thread to prime one. I’m looking at the only one who’d spend a bridge to move me.”

Yrsa did not deny it. That was the first mercy and the first horror both; she had never once lied to Isla with words, only with silences, and she did not begin now.

“I primed it. Rhee tripped it.” She set the cord down. “I meant it for a lever, not a grave.”

“A lever.”

“You won’t lift the shear for a cause. You never will; I gave up hoping years ago.” Her voice was low and even and terrible in its reason. “But you put your body between the drop and the people you love, every time, without thinking — it is the one thing about you a person can set a watch by. So I gave you a drop, and I gave you your people on it, and I trusted you to do what you always do. Take the recoil. Aim it. Save the reach and be, at the end of it, a woman who has aimed one cut for us. After the first, there’s no more pretending you stand outside this.”

“You can’t aim a break.” The ice in her own voice reached Isla from a long way off. “That’s the thing you never learned, all your years turning yourself into a lever. A whole cord, cut clean, I can send where I choose. A thread already breaking is weather. By the time my ear caught it there was nothing left to cut — only a hole to fall through. You built your trap out of a thing you knew was physics and dressed it as my choice.” A step. “Onil fell through the gap in your

reasoning. Your primed thread went the way the trade says a break goes — everywhere, and to no plan — and the only thing on that walk that held to a plan was a fat old man with three fingers, doing with his body the aiming you left to luck, because you have never once in your life trusted anyone else to be brave.” Her breath tore. “He used to slip you bread. He told me — a skinny furious girl on the low reach, twenty-five years gone, and a fence who fed her out of his own book and never wrote it down. You spent the man who kept you alive, to keep me on a leash.”

Yrsa flinched. Yrsa, who did not flinch. Her hand went to the throat-tally, the dozen grey stubs, and Isla watched her sister reckon the one she would have to add now, and know it had a face she had loved since she was Rhee’s age.

For a long moment she said nothing. The tallow-smoke moved. In the bowl a debt-bound man coughed and went still, and forty faces listened in the dark, but Yrsa had stopped seeing them.

“You want to know what you did to her,” she said. “You’ve wanted it twenty years, and I’ve kept it, because it was the one weight in the world that could move you, and I am not too fine to admit I keep levers. But you have just named my sin to my face, little sister — clean, the way you name a cut. I spend people. I don’t save them. And today it cost me the one man on this reach who ever gave me a thing with no hook in it.” The breath she drew shook. “So. I’ll set it down. I’ll tell you the whole of that night — both nights — and it will cost me the last hold I have on you, and maybe that is the first true thing I’ve done since I was sixteen.”

She told it.

“We were a bound family. Mother, father, you, me — the four of us tied in the one cord, the way the poor tie, because four backs bear what one back can’t. You were small. I was fourteen, and I remember all of it, and I have wished every night since that I did not.

“The winter you were nine the nets came up empty a whole season, and Mother took a debt off the cord-lord to keep bread in us.

A barbed one — you’ve cut a hundred since, you know the make, the fine cruel wire of no other choice. She thought she was buying us a winter. She was buying him a door. Because a barb on one of a bound family does not stay on the one, Isla. He can walk it down the family cord into all of you — bind the daughters to the debt, take the whole household for collateral flesh. That was always the plan. He never wanted the coin. He wanted us. Two girls are worth more than a season’s bread — worked, or sold, nine years, interest a year a year.”

Isla stood very still.

“Father saw it before the rest of us. Our father — the man you have hated your whole life for breaking and running in the worst hour, the coward who cut the family and left his wife to it —” Yrsa’s voice cracked clean across “— he did not run. He broke the marriage-cord on purpose. He cut himself out of us, and through himself the line the cord-lord meant to walk down into you and me, so the barb had nowhere left to reach but Mother alone. Breaking a marriage-cord is a killing recoil; he took it into his own body and it near stopped his heart where he stood. And then he went — because a broken man is a barb the cord-lord can still pick up and use, and he would not be that. He made a wall out of his own body and his own name and his own good memory, and he let us curse him for it, because a curse was cheaper than the truth, and the truth would have gotten us taken.” She looked at Isla. “He did not leave us. He chose which door stayed open, and paid it with everything he was. And I have let you hate him twenty years, because your hate kept you from asking the next question.”

“What next question.” Isla’s lips had gone numb.

“How a broken cord makes a blade.”

The bowl was silent. Somewhere the fog breathed in the seams.

“Here is the part Mother made me swear to keep until you were grown, and I kept too long, and for the wrong reason. In the same breath he broke it — she kept it. She would not let his breaking be a betrayal. She held the vow true in the instant he cut it; she kept faith

the exact moment he broke faith, so the break would be a shield and not a leaving. And a cord kept by one and broken by the other in the very same breath—”

Isla was already there. She was already back on the cold lip of the ledge in the vault, Beya’s cracked voice going through her: *a thing kept and broken in the very same breath, a knot that is a cut, the only tool that can hold two truths that ought to cancel and not discharge. You carry the proof of it on your own spine.*

“—does not die,” Yrsa said. “Does not go to quit. It turns.”

Isla’s hand had risen to the shear at her back without her leave.

“What was left where their marriage had been was a little hard coil, cold and warm at once, humming and silent at once — a thing with no business existing. Mother was a mender; she knew what she held the moment she held it. She folded it to an edge over three nights with her hands shaking, and made it a blade, and put it in the box under the loose board. And she told me: when Isla is grown, when she is ready, tell her what it is made of. Tell her her mother and father loved each other so hard in the worst hour that the love could not be killed and could not be kept — only turned. Tell her she carries the proof that a thing can be cut and held at once.”

Isla could not speak. The blade lay warm and cold against her spine, the way it always had, the wrongness she had carried twenty years and set to ten thousand strangers’ cords and never once asked how a broken thing could hold an edge.

“And two winters on, when you were eleven, the cord-lord’s men came up the stair to collect the matured debt off Mother.” Yrsa’s voice fell to almost nothing. “You got the blade out of the box — the blade you did not know was them. You cut the barb to free her, because you were eleven and you loved her and you could not watch them take her. And a barb is written to kill whoever cuts it. The recoil went into her and stopped her heart, on the plank, over the drop, and I caught you round the arms so the fog would not have you both.” She wept now with no change in her voice, the tears only running. “You

did not kill her, Isla. The cord-lord killed her, two winters before — the night he wrote a debt that would murder anyone who set her free. You freed her. Freeing her is what killed her, and that is a different thing, and a worse thing, to carry, and I let you carry the simpler one — my sister’s own hand did it — for twenty years, because it kept you cold, and cold was what I needed you to be.”

Isla stood in the tallow-smoke with the whole of it turning over in her at once: her father, who had found half of the third thing in a single night with his own body; her mother, who had made the other proof and folded it to an edge and hidden it so that a grown daughter might one day understand; the blade that was the two of them, kept-and-broken, cut-and-held, the exact shape of Beya’s impossible third door, carried against her own spine since she was a child — by a woman who had been taught to believe that binding was only ever a cage.

She had been sharpening the answer on strangers for twenty years.

“You kept it from me,” she said at last, “because if I had known the shear was made of a love that outlived its own cutting, I would never have believed the cut was the only freedom. I would never have been your cold clean blade.”

“Yes.” No flinch now; she had spent it. “You would have gone looking for the third thing at eleven instead of thirty-one. I needed a sever who believed a bond was a leash. I made sure you stayed one.” Yrsa dragged a scarred hand down her face. “And now I have unmade it, because I watched Onil throw two children through a gate, and I found I could not go on being the one thing our family ever made that spends people. So. There it is. Do what you want with me.”

Isla looked at her sister — the cropped salt-dark hair, the rope-burn up the jaw, the tally of the spent at her throat, and the Venn eyes that were their mother’s and her own — and found the fury and the grief and the twenty-year knot all still there, none of it loosed, none of it forgiven, and beneath all of it, for the first time since a girl

had caught her round the arms over the drop, something almost the shape of a sister.

“I’m not going to cut the Concord,” she said. “And I’m not going to let you. There is a third thing, Yrsa. Our father found half of it in one night with his own body; a woman at the root of the world found the other half over sixty years; and I am the only hand alive that can hold both at once. I am going to turn it — cut the city off the one back and pay its weight out into every soul who will choose to hold a thread. And I am going to need the Fallen.” She let the shear turn once in her fist, the cold-and-warm wrongness of it, her parents, her whole life. “Not to cut. To hold.”

“That is not what we are,” Yrsa said.

“It’s what our father was,” Isla said. “It’s what Onil was. It is in the family, if you would only stop cutting it out.”

And Yrsa — who had come down into that cistern the leader of everyone in Osmark who wanted the city brought down — looked at her little sister a long moment in the smoke, and did not say no.

Somewhere below them, Isla knew — under the great heel of the Trueknot, where the fog moved over the place the low gate stood open on nothing — a child with a loop of dead rope on her wrist would be going back to wait, because she had said that she would, and would begin, without the least idea of it, to hold up her corner of the world.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Recruiting the Weight

They gave Onil to the fog the way the Underhang gave everyone to the fog, which was to say they gave it nothing and kept the name.

There was no body. There was never a body. So at the head of the plank-walk, on the solid iron where the low gate stood open on the drop, a picker's widow chalked ONIL SUMP on the strut in the square letters the unlettered used, and one by one the low people came and laid a hand flat on the name and said it — not to a corpse, not to any god the Crown would own, only to each other, so that between them they would go on holding the shape of a man the drop had taken. Pib laid her small hand on the O and could not reach the rest. Isla knelt behind her and covered the child's hand with her own and moved it along the letters, and the two of them spelled him out together, and Isla said the name aloud because the child's voice had gone down somewhere it could not climb back from yet.

It was, she thought, the whole of what she had come to teach, and she had not said a word of it out loud.

Yrsa stood a little off, where the gate's one lamp did not quite reach her. She had come up out of the cistern behind Isla in the night and had not gone back down, and that was as near a yes as she had given. A leader who does not go home to her own hall has begun, whether she will say it or not, to belong somewhere else. The Fallen had come up with her — forty of the hardest people in Osmark in

their worn greys and their throat-tallies — and they had come to watch their leader's sister try to talk a drowning city into holding a rope.

Rhee spoke first, because Rhee always spoke first.

“Say it plain.” She was younger than Isla and harder than the iron of the gate, a debt-child who had watched a barbed cord take her father's arm off at the shoulder, and she had earned the right to be heard in the only currency the low city minted, which was loss. “You want us to make promises. You. The bare-wristed woman who never made one in her life. You want us to walk back up to the make of cord that ate my da, and put our own necks in it, and this time smile while it bites.”

“No,” Isla said. “I want the opposite of the thing that ate your father. It only looks the same from here because they gave you the one kind and swore to you it was the only kind there was.”

“A cord's a cord.”

“Is a hand on your throat the same as a hand in yours?” Isla said. “It's the same hand.”

That reached the edge of them, if not the centre. She had learned in one night of grief that she could not argue this the way Yrsa argued — Yrsa spoke in blades, and the low city had been cut enough. So she did not argue it. She crouched by the weeping stub of a debt-bound man near the front, an old cord sawed to a grey nub at his breastbone, still barbed, still hot to a sensitive's eye after years. She did not touch it.

“You feel that all the time,” she said to him, and he nodded, because a barbed cord never fully quiets; it aches at the change of weather, it wakes you in the deep of the night, it is a promise that was never yours pretending to be your own heartbeat. “That's a cord you were made to take. Somebody wrote it so that saying no would cost you more than saying yes, and called the difference your free choice. It bites because it's a lie about what you wanted. A true one doesn't bite.” She looked up at the ring of them. “You've all felt a true one.

You just never called it a cord, because the Crown taught you the word belonged to them.”

“Show us,” Rhee said. “Don’t preach it. You lot love to preach. Show us the difference in the hand, or sit down.”

And there, as if the city itself had grown impatient to be taught, the low reach gave her the chance.

It was the sling-walk two crossings down — a slung plank street that a dozen families used to reach the water queue, hung on a single main-sling that had been going grey at its high splice for a year while nobody with coin admitted the low reach existed. Isla had marked it on the way up without meaning to; a mender’s eye cannot help itself. Now the morning wind came up out of the Sile in a long cold shove, the way it did at the turn of the tide, and the splice let go a strand with a sound like a struck string, and the whole crossing dropped a hand’s-width and hung there whining, and the families on it screamed and did not dare move, because the next strand was the last that would go before the walk went the way of everything the fog was patient about.

The old Isla would have gone for the shear. A whole cord, cut clean, she could send where she chose. But this was not a promise-cord; it was rope, honest grey rope, worn to its end, and there was nothing to cut and no time to splice, and under it the drop that had taken Onil not two watches gone.

So she did the other thing. The thing Beya had shown her at the root of the world, that she had not yet done with her own two hands.

She reached into the failing sling the way a holder reaches — not to cut its weight but to *lift* it, to open a place inside herself and let the strain come into her — and she felt the crossing’s whole load pour up her arms and stand in her chest like cold water in a cup, and she understood in her body for the first time why an ordinary hand was a cup too small for this, why it killed. She was not an ordinary hand. She held it. She held a street.

And she could not hold it long, and that was the whole of the lesson, and she said so, out loud, with the families weeping on the tilted planks above her.

“I can carry this off you,” she called to the reach, “but not alone, and not long. One back can’t. That was always the lie — that one back should.” Her voice shook with the weight and she let it. “I need three of you to take a thread of it. Not all of it. A thread. As much as your own true word will bear and no more. You say it and you mean it — *I’ll hold my corner* — and you touch the line, and it’s yours, and you can set it down when the next hand comes, and it will not bite you, because you chose it.”

For a moment no one moved, and the moment was very long, and Isla felt her own held breath and the street’s on top of it.

Then the netting-woman from the upper reach — the one who had said *it’s a rail, kids come off it if I don’t*, the one holding Pib and the saved boy by the hand even now — let go the children and stepped to the line and put her rope-scarred palm flat on it and said, “I’ll hold my corner,” in the flat voice of a woman stating a fact about the weather, and the thread seated onto her and went gold, and hummed — warm, low, the warmest sound in the low city — and a third of the weight lifted off Isla’s chest so fast she staggered.

“There,” Isla gasped. “*There*. Feel it. Does it bite?”

“No,” the woman said, wondering, her own cord humming under her hand. “It — holds.”

Two more came then, a girl of maybe sixteen and the debt-bound man with the weeping stub, who put his ruined hand to a clean line for the first time in his life and made a sound when it took, because a true cord does not feel like the barbed one; it feels like the thing the barbed one had been counterfeiting all along. One man stepped up and could not say it — his fear was too loud, the word turned in his mouth to *what if I can’t* — and the thread would not seat on him, slid off like water off wax, and Isla let the reach see that too. “You can’t fake it,” she said. “You can’t be ordered into it. He’s not weak. He’s

honest. When he can mean it, it'll take, and not before. That's the whole strength of the thing. It can't be forced, so it can't be stolen."

The crossing hung on four freely given cords and Isla's failing one, and then the pickers rigged a fresh sling under it while it held, and the families came off the tilted planks on their hands and knees and stood on the solid iron shaking, alive, held up by nothing but their neighbours' word.

It was the first the new Concord had ever stood on. Four cords. A street. Isla stood in the middle of it with her chest ringing and looked at what she had done, which was nothing — she had cut nothing, made nothing, promised nothing. She had only shown the low city a thing it already did, and given it back its own word for it.

"That," she said to Rhee, when she could speak, "is the difference in the hand."

Rhee's jaw worked. She looked at the humming cords, at the netting-woman's flat astonished face, at the man with the weeping stub weeping now for a different reason. "Pretty," she said at last, and it was not quite a sneer, and it was not quite a yes. "Four cords held a footbridge. You need ten thousand to hold a city, and every one of them made by a soul that's been taught since the cradle that a promise is how the Crown gets its hooks in. You've got a fortnight of a dying woman's breath and a city of the burned. Tell me how you get from four to ten thousand."

"The children first," Isla said, and turned, and there they were — because the children had come, the way children come to anything true, and they had been watching the whole of it with their enormous unguarded eyes. Pib. The saved boy. A dozen quit-line runners with dead rope looped on their raw wrists.

"They already do it," Isla said. "That's the thing none of you can see because you learned the fear on top of it. Pib — what did you tell Onil you'd do?"

“Wait at the low gate,” the child said, very low. “Till he came. I told him I would.” Her hand had gone to the loop of dead rope on her wrist. “He didn’t come. But I’d have waited.”

“And when Tam is late off the high lines,” Isla said to another of them, “and you knock *coming* down the quit-line so his sister doesn’t fret — did the Crown make you do that? Did anyone write it? Does it bite?”

“No,” the boy said, baffled she would ask. “That’s just — you just do that. That’s how you know somebody’s got your line.”

“That’s a cord,” Isla said. “Every one of you has been holding your corner of this city your whole lives, on purpose, for free, in the one place the Crown wasn’t watching because it thought you had nothing worth taking. You already hold more of Osmark than Highspan ever has.” She heard Beya’s cracked voice under her own as she said it, the loom already half-threaded from below, and understood at last that she was not asking the low city to lift a new thing. She was asking it to sign its name to the thing it had been carrying, unpaid and unthanked, since the Slip. “You’ve been the anchor all along. All of you. A little each. I’m only here to ask you to do it out loud, so they can never again pretend it’s one buried body and not you.”

It was the children who believed it first, because a child has not yet been taught that the thing it does by nature is impossible. Pib came and put her hand in Isla’s — not the promise, not yet, Isla felt the vow rise to her own teeth and could not push it past them, twenty years of *never* standing in the gate of her mouth, and hated it, and did not lie to the child by saying a word she could not yet hold. But the child’s hand was in hers, and that was a beginning that was not a betrayal of the beginning still to come.

Yrsa had watched all of it from the edge of the lamplight. Now she came into it and stood beside her sister and looked out at her own forty, who had come to bring a city down and were watching a

footbridge be held up instead, and she made the only speech Isla ever heard her make that was not a blade.

“You came to end the eating,” she told them. “So did I. I told you the only way to end it was to bring the whole rotten weave down and start on bare rock. I was wrong about the *how*, and I have never in my life said that sentence, so hear it once.” Her scarred hand rose to the tally at her throat. “Every stub here is a name I spent to end it. She’s just shown you how to end it and keep the names. That’s not surrender. That’s the same war, up the harder road, and it’s the only road that doesn’t finish with our own people in the fog. I’m walking it. Walk it or don’t; I’ve stopped ordering. But I’m done cutting.”

Rhee did not answer her. Rhee looked a long time at the humming cords and then turned and went back down toward the cistern, and perhaps a third of them went with her, and that was the true measure of it, and Isla made herself watch them go and not pretend the day had been cleaner than it was. But two-thirds stayed. Two-thirds stayed on the low reach in the grey morning and began, awkwardly, one name at a time, to learn to say a thing they meant and let it hum.

And far below, under the plank and the drop and the moving fog, Isla felt the deep slow breath of the world hitch and turn its failing attention up the cables toward the low reach — toward the small new gold cords lighting one by one where none had been — and this time it did not feel like being hunted. It felt like being *seen* by someone who had waited sixty years to see exactly this.

“She feels it,” Isla said. “Beya. She feels every one of them light.”

“Then so will the Warden,” Yrsa said, and the cold came back into her voice, but it was aimed outward now, at the thing above them and not the sister beside her. “Understand what you’ve just started, little sister. A cut, Marrow can fight. A cut is a crime; she has spent her whole life armoured against it; she knows the shape of a blade coming for the root. But this—” she nodded at the gold threads

blooming along the reach “—this is worse than a blade to her, and she’ll know it the instant her cord-readers feel the weight begin to move. Because a city that learns to hold itself doesn’t just take her power. It proves she never needed to bury anyone at all.” She looked up, past the low gate, up the black miles of cable toward the Hold and the Cinch. “You’re not going to cut her Concord. You’re going to replace it. And there is no woman alive that word will frighten more.”

Isla followed her sister’s gaze up the dark, to where a boy she loved was being kept fed and rested and unstrained for one particular morning, and felt the clock she had not known was running begin, somewhere far above, to strike.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Warden's Arithmetic

Warden Sesta Marrow had spent forty years learning to count without moving her lips, and she was counting now.

The report lay on the slate under the map-room lamp, and she had read it three times, and each time her hands had gone a little colder, the way they had gone cold over sums since she was a child — a body's small honesty she had never been able to train out of herself. The cord-readers had felt it first, in the deep watch: new bonds lighting in the Underhang, dozens of them, then scores, blooming up the low reaches in the dark like frost coming across a window. That alone would have been nothing — the poor made and broke their little cords all day, beneath the order's notice, beneath its contempt. But these were not little. The readers, pale and careful, had brought her the thing they could not explain and did not want to have felt: the new cords were *taking weight*. Structural weight. The city's own load, shifting a hair's-breadth at a time off the great cables and down, out, onto ten thousand small backs that had no business bearing it — and holding.

And under the readers' report, in a field officer's blunt hand, the words a taken low-city talker had given up before dawn, that Marrow had now read enough times to have them by heart:

She says she isn't going to cut it. She says she's going to share it out. She says nobody has to be buried anymore.

Marrow set two fingers on the slate as if to keep the words from lifting off it.

For a cut, she had a defence. She had built her whole life into a defence against the cut — the outlawing of severs, the disappearing of the curious, the Hold, the guarded stair, forty years of her own bare hands on the Anchor's cords keeping the great knot true. A blade coming for the root was a thing she understood in her spine; it was the oldest fear of the order and she was its sharpest edge. Let the Fallen come with their worn severs and their willingness to drop the city to make a point; she would meet them at the Cinch and she would hold, because holding was the one thing she had never in her life failed to do.

But you cannot armour against a thing that does not strike. You cannot guard a wall against water that has decided to become rain. If the sever meant to *replace* the Concord — to teach the city to hold its own weight so that no anchor was needed, ever again, by anyone — then there was no blow to block, no root to defend, nothing to fight but an idea spreading upward through the poor like warmth through a cold limb. And an idea, Marrow knew, was the one thing the Cinchguard had never learned to unmake. They could disappear a sever. They had never found the tongs to pull a thought out of a city.

She became aware that she had picked up the length of cord she kept for her fingers and was working it, over and under, over and under, and made herself set it down.

There was the matter of Keel, too, and she let herself look at that for exactly as long as it deserved and no longer. Vora Keel, whom she had trusted — *clear and cold, never once gave the order reason to doubt her* — sat now in a grey cell three galleries down and would not say why she had walked a loose sever down the maintenance runs toward the vault, would not say what had turned in her, would not say anything at all but one sentence she had repeated to the wall until they stopped asking: *a thing that holds up the world shouldn't sound like it's begging*. Marrow had signed the order for her holding herself. She

would deal with Keel when the city was safe. She told herself the flat grey word *when*, the way she had told herself a great many words across forty years, and did not look at the fact that she had begun to collect officers she could not afford to have thinking.

She would go down. She always went down when the arithmetic would not balance; there was one certainty at the bottom of the world against which she had checked her sums for four decades, and she needed it now the way she had needed it at forty and at twenty-three and, though she did not let the thought finish, at three.

She went alone, at the ebb, as she always did. Past the third gate the stair stopped being a stair and became iron rungs down the raw throat of the Sile, no rail, the cold breath of the fog rising to meet her, and she went down them without hurrying and without holding the rock harder than a rung required, because a Warden does not flinch from the drop any more than she flinches from the fire of the cords, and Sesta Marrow had made a life's discipline of not flinching from things that ought, by any human measure, to be flinched from.

The vault opened below her, gold and grey, the city gathered to its single point — every great hawser of the Concord drawn in to the woven knot the size of a house, and at its heart, cradled where the tension crossed itself and cancelled and became almost bearable, the small veiled shape that held it all.

Three of the great cords had gone from gold to a strained and whining pale. Marrow's cold hands counted them without being asked. A fortnight, the readers said. Less, now, she thought. The breath that moved the whole vault came slower than it had a season ago, and it caught — a small dry hitch on the held part of it, the sound of a body that has decided to set a thing down and has not yet been given leave.

She stood. She never sat, here. Forty years she had stood in this vault while the woman in the harness bore the weight, because it seemed to her the least a soul could do was stay on its feet in the presence of the one who could not.

“Sesta,” the Anchor said.

The word came on the out-breath, the way all her words came now, waiting for the breath to carry them, plain and cracked as bread left a day too long.

“Mother,” Marrow said.

She had not said the word aloud in this vault in years. She allowed herself, once a year, to lay two fingers on the veiled shoulder where no cord entered, and to call it homage; she did not, as a rule, call the other thing by its name. But the arithmetic was loud today, and the report was in her chest like cold water, and she was three years old somewhere very far down inside the plumb-line of a woman she had made herself into, and the word came out before she could audit it.

The veil had slipped, as it did in the harness-updraft; she could see the folded-fine face, the ash-white hair that no one had cut in a lifetime drifting long on the rising air, the eyes the pale grey of fog at the very top of its climb — her own eyes, worn older, gone soft where hers had gone to iron. She had put her cold child’s hands on this woman’s neck to warm them, once, in this vault, a lifetime ago, and this woman had let her, because a mother lets you, even a mother the order had already taken and bound and renamed to the city. It was the only memory Sesta owned of her mother that was not this: the veil, the harness, the breath. She had been three when they brought Beya down. She had been raised on the order’s grey milk, a ward of the Cinch, taught to be proud that her mother was a saint who had given herself so the city might stand. She had believed it so hard and so long that the belief had become the floor she walked on.

“You’ve heard, then,” Beya said. Breath. “The low reaches. The little cords.” Breath. “I’ve been waiting sixty years to feel them light, and last night they began, and I lay here in your harness and I wept, Sesta, for joy, where you keep me, and you have come down with your cold hands to tell me it must stop.”

“It’s a lie,” Marrow said. “A cruel one. She’s telling the poor they can hold a city on their own backs, and they’ll believe her because it’s kind, and when it fails — and it will fail, Mother, ten thousand frightened people are not a cord — the whole weave will go at once and take the low tiers into the fog. She’s not saving them. She’s going to drop them, gently, with their own hands on the rope.”

“You don’t believe that.” Breath. “You’re too good a counter to believe that. You felt the weight move last night, same as your readers. It held.” The pale eyes found her. “It held, Sesta. Say the sum you actually came down here to check, and stop hiding it behind the poor.”

And Marrow, who had not been ordered to do a thing by anyone in forty years, found the sum rising to her mouth against her will, because there had never been anyone but this woman who could make her say the true thing, and there never would be again after this fortnight, and some starved part of her knew it.

“If it can be shared,” she said, and her voice did not shake, she had trained it too well for that, only her hands were ice, “then it was always able to be shared. And if it was always able to be shared, then no one ever had to be buried here. Not the first Founder. Not the eleven since.” Breath — hers now, not the Anchor’s. “Not you.”

“No,” Beya agreed, gently. “Not me.”

“You gave sixty years to the dark for a thing that was never needed.” The words came out level and terrible. “And I —” She stopped. The arithmetic reached the entry she had spent forty years refusing to post, and she made herself post it, once, in the cold vault, to the one auditor left alive who already knew the figure. “Twenty years in, you asked me to let you go. You’d held two decades; you asked me to find another way, to not spend the rest of your life here, and I was three-and-twenty and full to the throat with the order’s faith, and I told my own mother *no*. I told you the city needed you. I told you it was holy. I have kept you in this harness forty years with my own two hands and called it my life’s devotion, and if that woman

on the low reach is right, then I did not fail to save you, Mother. I chose the order over you. Twice a year, every year, I chose it. I have been choosing it every day I did not ask the question she asked in one night.”

“Yes,” Beya said. Breath. There was no cruelty in it, which was the worst of all. “You did. You were a child raised by people who needed you to believe it, and you believed it with your whole brave heart, and it was not your fault that it was possible, Sesta. It was only ever going to be your fault if you made it happen again.” Breath. “And now you have come down here to tell me you mean to make it happen again.”

Marrow said nothing. In the map-room three galleries up, on the slate beside the readers’ report, lay the candidate ledger, and the ledger’s most recent hand — a boy, born to hold, fed and rested and kept from all strain this last week on the gentle road — and the order she had not yet sealed but had already, she understood now, decided to seal on the long climb down.

“His name is Coll,” Beya said, because she felt everything, because she had felt the boy over her head for a week, strong as a bridge and unable to stop talking even in his sleep. “He is fifteen. He carries his hook the wrong way and I have lain here loving him for six nights the way I have loved every soul in this city, and you mean to bind him into this harness at dawn, before she can prove to Osmark that you never had to.”

“If I bind him,” Marrow said, “then it was needed.” Her hands had stopped being cold. That was how she knew she had reached the bottom of the sum, the place past counting, where the only warmth left was the terrible warmth of a decision that lets you stop feeling the thing underneath it. “If a new Anchor holds at dawn, then the sacrifice is real and the city is saved and your sixty years meant something, Mother, they *meant* something, and the kind lie on the low reach dies because there is no longer a gap for it to fill. She can teach the poor to hold all she likes. They will not need to. The Concord will

stand where it has always stood, on the one back the order chooses, and the world will go on.”

“You would spend a child,” Beya said, “to make my life mean something.”

“I would spend a child to keep the city standing.” The old sentence, the true north of forty years. *A city is worth a single life.* She had said it over a hundred candidates and never once heard it as she heard it now, in her mother’s vault, with her mother dying free in front of her and a boy asleep above who did not know what the honey-milk was fattening him for.

“That is the same arithmetic that buried me,” Beya said. Breath. “And you were three, and blameless, when it was worked on our family. You are sixty-three, and the Warden of the Cinch, and you are about to work it on someone else’s. Let it stop with me, Sesta. I have held two hundred years of this city’s word and I have earned one word of my own and it is *no*. Let me be the last. She has come. The other hand has finally come. Let me set it down.”

Marrow looked at the small failing shape of her mother, and at the three whining cords, and at the woven knot the size of a house that was the whole city gathered to a point, and she did the thing she had trained forty years to do, which was not to flinch from the drop.

“I can’t,” she said. “Because if you’re the last, then you were never needed, and I cannot live in a world where I did this to you for nothing. Forgive me. Or don’t — you always did say a curse was a thing you could pay with when you’d nothing else. I’ll take the curse. I won’t take the nothing.”

She turned and went to the rungs, and behind her the slow caught breath of the woman who had let a cold child warm her hands on her neck went on, in and held and out, holding the city that did not know her name, and would not stop holding it, because she had never once been given leave.

At the third gate Marrow met the officer of the watch and did not let her hands be seen, and gave, in the same flat voice she might have

used for the hour of the tide, the order that turned the fortnight into a single night.

“The boy. The chosen holder — Coll.” She did not stumble on the name; she had trained herself too well. “We bind him at dawn. Wake the harness-wrights. Ready the Cinch.”

The officer’s face did the thing subordinates’ faces did, the reverent stiffening, and she went to carry it up the stair, and Warden Sesta Marrow stood alone on the iron above the drop with the whole city breathing under her, and counted the hours until dawn, and found, for the first time in forty years of sums, that her cold hands would not tell her the number, because they had begun, very slightly, where no one could see, to shake.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Low Gate

By the second dusk the low reach carried forty-one new cords, and Isla had caught every one of them at least once as it slipped.

The footbridge had lied to her, being small. Four cords and a street had let her believe the hard part was the asking. It was not the asking. It was the after. A promise freshly made was a muscle no one down here had been permitted to use, and it tired the way an unused thing tires, all at once and without warning, and when it went slack the weight it had been carrying did not wait politely for its owner to recover. It went looking for the nearest back that could take it. Hers was always the nearest back.

So for two days she had been the place the reach's courage came home to when it failed. A woman up the crossing would say *I'll hold my corner* and mean it with her whole frightened heart, and her cord would seat and gold and hum, and Isla would feel a thread of the world come to rest on a stranger and have to look away from the rightness of it. And an hour on, the woman's nerve would thin at the edge of the drop, or her baby would wake, or the wind would come up the Sile in the particular voice it kept for the low reach, and the cord would whine and begin to shed its load — and Isla would open the place inside herself that Beya had shown her and take the weight before it could fall on anyone, and hold it, and feed it back onto the woman's cord when the woman found her feet.

By the second dusk she was carrying some part of eleven promises that were not hers, and she was so tired she had begun to see cords with her eyes shut.

Yrsa found her with her spine against the low gate's cold iron, in the one place on the reach where a body could brace itself against something that would not move.

"You look," Yrsa said, "like a woman being eaten slowly by a thing she volunteered for."

"I can't be the anchor." Isla did not open her eyes. "That's the joke of the last two days. I've been proving the Warden's whole argument for her. One strong back at the bottom catching everything, so no one above has to feel the strain. I made myself the buried body. I only did it out in the open where you could watch."

"So stop catching."

"Then it falls on them."

"Then they learn it falls." Yrsa crouched, and the tally at her throat clicked, all those grey stubs, all those spent names. "You keep saving them from the weight, they never grow the back for it, and you die of carrying eleven strangers' nerve. That's not the tender thing, little sister. That's the cruel thing wearing the tender thing's coat. I'd know. I wore it twenty years."

Isla opened her eyes. Above them the reach was going to its lamps, the small gold cords she had midwived showing here and there in the dark like the first warm windows of a street that had never had windows before, and it was beautiful, and it was nowhere near enough, and she finally understood what Beya had been trying to tell her at the root of the world when she'd said *you'll have to be the point it all turns through, and I'm afraid for you*.

"Listen," she said. "The whole working — unpicking the Concord and paying it out at once — it needs one person to be the place the weave turns through. Both hands in one breath, the cut and the carry. Beya can't; she's the load, not the pivot. It has to be me." She made herself say the next of it, which she had been circling for

two days and had not wanted to reach. “But a point that bears against nothing isn’t a point, Yrsa. It’s a leaf. When I open that working, the whole city’s weight is going to come through me looking for somewhere to go, and if I’m braced against nothing it takes me the way the tide took that sling-strand. Off into the fog. And Coll and Beya go with it.”

“Then brace against something.”

“Against what? Stone can’t hold a working; stone doesn’t *agree* to anything, and the whole rot of this city is that they anchored the living to dead certainties and called it holy.” She heard her own voice climbing and let it, because there was no one down here who had not earned the truth. “The only thing I can pull against and not be lying is a living cord. A promise. A person choosing to hold the other end while I do it.” She laughed, and there was no cheer in it. “Do you hear what that means. I have spent my whole life wearing no cords so that nothing could ever pull on me. And the one working the city needs from me is the one I cannot do unless I let something pull on me. I have to tie myself in. First. Before I can ask a single one of them to.”

Yrsa was quiet a moment. “You’ve never made a promise in your adult life.”

“No.”

“Because a promise is a cord, and a cord your death turns into a weapon aimed at whoever you gave it to.” Yrsa’s tea-dark eyes, their mother’s eyes, held hers without mercy and without cruelty, which from Yrsa was a kind of tenderness. “You watched it happen. You’ve spent twenty years making sure you could never do to anyone what that barb did to her.”

“Yes.” It came out of Isla very low. She had never once said it plainly, not to herself. “If I promise, and I fall — and I am about to go somewhere I may well fall — then the person I promised takes the recoil. I would be handing them the thing that killed her. Loaded. And telling them it was love.”

Down the reach a child laughed at something, brief and bright, and both women turned toward it without meaning to.

“That is exactly why you have to be first,” Yrsa said. “You want to ask ten thousand frightened people to run that risk. To make a cord that their neighbour’s death might turn on them. You cannot ask them to carry a danger you won’t carry yourself. Marrow spent one life so no one would feel the strain. You want a city that spends a little of the strain on everyone, out loud. That means everyone risks the recoil. Starting with you.”

A runner came pelting down the plank before Isla could answer — Doss, one of Yrsa’s, a doubter with a limp and an honest face, and he did not waste breath. “Rhee’s gone down to the cistern with nine of them,” he said. “And Sarn.” He looked at Yrsa, then at Isla, and chose to tell the whole of it. “They think this’ll fail. The slow way. Ten thousand cowards, Rhee says, and one dying woman’s breath, against the Warden and the Crown and the cold. She says when it falls apart she wants the cut ready, so it’s clean and quick and ours, and not a slow drop with the Warden’s hand on the rope. They’ve gone to prime the Trueknot thread. The one under the footing.” His throat worked. “The one over the low gate.”

The gate they sat against. The oldest iron in Osmark, with the plank-walk beyond it going out over the drop that had taken Onil not three days gone, and beneath the walk the great cord the Fallen had found they could reach, and past all of it the fog that was patient about everything.

“I told them I was done cutting,” Yrsa said.

“You told them you’d stopped ordering,” Doss said, not unkindly. “They heard the second part.”

Yrsa stood. For a moment she was all the way back to the woman Isla had met in a mender’s crawl, hard and magnetic and grief-forged, and then she let it go, deliberately, the way you set down a tool you have decided never to lift again. “I’ll go to them,” she said. “Not to order. To stand on the thread, if I have to, so Sarn can’t cut it without

cutting me. Rhee won't spend me. Not yet." She looked at her sister. "You do your part. Grow your back. And little sister — do it tonight. I can feel the same clock you can. Whatever the Warden's arithmetic came to, it came to *soon*."

She went down the dark toward the cistern with Doss limping after her, and Isla sat alone against the low gate with the weight of eleven strangers stirring uneasily inside her, and knew that Yrsa was right about the clock, and about the promise, and about which had to come first.

She found Pib where Pib always was now, at the head of the plank-walk, in the lee of the chalked name, sitting with her knees to her chest and the loop of dead grey rope turning and turning on her wrist. The child had kept a kind of vigil there since the fog took Onil, in the place he had taught her, *if the worst comes, go to the low gate and wait, and be found*. She had waited for a man who could not come. She had the patience of someone who had already learned the worst thing and was not surprised by it.

Isla sat down beside her on the cold iron.

"You said a thing to Onil," she said. "Before. You told him you'd wait for him at the low gate till he came."

"He didn't come."

"No." Isla let that be true between them, because the child was owed the truth and had been owed it her whole short life and rarely paid. "He couldn't. It wasn't that he forgot you, or chose something over you. The drop took him before he could keep it. That happens. That's the risk in the thing you did." She turned the loop of rope gently on the small wrist. "You made a promise to someone who might not be able to come back. And he wasn't. And it still mattered that you'd have waited. Do you understand what I'm telling you? The promise wasn't wasted because he couldn't keep his end. It held you up anyway. You held your corner."

Pib's enormous eyes came around to her, wary, hoping, having learned that hope was how you came to grief.

Isla felt the vow rise to her teeth the way it had the first day, twenty years of *never* standing across the gate of her mouth like a hand. But she knew now what the hand was. It was not cowardice and it was not cold. It was the oldest, most careful love she had, the love that had decided at eleven never to arm anyone against her, never to hand a soul she cared for the cord that her own death would turn into a barb. She had thought that keeping. It was only another buried body. Her own private Cinch, one small anchor in the dark so that no one who loved her would ever have to feel the strain of losing her.

She was going to ask a whole city to feel the strain. She could start it here, or she could keep asking others to risk what she would not.

“Pib,” she said, and her voice did not shake, though everything under it did. “I’m going down tonight. Down where they keep the thing that holds the city up. I’m going to try to change it so nobody has to be buried to hold us any more — not Beya, not Coll, nobody. And I might not come back, the way Onil didn’t. I want you to know that before I say this, because I won’t lie to you to make a cord. That’s what makes theirs bite and ours not.” She took the child’s hand off the loop of dead rope and held it in both of hers. “I will come back to the low gate for you. If I can. With everything I have. That’s my corner, and I’m holding it, and if the drop takes me before I keep it, then you’ll know I’d have come. The way you’d have waited.”

She meant it. She had never in her life meant a thing so entirely, all the way down past the place where the fear was, and she felt the fear and said it anyway, and between her hand and the child’s hand something crossed that had never been there before.

The cord seated. It went gold. It hummed — thin, and new, and warm as the netting-woman’s had been warm, and it *hurt*, a sweet unbearable tension she had spent her whole adult life without, because now there was a line running out of her chest into a seven-year-old that her death would pull tight as a garrote, and she had chosen it, out loud, with her eyes open.

“It’s warm,” Pib whispered, astonished, her free hand going to her own breastbone where the thread went in. “It doesn’t — it doesn’t bite.”

“No,” Isla said, and found she was weeping, quietly, for the first time since Onil, though not for grief. “No. It holds.”

And the moment the cord took — the moment she was, for the first time in twenty years, *tied in* — her hearing changed. She had learned at the Splint to put her ear to the down-cable and hear the deep breath resolve into a person. But she had heard it as a listener at a wall, from outside. Now she was inside the weave, holding an end of it, and the whole city’s cordage rang through her like water finding a level, and far below, under the plank and the drop and the patient fog, the great slow failing breath of Beya turned and found the new small cord lighting on the low reach and knew whose it was.

And Beya, dying, spent something she could not spare to push a single knowing up the miles of cable into the only ear now tuned to receive it. It was not words. It came as the sensation of the vault: the harness-wrights woken and moving, new cords being readied where the old ones guttered, a boy’s warm untired weight being carried down the last stair toward the knot the size of a house — and under all of it the breath, hitching now, close to the end, and grieving, and afraid, and aimed up the dark at Isla with the whole of what it had left, which resolved, when she let it, into a single unspeakable fact.

Not a fortnight. Not soon. *Dawn*. The boy. At dawn.

Isla came up off the cold iron with her new cord ringing in her chest and the low reach’s lamps burning small and gold around her and the clock she had not known the face of suddenly, terribly legible.

“Tonight,” she said, to the child, to the reach, to the dark. “It has to be tonight. They bind him at dawn.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Everything at Once

They went down into the last of the night the way water finds a crack, quietly and all at once and along the seams no one thinks to guard.

Isla went with four of the reach behind her and the netting-woman ahead, because the netting-woman knew the under-runs the way only a person who had spent a life keeping children off a rail could know them, every hatch and creep and dead ladder in the low structure. Yrsa was gone the other way, down toward the cistern to stand on a thread so a worn sever could not cut it, and that was its own descent into its own dark, and Isla had embraced her sister once, hard, at the fork, and neither of them had said a word that could turn into a cord, because some promises you keep by not making them where a death can hear.

The route was the officers' shadow-route, the one Vora had walked her onto a lifetime ago, the raw throat of the Sile going down past the last lamp, iron rungs and no rail and the cold breath of the fog rising to meet them. But tonight the Hold was awake. She could feel it before she could see it: the whole structure above the Cinch stirring in the dark, cords tightening and readying, the particular tense hum of an order being carried out by people who believed it holy. The harness-wrights were awake. Somewhere below and ahead of her, in the gold-and-grey vault at the root of the world, they were making

ready to fasten a boy who carried his hook the wrong way into the place where the city came to a point.

Half a gallery down, the shadow-route ran her into a sealed gate.

It had not been sealed when Vora walked her down. It was sealed now, bolted from the Hold side, a slab of old iron across the only throat that went down to the vault, and she could hear guard on the far side of it, low voices, the readying, and she stood in the dark with her four and the netting-woman and felt the clock run and had no way through.

Then the bolt threw. From the far side. Someone hauled the slab back on its pins, and the lamp-light fell out through the gap, and it was Vora Keel, grey-faced and swaying, out of her cell and no longer masked, with a young guard behind her holding a ring of keys and an expression like a man who has just done the most frightening thing of his life.

“I told him,” Vora said, without preamble, her voice worn to a rasp on whatever she’d been saying to a wall these three days. “I told him what the honey-milk is for. What we guard. He didn’t know. None of the young ones know.” She looked at Isla and something in her ruined face eased, the way a held breath eases. “You. Good. I hoped it would be you. Go down. The vault stair’s thick with them — the Warden’s there, and half the order, she’s made it a rite — but the wrights’ creep runs beside it and comes out on the vault rim behind the harness. He’ll walk you to the mouth of it.” She jerked her chin at the young guard. “I can’t. I have to hold this gate open, or they’ll seal you in from above and take you at their leisure.”

“Come with us,” Isla said.

“I’d only be a body they have to get past.” Vora smiled, which Isla had never seen her do, and it made her briefly and terribly young. “I opened the way. That’s my corner. Go and be the thing I couldn’t be, which is on time.” She set her shoulder to the iron slab and braced it, one turned officer holding a door in the dark so that a sever could

reach the thing the order had spent her whole life keeping her from.
“Go.”

Isla went.

The wrights’ creep was a crawl barely wider than her hips, running down beside the great vault stair in the raw rock, and through the gaps in the stone she could see it, the rite Vora had named — the Cinchguard on the wide stair with their lamps, grey and silent and reverent, descending in their ranks toward the root of the world to watch a child made into an anchor, and it was, she understood, the most sincere thing they knew how to do, and that was the horror of it, that none of it was cruelty, all of it was faith.

The creep took skin off both her shoulders and both her palms and she paid it without slowing, and through the gaps in the stone she read the ranks as they went down. The old ones walked in front, certain, their faces long since worn to the shape of the secret they carried. Behind them came the young ones — the ones Vora had said did not know — and their lamps wavered, because their hands were not yet steady in the presence of a thing they had been ordered to help do and never once been told the name of. Isla marked them as she crawled, the young and the unsteady, the way a mender marks the strands that have not yet decided to hold. A wedge, if she lived to drive one.

The creep let her out on the rim of the Cinch, behind the harness, into the gold and the grey.

And there was everything, all at once.

There was Beya. The small veiled shape at the heart of the woven knot the size of a house, the cords entering her shoulders and her spine and her open palms, and Isla could see now with her tied-in sight what she had only heard before: the breath was nearly done. Three of the great cords had gone from pale to a dead and lightless grey, quit, discharged, and the ones that still held had gone so thin and hot that the whole vault whined on the edge of a note no throat could hold. The old woman was minutes from setting down a weight

she had carried sixty years, and when she set it down, if nothing caught it, the city would follow it into the fog.

And the veiled head turned. A hair's width, no more, on the rising air of the harness — but it turned toward the rim where Isla crouched, because the woman at the heart of the knot felt every promise in the city and there was a new one now, thin and gold and three days old, come down the dark on its maker's own back. Isla felt the attention find her and settle, and it was not words, it was the ease of a thing waited for past all reasonable waiting. *You tied yourself in*, the breath seemed to say, in the sudden loosening of its grief. *Oh, well done. Too late, and well done, and too late.*

There was Coll. They had him at the mouth of the harness, two wrights easing the first of the anchor-cords toward the boy's broad untired back, and he was not fighting, because he did not yet fully understand, because they had told him some kind lie about honour and he was fifteen and had wanted so badly to be chosen. But he had gone still in the way of an animal that has finally smelled the truth under the words, and his mouth was moving, and Isla, tied into the weave now, could hear what he was saying, low, over and over, to no one, to Vora who was not there, to her — *this isn't a posting, is it. This is the thing. I'm the thing.*

And there was Marrow.

The Warden stood at the foot of the harness with her cord-burned bare hands folded and her plumb-line spine straight, and she was watching the wrights work, and as Isla came out onto the rim the Warden's grey eyes lifted and found her, and did not widen, and did not call an alarm, and that was when Isla understood she had walked into the shape of a thing already decided.

"There she is," Marrow said, quietly, to the vault, to the dark, in the flat exact voice that had ordered the disappearing of the curious for forty years. She looked at Isla the way she had once looked at Coll, the way the boy had told it — *like a sum* — except that the sum had resolved, and Isla could see the answer in the Warden's terrible

calm. She had not been surprised by the sever coming down the wrights' creep behind the harness. She had counted on it. A clean sever who was also a holder. The one soul in Osmark who could take Beya's place and hold it flawlessly for another sixty years, walking down into the vault on the last night, delivering herself. Marrow had left the way open. Marrow had been fishing with a boy for bait.

"You came for him," the Warden said. "Of course you did. You'll find it makes no difference which of you I bind, so long as the city holds. He's willing and he's strong. You're stronger, and you'd hold cleaner, and you came down here of your own feet, which the order has always preferred. Either way a back bears the weight by dawn." Her folded hands did not shake now; she had reached the bottom of her sum, the place past feeling. "I would rather it were the boy. He wanted it once. But I will take what walks into the vault."

"Don't do this." Isla's voice came out steady, and her new cord rang in her chest, the thin gold line running all the way up the dark to a child on the cold iron who would wait for her. "Beya wants to be the last. She's earned one word and it's *no*. If you bind either of us you make her sixty years mean a thing that was never true. You'd murder the truth to save the lie."

And then, because the Warden's face had not changed and would never change, Isla stopped speaking to Marrow at all. She pitched her voice past her, up the wide stair, to the ranked lamps and the wrights with their careful, steady hands.

"You don't know what you're holding a lamp for." She threw it to the young ones, to the not-knowing, and her voice carried in the vault the way a true thing carries in a still place. "They told you it was civic virtue. Faith. The Founder who gave herself to the city. It's a person. It has always been a person. That breath under your feet is a woman they buried alive sixty years ago so that none of you would ever have to feel the weight — and she is dying now, and begging to be let be the last, and the Warden means to fasten that boy into her place before the sun comes up so that the lie stays true one more

lifetime. Look at him. He is fifteen. Ask yourselves what the honey and the rest and the reverence were for. You already know. Your hands already know it, or they wouldn't be shaking."

One of the wrights' hands had gone still on the anchor-cord. A young guard three lamps up the stair had turned the colour of tallow. For the length of one held breath the vault hung on the edge of the thing Vora had done in the dark — the small unbolting of a certainty, spreading outward lamp by lamp.

"Take her," Marrow said, before it could reach the next hand.

They came out of the grey behind the ranked lamps, four of them, quick and practised, and Isla got the shear up out of her sleeve — turned cord, her mother's blade, her father's contradiction, the whole third way folded to an edge in her hand — and for one breath she had it, the only tool in the world that could cut and carry at once, the one thing that could unpick this knot without dropping the city.

Then a gauntleted hand came down on her wrist like the heel of the Trueknot, and another took her hair, and the shear turned in her grip, and she felt it leave her fingers.

It went out over the rim.

It fell into the dark of the vault, past the gold and the grey, down the throat of the Sile toward the fog that gave nothing back, the small bright turned-cord edge her mother had folded over three nights spinning away into the one place in the world that never returned what it took, and Isla screamed after it, one raw wordless sound, and could not follow it, because there were four sets of hands on her now, forcing her down onto the cold rim of the knot at the root of the world.

She fought them, which was useless — four trained bodies against a woman worn to string by two days of carrying other people's nerve — but she fought, because the only other thing to do was kneel quietly at the making of the thing she had come to unmake. And as they bore her down she saw, through the gold and the grey, that the veiled head had turned once more; that Beya's pale fog-eyes

had followed the shear over the rim and down into the dark and were fixed there still, on the exact place in the falling where it had gone, with an attention Isla did not understand and had no breath left to question.

And through the stone, faint and climbing, came the sound she had been dreading up the other dark: a whine going too clean, a great cord run to its lip and loosed on a chosen instant. Somewhere above, at the Trueknot's footing over the low gate, the Fallen's thread had begun to go, and Yrsa had not stopped them, or had not stopped them in time, and the cut the die-hards wanted was coming to meet the binding the Warden wanted, the two answers the city had always been offered rushing at each other through the dark with a boy and a dying woman and a disarmed sever caught in the closing gap between them.

They pushed Isla's face toward the failing knot. Beya's breath hitched, and held, and did not this time let go — one more time, one more, an old woman refusing to set the city down while a child she loved still might be fastened under it. Above, the whine climbed. At the harness, the wrights drew the first anchor-cord to the width of a hand from Coll's back. And Isla knelt on the rim of the Cinch with empty hands and no shear and no third door anywhere she could see, tied into a weave that was about to be crushed or cut, and had time, in the ringing dark, for exactly one thought, which was that she had promised a child she would come back, and had already, it seemed, begun to break it.

Far down in the fog, where nothing was ever recovered, a small bright edge went on falling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Third Door

They had her down on the cold rim of the knot with her cheek against the gold, and once the animal in her understood that four trained bodies could not be fought, only outlasted, and that she had nothing left to outlast them with, Isla stopped.

She went still under their hands. Not slack — still, the way she had taught herself to go still against a strained cord, every loud thing in her drawn down to one quiet line. They had taken her hands and they had taken the shear. They had not taken the thing that had changed tonight, which was that she was tied into the weave now and could hear the whole vault ringing like a struck bowl, and that half the people standing in it had, a minute ago, heard a truth they would carry to their graves.

So she used that instead of her hands.

“You felt it.” She turned her cheek along the gold and pitched her voice up the wide stair, past the Warden, to the ranked lamps and the wrights with their steadying grips. “When I said it. You felt the cords in this room go strange. That is what a true thing does at the root of the world. It does not argue. It rings, and the false thing next to it goes quiet, and a wright knows the difference in his hands before he knows it in his head.” A gauntlet ground her wrist against the stone; she let it. “Your hands already know. Ask them.”

“She is a sever,” Marrow said, to the vault, in the voice she had never once, in forty years, been made to raise. “A cutter, taken in the act, saying the thing cutters say. Fasten the boy.”

Two wrights bent again to the harness. But one of them — the one whose hand had stilled — did not, and the young guard three lamps up the stair had not got his colour back, and Isla felt the hesitation move through the ranks like a slack going down a line, one strand at a time deciding.

She stopped speaking to the room then, because the room was not the lock. The Warden was the lock, and the Warden could not be turned by an argument about faith; she had built her whole self out of the faith, mortared it in over sixty years, and you did not talk a wall out of being a wall. You looked for the one stone it was ashamed of.

Isla turned her head the other way, toward the heart of the knot, toward Beya — and with the sight the new cord had given her, the sight that came of holding an end of the weave instead of listening to it from a wall, she looked at the cords.

They were everywhere, of course, the whole city gathered to this one point and burning gold and pale and, in three places now, dead grey. But there was one she had not marked before, because it did not run up and out to the city like the others. It ran across. A single old cord, thick once and worn now to a fraying core, going from the veiled woman in the harness to the iron-spined woman at its foot. It was the oldest kind of cord there was, the kind made before you were old enough to choose it, a cord grown rather than sworn — and it had been barbed so long ago and borne so long since that the barb had healed into the line like a hook grown over by a living tree. A cord between a mother and her child, kept past all bearing on the mother’s side, and on the child’s side turned into the leash she used to keep the mother where she was.

Isla looked at that cord, and looked at the Warden’s cord-burned bare hands, and at the veiled head that had turned toward her once in sixty years of stillness, and she understood the thing the whole vault

had been built to keep her from understanding, and it went into her like cold water.

She of all people. She who had found her own mother barbed and cut her free and paid for it with every year since. Here was the same photograph held to the lamp and reversed: a daughter who had found her mother barbed and, instead of cutting, had closed her fist around the barb and held it, and called the holding faith, and called the holding duty, and called the holding the city. Two girls. Two mothers. Two cords. Isla had cut and lost hers in a single night; Marrow had kept and lost hers across sixty years; and neither of them, until tonight, had been allowed to know there was a third thing a person could do with a cord that was killing someone they loved.

“She is yours,” Isla said.

The Warden’s face did not change. That was how Isla knew.

“Say it plainer than that,” Isla said, and now she was not pitching her voice to the stair; she was speaking low, straight across the gold, sever to Warden, one held woman to one that only looked free. “That is not the Founder in the harness. That is not a saint who gave herself to the city. That is your mother. You have a cord to her older than this vault, and it goes into a woman you have kept buried alive for as long as you have been able to keep her. The cold hands you count with.” Isla saw the small flinch and drove the edge of it home, gently, which was worse than cruelly. “Those are hers. You learned them at her neck when you were small enough to be frightened of the dark down here. And you grew up and you did not let her out. You are the one who did not let her out.”

“I kept the city standing.” The Warden’s voice was still flat, but the flatness had gone from the flatness of stone to the flatness of a held breath. “Sixty years it has not fallen. There are children asleep tonight above us who will never know what it costs to keep the air under their beds. You would trade them for a sentiment.”

“I would trade nothing. That is the whole of what you have never been able to hear.” Isla let the next of it come slow, because it was the

stone the wall was ashamed of and she meant to set her whole weight on it. “You buried her because you believed one back had to bear it so the rest could sleep. I believed you, for two days. I made myself the one back. I know now exactly how holy it feels and exactly how much it is a lie.” She held the grey eyes. “So answer the sever, Warden, since you will not answer the daughter. If the weight can be shared — if it could always have been shared, if a city could always have held itself the way it is going to hold itself before this sun comes up — then what was she *for*? What did you keep her down here sixty years *for*? What did you refuse her *for*, every year she asked, when the asking cost her more than the holding? Tell me the number that makes that come out even. You count better than anyone alive. Count it. Out loud. In front of them.”

And the Warden, who had an answer for cutters and an answer for the council and an answer for every frightened man who had ever asked her what the honey-milk was for, opened her mouth in the gold light at the root of the world and did not have an answer for that.

Her cord-burned hands, folded so exactly at her waist, came unfolded. And they shook. Isla watched the Warden of the Cinch look down at her own shaking hands as though they belonged to a stranger who had just now walked into the vault and begun, quietly, to weep.

Into that stillness — the stillness of a certainty that has just felt its own footing go — the breath at the heart of the knot let out its slow Out, and Beya spoke, because Beya’s speech had always waited for the exhale, the way the whole city’s did.

“Sesta,” she said. The cracked-plain voice, unbroken after everything. “Don’t. Count. Anything.” A breath. “Let me. Do the one. Free thing. I have left.”

And the veil turned, not toward her daughter this time, but down — down over the rim, into the dark of the vault where the throat of the Sile opened under the gold and the fog waited, patient about everything, for the things that fell.

Isla felt it before she saw it. She was tied into the weave, and the weave sang, one high impossible note, as the woman who had spent sixty years learning in secret to move the city's weight without a hand spent the last of what she had — not on the city, not on her own next breath, but on a single filament of will she cast down the throat of the world after the thing her pale eyes had marked as it fell.

Down in the fog, turned cord answered turned cord. The way the deep line had answered Isla in the dark under the fish-lift, the way like has always leaned toward like across any distance, the small bright edge that had been falling since the Warden said *take her* felt the great turned working reach for it, and turned, and came.

It came up the throat of the Sile on the rising breath of the harness, out of the one place in the world that gave nothing back, a splinter of light climbing where nothing climbed. The four guards who held Isla saw it and their hands forgot her. The wrights saw it. The young guard the colour of tallow made a sound that was half a prayer and half the noise a child makes, because he had been told all his life that the fog kept everything, and here was the fog giving something up, and no story he had been given had room in it for that.

And then he did the thing no drill had readied him for. He set his lamp down on the stone. Just set it at his feet, as though his hands had cast their vote before his heart could be consulted, and stood empty-handed in the ranks with the light pooling around his boots — and the guard beside him stared at the set-down lamp the way you stare at the first stone that quits a wall. It was a small unbolting. It was the same one Vora had begun above in the dark, with a boy and a ring of keys. It went down the wide stair one lamp at a time, the way the truth had gone, the way a slack goes down a line, and by the time it reached the bottom three more lamps had come to rest on the steps and three more pairs of hands hung at a stranger's sides.

The shear rose over the rim, turned once in the gold light — her mother's blade, her father's contradiction, the whole third way folded to an edge — and Beya, with a filament of a will that had one breath

of strength left in all the world, laid it across the gold and into Isla's freed and open hand.

Her fingers closed on the worn grip. It was cold from the fog and it was hers.

"Oh," Isla said, which was all there was.

"There." Beya's Out was very small now. The gold in the vault had dimmed with the spending; three grey cords had become four. "I marked. Where it fell. Sixty years down here." The ghost of something that in a face less tired would have been mischief. "You learn. Where things land."

"Beya —"

"Listen. No time for the other." The veil lifted a fraction on the rising air, and for the first time Isla saw the pale fog-eyes full on, and they were not transcendent and they were not saintly; they were an old woman's eyes, exhausted past exhaustion, fixed on her with the ferocity of the single thing she had stayed alive to hand over. "You have the cut. You have the carry. You are the point it turns through, and you tied yourself in, so you have your brace. There is only. One thing left. That I could not give you. Until you were inside."

The breath drew in, the whole vault dimming as it gathered, every failing cord leaning toward the woman at the center as she pulled the last of the city's air into her small body.

"The note," Beya said, on the Out. "You cannot pay the weight out into ten thousand cords. Unless they all ring. At one pitch. Or they fight each other. And tear. Listen to me hold it. This is the note the city has to find. This is the sound of a thing. That is holding exactly right. Neither slack. Nor strained."

And she breathed — not words now, but a tone, low and warm and impossibly steady, the sound Isla had chased up an updraft on the Concord Bridge a lifetime ago and mistaken for a flaw in the wind; the hum under the city's hum; the single kept note that a bridge makes when it bears its whole load and complains of none of it. Beya held it, dying, so that the one ear in the city tuned to receive it could learn it

by heart — and Isla, tied in, took the note the way you take a hand in the dark, and held it, and knew it, and would know it now until whatever was left of her stopped ringing.

The note ended. The breath that had carried it did not draw again as deep.

“Now,” Beya said, so faint it was almost only the shape of the word on the last of the air. “While the daughter. Is still counting. Undo me.”

Above them, through the stone, the whine of the Fallen’s thread climbed another half-step toward the note no cord could hold. At the harness, one freed wright had stepped back from the boy and one had not. And the Warden of the Cinch stood at the foot of her mother’s harness with her unfolded hands shaking and her whole life coming, at last, to a number she could not make come out even — and did not, in that ringing moment, say *take her* again.

Isla got her knees under her on the rim of the world, her mother’s shear in her hand and a dying woman’s one true note held burning in her chest, and turned to begin the thing no one had done in two hundred years.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Unpicking

She began with the boy, because she would not leave a child a hand's width from the thing she had come to unmake.

Two strides across the gold and no one stopped her, because the four who had held her were staring at a shear that had come back out of the fog and the Warden was staring at her own hands, and in the gap their faith had opened Isla crossed the rim and put herself between Coll and the harness. The first anchor-cord hung there in the wright's careful grip, a finger from the broad untired back, gold and hungry and not yet seated. It had not taken him. It was reaching for him the way water reaches for the lowest place.

"Isla." Coll's voice cracked on her name. His eyes were enormous and he had gone the still grey of a boy who has understood the whole of a thing at once. "It's me. They picked me. I thought it was — I thought I'd earned —"

"You did earn something." She got the shear up between his back and the reaching cord. "You earned this: I am about to make it so that nobody ever gets picked again. Hold still. This one hasn't bitten you. It's going to want to as I cut it. Don't fight the pull. Let it come to me."

She sheared the readying-cord.

She had cut ten thousand cords in her life and every one of them had cost her a clean toll and gone quiet. This did not go quiet. The

instant the turned edge parted it, the weight the cord had been reaching to lay on Coll came looking for the nearest back, exactly the way the reach's promises had, and Isla was the nearest back, and she was ready for it, and she took it — took it into the holder-place Beya had opened in her, held it one whole breath while it screamed for somewhere to fall — and then she did the thing that was not cutting and was not holding, the thing the turned cord in her hand had been made across two winters to let her do. She turned. She paid the weight out along her own live cord, down the thin gold line in her chest that ran up all the dark to a child at the low gate, and out through the reach's small chosen threads, at the note, at Beya's one true note, and the weight went out of her and into the many and seated, and hummed, and held.

Coll gasped as the cord let go of him. He did not fall. He stood on the rim of the Cinch a free boy, unbitten, unchosen, and put his hand on his own chest where nothing had taken hold, and looked at Isla with the beginning of an understanding that was too big for his face.

"That," Isla said, breathing hard, "is the whole of it. Cut, carry, pay it out to the ones who chose. Now the rest."

But the rest was not one readying-cord to a boy. The rest was Beya, and the whole two-hundred-year weight of the Great Concord gathered into her small failing body, and Isla turned to it and felt, for the first time, the true size of what she had said she would do.

The knot was the size of a house and it was all live cord, every span and ladder-street and gilded Highspan oath in the city run down here to a point and threaded through one dying woman. Isla could not cut it all at once; no edge could, not even this one. She had to unpick it. Cord by cord, the way you take apart a snarl you dare not simply slash, choosing each strand and cutting it free of the anchor and turning its weight outward in the same breath, ten thousand times, faster than any of them could fail, while a woman who had one breath of holding left held the rest.

She set the shear to the first great cord and began.

It was like nothing. It was like being a door the whole sea had decided to come through. The first cord she took was a Lowspan span's civic thread, and its weight when she turned it was the weight of a bridge full of sleeping people, and she paid it down into the reach and the reach's threads took it, humming, and it held — and there was no time to be glad, because she was already choosing the second, and the third, and her hands had found the rhythm her whole strange double-natured life had been the rehearsal for: cut and carry, cut and carry, the sever's edge and the holder's back working in one breath the way her mother had kept and her father had broken in one breath, so long ago, to make the very thing in her hand.

For a hundred cords it was possible. She paid them out into the threads she knew, the low reach, the netting-woman, the children with their quit-line code that had been load-bearing cords all along, the two-thirds of the Underhang Yrsa's people had talked into choosing, and they took the weight and rang at the note and it was, for a few impossible breaths, working — the thing Beya had bent sixty secret years toward, the city beginning, at its very bottom, to hold itself.

Then she ran out of threads.

She felt it happen the way you feel a stair end in the dark with your foot still going down. She turned to pay out the next great cord and there was nowhere to put it — every chosen thread in the Underhang was already full, ringing, bearing all it had freely said it would bear, and the cord in the shear was still coming free of the anchor with its whole drowning weight, and it had to go somewhere, and the only somewhere left was her.

So it stayed in her. And the next. And the next.

A holder can carry what would snap anyone else. Isla had not known, until the weight of a district with no thread to take it settled onto her holder-back and stayed, how much that was, or how far it was from enough. She was the pivot, and a pivot that cannot pay out what it takes in is only a slower place to break.

And tied in, she had no mercy of abstraction. The weight had faces. It was the sleeping weight of a Lowspan tenement she had once picked quit from at dawn, forty families breathing easy over the drop on cords not one of them had chosen or could name the price of. It was the fish-lift, and the netting-woman's rail, and the plank-walk over the low gate where Onil had gone into the fog with two children thrown safe behind him. It was every ordinary back that had slept sound for sixty years because one buried woman had not; and Isla held all of it now, all of it that had nowhere left to go, and understood in her own creaking spine the size of the thing Beya had carried alone since before Isla was born — and understood, too, that the understanding had come far too late to be anything but more weight.

The weight she could not turn began to stack inside her, cord on cord on cord, and she felt her own new cords creak with it, felt the thin gold line to Pib go taut as a thing that might be asked to bear more than a child could hold, and she throttled the working back, took the great cords slower, and knew even as she did it that slower was its own death, because above her —

Above her, through the stone, the Fallen's thread climbed another half-step. Sarn's cut, coming clean and quick on a chosen instant, the die-hards' answer racing the Warden's, and it ran under the low gate, under the reach, under the exact chosen threads she was paying the city's weight into, and if it went — if it dropped the low reach into the fog — then not only would Pib and the netting-woman and the children fall, but every cord she had just seated would go grey in an instant and dump its whole borrowed weight back through the pivot, back into her, all at once.

She was building the new city on the one span the old revolution was sawing through.

"It's not enough," she said, out loud, to the vault, to the boy, to the dying woman, and heard the fear in it and let it be heard. "There aren't enough of them. I can seat the Underhang. I can't seat a city with a few hundred cords and one back. The rest of them are asleep

above us and they don't know they can carry anything, and if they don't choose, and choose now, this stacks up in me until I go, and when I go it all goes." She was holding a district in her body and speaking through it and the effort greyed the edges of her sight. "I need the whole city awake and choosing before the sun. And I can't leave the pivot to go and ask them. If I let go to climb, it drops."

And Coll — who had stood on the rim watching the woman who raised him take a district into her body and begin to buckle under it — reached it before she could say it. She saw the understanding go through him, saw him arrive at the one thing that only he, in all that vault, could do.

"I'm a holder." He said it plainly, without any of the old hunger in it, as if he had only just learned what the word was for. "That's what all of it was. The honey and the rest and the picking. They wanted me because I can carry. So I'll carry it up." He was already moving toward the wide stair, toward the ranked lamps of an order that had come down here to bury him. "I'll take the weight up the stair on my own back so you don't have to hold it and climb both. And I'll tell them. Every tier. I'll tell them what I am and what she is and that they can each take a thread, out loud, on purpose." He stopped at the foot of the stair and looked back at her, fifteen and grey with fear and entirely certain, and for once she had nothing to teach him. "You always said I talked too much. Let me go talk."

"Coll —" Every part of her that had spent two winters keeping him small and safe and hidden rose up to call him back. She was tied in now. She knew what it was to send someone you loved up toward the drop with a cord running out of you into them. She made herself do it anyway, because that was the whole of the thing she had learned. "Go up. Stay on the note. Ask them, don't order them — the ordered ones don't seat, you know that now. And Coll." The gold line of the working screamed in her and she held it and gave him the true thing instead of the safe thing. "You were never going to be the anchor. You were going to be the voice. Go be it."

He went up the stair two lamps at a time, a holder-boy climbing into the waking city with a share of its weight on his back, and the wavering young guards did not stop him, and one of them — the tallow-coloured one — turned and went up after him, whether to help or from sheer need to be nearer someone certain, Isla could not tell and did not have breath to wonder.

She turned back to the knot. Beya's breath was a thread now, in and out, in and out, refusing with the last of itself to set the city down while there was still a woman on the rim who might catch it. The daughter stood where she had stood, her unfolded hands still, not shaking now but open, staring at the mother she had kept and the sever who was unmaking sixty years of her arithmetic one turned cord at a time, and she did not say *take her*, and she did not say anything, and once — Isla saw it at the grey edge of her sight — the Warden of the Cinch took a single step toward the harness. Toward Beya. The first step she had let herself take in the direction of her mother in longer than Isla had been alive.

There was no time to see where it led.

Isla set the shear to the next great cord, and the next, cutting and carrying and paying out the weight into a city that was not yet awake enough to take it, holding in her own creaking back everything the sleeping tiers would not yet hold, feeling with every cord she turned the toll of it beginning somewhere deep and unreadable — a sever always paid, and this was the largest cut two hundred years had ever seen, and she could feel the price starting to be counted, far down under the working, in a place she had no attention left to look. She could not read yet what it would take from her. She only knew, the way she had always known at the edge of a cut, that it would take something, and that it would be dear, and that she had agreed to it the moment she closed her hand on the grip.

Let it, she thought. Count it later. Hold now.

The weight stacked in her. The note rang in her. The thin gold cord to the child at the low gate thrummed with the strain, and above

it the die-hards' whine climbed toward the breaking pitch, and somewhere far above that a fifteen-year-old holder was climbing into the dark toward a sleeping city with the whole of the plan riding on whether strangers, woken before dawn and told an impossible thing by a boy from the Underhang, would choose to hold a stranger's weight out loud.

Isla knelt at the root of the world and held what a city would not yet hold, and cut, and carried, and could not, alone, keep it up much longer.

"Choose," she said, to all of them, to none of them, to the dark going up. "Please. Choose. I can't hold your whole weight for you. I was never supposed to. That was always the lie."

The knot came apart in her hands, strand by burning strand, faster than she could pay it out, and the overflow settled on her back, and she bent under it, and held, and waited for the city to answer — not knowing, in the ringing dark, whether it would.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Answer of the City

He climbed with a district on his back and learned, one stair at a time, what he was.

Coll had carried heavy things before. He had hauled coils of quit-cord up out of the Underhang that bowed grown men, had braced a slipping cable at Coper's Reach until his sight went white at the edges, had believed, in the vanity of fifteen, that he knew what it was to bear a load. He had known nothing. What lay across his back now was a piece of a city. It was the sleeping weight of a Lowspan tenement and half a ladder-street and a stretch of the fish-market spans, laid on him by Isla in the same breath she cut it loose, and it did not crush him, and that was the terrible marvel of him. It should have folded any ordinary back into the stone. Instead it settled onto the place the Cinchguard had spent a whole season fattening, the place in him that never frayed, and the place answered the way it had answered his whole life without his understanding it. *More. I can take more.*

So this was the thing he was. Not chosen. Made to carry. He had wanted so badly to be the picked one, the boy lifted above his station, and the whole time the thing that lifted him had only ever been a capacity for other people's weight — and now he was climbing up out of the dark to give it all away.

Down behind him a thin gold line ran out of the small of his back into the deep, and on the end of it, unmistakable, was Isla. He could feel her the way you feel someone gripping the other end of a rope you are both trying not to go off. Holding. Buckling and holding. *Choose*, she had said, into the ringing dark. *Please*. He was going to make them choose if he had to say the word into every waking face in Osmark.

The tallow-coloured guard came up the stair at his shoulder and would not fall back.

“You should stop following me,” Coll said, not slowing. “I’m the thing they were going to bury. Being near me is bad for a career.”

“I set my lamp down,” the guard said, as if that settled a question Coll hadn’t asked. He was young, younger up close than his grey coat made him, and his face had the scoured look of a person who has just learned that the holy thing he guarded was a crime. “I can’t pick it back up. I’ve tried thinking how and I can’t.”

“What’s your name?”

The guard blinked, like no one at the Hold had asked him that in a long time. “Teb.”

Coll had spent his whole life being told, by people in better coats, that he’d been chosen. He was done, forever, with choosing people for things. “Then help me ask, Teb. That’s the only order I’ve got and it isn’t one. We don’t tell anybody anything tonight. We *ask*.”

They came up through the Hold and the Hold did not stop them. The ranks that had descended so surely to bind a boy stood now in broken files along the great stair, lamps guttering, faces turned inward on the arithmetic Isla had spoken into them below, and where Coll passed with the weight of a district plain on his back a few of them stepped aside as if from something they had been taught their whole service to revere and had never once expected to see walking. At the last sealed gate a woman held the bolt thrown open with her own body wedged in the frame, unmasked, worn to a wire. Coll knew her. She was the one who had never, in all his weeks of being fattened,

been able to look at him. She looked at him now, full, tea-and-iron eyes in a grey face, and something in her went loose at the sight of him free and upright with a city on his back.

“Go on, holder,” Vora Keel said. “Be quick. I can’t hold this gate and your whole life both.”

He went on.

The Underhang met him first, because the Underhang is nearest the drop and always awake to it. They had felt the tremor of the working in their floors before he arrived — cords tightening, the deep hum shifting under a night that should have been ordinary — and they had come out onto the swaying walks in the cold, quit-runners and net-menders and mothers with babies slung to their chests, all of them listening down the way people listen when they have grown up knowing the exact sound a cable makes before it lets go.

Coll did not have the breath yet to shout across a tier. So he did the thing he knew, the small thing that was his and had always been his. He found a dead quit-line strung along the walk-rail, and he set his split knuckles to it, and he tapped.

Come. Come. The low gate. Come.

It was a child’s code. He had made it up himself, half of it, trading knocks in the dark with other orphans who could not read a word between them, and he had never once thought of it as anything but a game that had gone useful. The dead rope carried the taps out along the whole slung underside of the city the way only quit carries them, silent to every ear but a knuckle laid against the line, and a moment later, from off in the fog-dark, an answer came back down a different line — *coming* — and then another, and another, until the whole Underhang was ringing with the code, hands finding lines, the least people in Osmark passing the word along the one network the Cinchguard had never thought to watch because it was made of dead rope and children.

Then he opened his mouth, and the weight on his back sang.

That was the strangest gift of the night. Beya's note, the single true pitch Isla had told him to stay on — *ask them, stay on the note* — he had feared he would lose it, tone-deaf boy that he was, would stand up in front of a tier and ask them to promise in the wrong key and seat nothing. He needn't have feared. The weight itself hummed at the note. The whole borrowed load across his shoulders rang with it, a low warm exact tone, the sound of a thing holding precisely right, neither slack nor strained, and all he had to do was let his voice ride out on top of the sound already coming through him.

"You don't have to fall!" he called down the walks, and heard the note carry his voice further than his voice could have gone alone. "There's no floor coming for you tonight. There's a woman at the root of the city cutting you all loose from the thing that's been holding you up, and she's going to hand you your own weight, and you can *choose* to hold it — a corner of it, a thread, whatever you can bear — you choose it, out loud, and you pitch it to the sound you're hearing right now, and it takes. Nobody has to be buried again. Not her. Not me. Not anybody's kid. But you have to say it. It won't take if you don't mean it, and it won't take if I make you, so I'm not making you. I'm a boy from the Ledgers-end with nothing and I'm asking you. Hold a thread. On purpose. Say it."

For one breath nothing. He hung over the drop of that silence worse than any physical drop.

Then the Underhang answered, and it answered the way he should have known it would — first, and fastest, and with the most, because they had the least and had always known exactly what it was worth. A net-mender two walks over planted her feet and said to the fog, in a voice cracked with cold, "I'll hold the Sarrow rail. Kids come off it if I don't. I'll hold it," and Coll felt through the down-cord to Isla the instant that promise seated — a new thread going gold and taking weight, and a fraction of the load lifting off his own back as Isla, far below, paid the mended rail's weight out into a woman who

had chosen it. It was the most extraordinary feeling of his life. It was like the first breath after being held underwater.

Then a quit-runner, then a fish-lift man, then a whole tenement's worth of them at once, each one saying a small true thing into the note — *I'll hold the low walk. I'll hold my sister's span. I'll hold the plank where Onil went, I knew Onil, I'll hold it* — and each one seating, gold blooming out along the slung underside of the city thread by thread, and the weight coming off Coll and off Isla and settling where it had been laid down freely, and holding, and humming, and the Underhang that fell first in every disaster was, tonight, the first thing in two hundred years to hold itself up on purpose.

And then, far down at the very lip of the Underhang, at the oldest iron gate in the city, a thread he had not made and could not have made went gold all on its own and took a load far too large for the size of it and rang so piercingly true at the note that Coll laughed out loud, once, with a district on his back. He knew whose it was. Everyone at the low gate knew whose it was. A child had said she would wait there, and had waited, and now a woman she loved was cutting the whole city free at the root, and the small kept promise between them lit up load-bearing — a seven-year-old holding a thread that grown houses in Highspan would have called beneath them, holding it clean and true, and around her, following her the way the young follow the certain, the other quit-runners were taking up threads of their own, the children of the Underhang each choosing a corner, so that the base of the new city, the very bottom course of the whole rebuilt weave, was laid by orphans keeping their word.

"That's it," Coll said, half to Teb and half to no one, his eyes stinging. "That's the whole answer. They had it the whole time. They were the anchor the whole time and nobody ever asked them."

He climbed. The Underhang was holding; now he had to wake the rest, and the rest slept higher, and slept sounder, and would be harder to move the higher he went. He came up onto the great central span in the grey before dawn, the widest bridge in Osmark, the

Trueknot that the newer mouths called the Concord Bridge, and over its head-gate two words stood carved and worn shiny by two hundred years of passing hands. Coll could not read them. He had never been able to read them. He had walked under them a thousand times being told what they said, the way he had been told everything all his life by people who could read and chose what to tell him. *Hold fast*. He knew the shape of it without the letters. Tonight, for the first time, he was going to be the one who said what it meant.

He stood in the throat of the Concord Bridge with the note ringing up out of the weight on his back, and he called Osmark to choose.

Lowspan answered, slower than the Underhang but it answered — lamplighters and quit-market traders and a Knotwright's apprentice who wept while she said her thread, because she had spent her training learning to appraise the price of other people's promises and had never once been allowed to simply make one. Midspan answered slower still, wary, counting, but the sight of the whole lower city already lit and holding was its own argument, gold climbing the tiers below them plain as sunrise, and a guild-hall's worth of solid frightened people pitched their voices to the note and took up their share.

The weave climbed. Coll felt it climb, felt the load spreading up off his back and Isla's into ten thousand chosen corners, felt the impossible thing coming true tier by tier, and for a few soaring breaths on the Concord Bridge he believed it was simply going to work, all the way up, all the way to the sunlit rim.

It reached Highspan and stopped.

He felt it stop the way you feel your foot come down where a stair should be and isn't. The gold ran up the cables toward the Crown, toward the gilded spans and the stone-anchored towers, and found nothing to seat into. Up on the sunlit rim the great houses of the Concordat had come out onto their high walks in their night-robes to watch the lower city light itself, and they did not pitch their voices to

the note, and they did not take up a thread. A man's voice came down from the high gate, smooth and carrying and entirely certain, a voice that had never in its life had to know the sound a cable makes before it goes.

"The Concord is the civic virtue of Osmark," the voice said, "not a rope trick performed by the Underhang. Highspan does not take instruction shouted up from the fog. Whatever is happening below will be corrected by morning. It always is."

And the weave, blooming so beautifully up from the bottom of the world, reached the top of the world and had nowhere to go. The weight that should have spread across a hundred gilded Highspan backs had a hundred gilded backs refusing it, and weight refused does not vanish. It buckled. Coll felt the whole upper course of the new city sag all at once, felt the load that Highspan would not take come sliding back down the cables looking for the nearest bearing thing, and the nearest bearing thing was the boy on the Concord Bridge with a district already on his back, and under him the low reach, and under that the low gate, and under that a child.

"No," Coll said, and got his shoulders under it, and took what he could, and it was not enough, it was a tier's worth of refused weight and he was one holder, and his knees went, and the note bent in his chest toward the ugly whine of a thing strained past true. The down-cord to Isla screamed. Below him, he knew, the surplus was already racing down the cables toward the low gate, toward Pib, toward everyone who had answered first and would now be crushed first for it.

"Somebody hold the top," Coll gasped, to a rim that would not hear him, to a city half-gold and half-asleep, to anyone. "It's coming down. Somebody hold what the Crown won't or it all comes down on the ones who said yes."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

What the Crown Owes

Yrsa had been standing on the thread long enough to feel her feet go numb, and she did not move them, because the moment she moved them Sarn would cut it.

The footing-thread of the Trueknot ran here, through the dead cistern's under-runs, a hand-thick cord of two-hundred-year-old civic oath married into the stone above the low gate — the oldest load-bearing promise in the low city, the one the Fallen had chosen because breaking it would slip the whole Lowspan heel into the Sile and start the cascade they wanted. Sarn had primed it. He had spent an hour with his worn grey hands coaxing it to its lip, and it whined now, hot and thin, a great cord run right up to the edge of letting go and held there on a chosen instant. All it needed was an edge and a will. Sarn had both. He was a sever the way a fallen tree is firewood — used up, most of him gone to soak the recoils of a hundred cuts, only enough left to make one more.

Yrsa stood on the thread between the edge and the will, and had told him, an hour ago, without heat, “You cut it, you cut through me. You’ve spent a lot of people, Sarn. Spend me and see how the others take it.”

“You’d let the city stand,” Rhee said. Rhee had a hawk’s patience and a hawk’s mercy. She stood at the mouth of the run with nine of the die-hards behind her and the low gate at her back, and she had

loved the cause longer than she had loved anything, and it had hollowed her the way loving a cause does. “After what it did to your mother. After what it did to every mother down here. You’d let it *stand*.”

“I came to cut it,” Yrsa said. “You know I did. I sent for the only clean sever left alive so we could aim the fall and not just make it. I’ve wanted this city in the fog for twenty years.” She did not take her eyes off Sarn’s hands. “I’m telling you I was wrong about the fall. Not soft. Wrong. Listen.”

Because she could hear it now, and so could they, if they would stop and hear. All through the dead runs the quit-lines were ringing with a child’s tap-code — *come, the low gate, come* — and under that, rising, was a sound none of them had heard in their lives and all of them knew instantly, the way you know a thing you have only ever been promised: the low city holding itself. Not the old ambient hum of a million promises no one remembered making. A new sound, chosen and awake, thread after thread going gold below them and taking weight and ringing at one true note, the Underhang — the Underhang, the least of them, the ones who fell first — standing up under their own lives on purpose.

“That’s the slow way,” Yrsa said, and heard her own voice do something it had not done in twenty years. It shook. “That’s the thing I called a fantasy. Ten thousand cowards and one dying woman’s breath. Listen to it, Rhee. It’s working. My sister is at the root of the city right now unpicking the Anchor cord by cord and handing the weight to anyone who’ll hold it, and they’re holding it. The answer we said didn’t exist is happening under your feet.”

Rhee’s face did not move. “Then we don’t need to cut. We just walk away.”

“No.” And here was the hard part, the part Yrsa had come down into the dark already knowing, the part she had not said aloud to anyone, not even to Isla, because saying it made it true. “Because it won’t reach the top. It’s climbing tier by tier and it will climb right up

to the Crown and the Crown will not take its share, because the Crown has never taken its share of anything, that's what a Crown is. And when Highspan won't hold, the weight it won't hold comes back down. On us. On the low gate. On the children who said yes first." She finally looked away from Sarn, at Rhee, at all of them. "The cut was always going to kill the poor to punish the rich. It just does it slower this way, and calls it their choice."

She felt it come before she finished saying it.

Far up the cables something sagged — she felt it in the thread under her feet, a great slackening and then a sick returning tautness — and she knew the shape of it without being told: the top had refused, and a tier's worth of unheld weight was sliding back down the world toward the lowest bearing thing it could find. Toward here. It would come down the cables into the Lowspan heel, into the footing-thread she stood on and the low gate under it, and it would drop the whole low reach into the Underbreath — Pib and the net-menders and the quit-runner children, every soul who had answered the boy first, crushed for the sin of choosing before their betters.

Unless something down here held what the Crown would not.

Yrsa Venn was a sever. She had spent her life learning to cut, to absorb, to redirect recoil into herself and walk away emptier each time. She was not a holder. She had never been a holder. To take weight onto herself and *bear* it, the way her sister's monstrous strange back could bear it, the way the boy could — that was not a thing a sever's body could survive. Take a load like that into a frame not made for it and it would not fray you slowly the way cutting did. It would kill you now.

She had known that when she came down here. She understood, standing on the thread with the weight of a refused Crown sliding toward her, that some traitor part of her had understood it for a while — had chosen this run, this thread, this position over the low gate, the way a person chooses where they mean to make their stand.

“Get off the thread,” she told Sarn, and her voice had stopped shaking. “You’re not cutting it. Nobody’s cutting anything tonight. You want to spend the last of yourself on something, spend it holding. All of you.” She turned to the nine. “You came to end the sacrifice. So end it. Not by making a new fall — by being the thing nobody’s ever been for you. Get to a live thread and take a share and hold it and don’t you dare let go. That’s the whole revolution. It was always the whole revolution. We just thought it had to be done with an edge.”

Doss went first, of course — Doss the doubter, limping to the nearest gold thread and laying his honest hands on it and taking a share with a grunt like a man lifting a cart, because doubters, in the end, are only people who took longer to be sure. Then two more. Then, terribly, Sarn — Sarn who had come to die making the cut looked at Yrsa a long moment out of his used-up face and said, “A cut that big takes a person. I always said. Didn’t figure the hold took one too,” and he set his ruined sever’s hands to a thread instead of an edge, and took what a nearly-gone man could take, and it was not much, and it was everything he had.

Rhee did not move. Rhee stood at the mouth of the run with her hawk’s face and watched her people turn from cutting to carrying, and Yrsa saw her decide that a purity kept was worth more than a city saved, and saw her turn, and walk up toward the low gate and out, alone, uncut and unbending and wrong, and there was no time to grieve it because the weight arrived.

It came down the footing-thread like the whole sky sitting down.

Yrsa took it. She wrapped both bare arms around the great cord she had been standing guard on and she stopped being its guard and became its bearing, opened herself the way a holder opens and let the refused weight of Highspan pour into a frame that could not hold it, and the pain was not like a cut. A cut was clean, a bright specific theft. This was every cord in her body pulling at once toward the drop, her sever’s frame screaming that this was wrong, you don’t hold, you cut, you spend the weight into yourself and walk away —

only there was no walking away from this, there was only holding it, and holding it, and the low gate under her not falling, and Pib not falling, and forty families over the drop not falling, because for as long as Yrsa Venn's heart kept beating it was beating against a tier's worth of weight and refusing to let it down.

She felt her old scar burn. The rope-mark along her jaw, twenty years old, the one she had gotten the night she first tried to hold a thing instead of cut it and it had torn through her hands and burned her to the bone and not saved anyone anyway — the night on the plank, the night she learned that holding was for fools and cutting was the only mercy. She had believed that lesson so hard for so long. She had it wrong end to. She had simply been too small, that night, and too alone, and holding a thing alone is what kills you. She was not alone now. Below her the Underhang held. Beside her Doss and Sarn and the turned die-hards held. She was one back among a city of backs, at last, and the thing that killed you when you did it alone was survivable, almost, nearly, when it was shared — except that someone still had to take the Crown's refused portion until the Crown was shamed into taking its own, and that someone was her, and it would not be survivable for her, and that was a price, and Yrsa Venn had spent her whole life spending people, and had finally found the one death she was willing to buy.

She could feel, at her throat, the loop of grey quit-stubs she had worn for twenty years — a tally, one dead nub of cord for every life the cause had spent, a rosary of the sacrificed she had made herself carry so she would never once pretend the ledger came clean. She knew each of them by touch in the dark. She understood now that she had been walking toward a stub of her own the whole time, and that this was the only one on the string she would ever put there for herself and not hang on someone else. Below her the low gate held. She thought, absurdly, with the clear stupid tenderness of the dying, of Denna — of their mother on the plank, a kept cord stopping her heart — and of how the lesson Yrsa took from that death had been *cut*,

always cut, when the true lesson had been standing in her mother's own body the whole time and she had been too busy raging to read it. Denna had kept. In the last second of her life their mother had held her word and it had cost her everything, and it was, Yrsa saw at last, the bravest thing either of her parents ever did. Isla had spent twenty years believing she killed their mother. She hadn't. The cord-lord had, two winters before, when he barbed the oath. And Denna had died holding — like this, exactly like this — and if there was one thing in the whole ruin of the night Yrsa wanted to live long enough to say, it was that.

“Look at this,” she said, to no one, to the fog, to the smooth sure voice she could feel refusing up at the top of the world. She could feel Highspan through the weave now, the way you feel the far end of a thing you are bearing the near end of. She could feel Vessimer's certainty, and she wanted, with the last clear part of her, for him to feel her. “You want to know what the Crown owes. Come down here and I'll show you the bill. The leader of the Fallen. The woman who came to drop your city in the fog. Holding it up. With her body. Because you won't lift a finger of yours.” She bared her teeth at the dark. “Let them all see it. Let it go up the weave. Every back in Osmark is holding tonight except the ones that own it. Choke on that, Councilor.”

And it went up. She did not know how — through the boy's voice on the bridge naming it, through the weave carrying the fact of her the way a cord carries a tremor, through the plain unbearable sight of the whole drowning bottom of the city holding itself and one famous destroyer dying at the low gate to hold the top's share too — but she felt it reach the rim. She felt the smooth voice falter. She felt, up at the sunlit edge of the world, the first gilded Highspan cord seat at last, some merchant's son or shamed daughter unable to keep watching the fog do the Crown's work, pitching a voice to the note and taking a thread — and then another, and another, the top of the weave finally,

grudgingly, catching, the golden bloom that had stopped at Highspan climbing at last onto the rim.

The weight began to lift off her. Not because she was set down. Because the Crown, at the very end, took up enough of its own that the tier's-worth crushing her eased to a share, and a share to a fraction, as the refused portion found the backs that owed it.

It was too late for her and she had known it would be. A sever's frame does not take a beating like that and mend. She felt the important things in her chest going quiet one after another, the way a great cord goes to quit, and she found she was on her knees on the footing-thread, still holding it, though there was less and less to hold.

Doss was saying her name. She could not spare the breath to answer him. She had one thing left she wanted and it was small and she was, for once in her hard life, going to let herself have it: she wanted to feel the weave finish. She hung on, one back among ten thousand, at the bottom of a city that was, thread by golden thread, learning to hold itself all the way up, and she waited to feel the top course close.

It closed at the grey lip of dawn. She felt it the way you feel a knot seat under your hands after a long fight with it — the last gilded thread on the rim taking its share, the golden bloom running all the way around the top of the world and meeting itself, and the whole vast weight of Osmark, for the first time since the War of the Slip, resting level across ten thousand chosen backs instead of pouring down to a single buried point. The refused portion went out of her. The footing-thread under her knees eased from a killing tautness to the ordinary honest strain of a promise being kept by enough people at last. It did not need her anymore. It had a city.

So she let go of it. It held without her, which was the only thing she had ever truly wanted and had spent twenty years too angry to say.

"Tell Isla," she said to Doss, who was holding her now the way you hold a person and not a cord, "tell her the destroyer held. Tell her

I finally learned the difference between a break and a cut, and it turned out to be neither.” She got her hand to the loop at her throat, to the twenty years of little grey deaths strung there, and could not manage to lift it off, and let it be. Far down under everything the great buried thing that had breathed beneath the city her whole life was being set down at last, its sixty years paying out into the morning — and Yrsa Venn, who had come to free the Anchor by dropping everyone, had helped instead to carry her, and understood, going, that carrying was what freeing her had meant the entire time. The dawn came up cold off the Sile. She had never much cared for it. It was, she decided, letting her eyes rest on the first hard gold of it over the low gate, a real one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Free

For sixty years the city had rested on her, and she had learned it so completely that she had stopped calling it weight. Weight was a thing you felt at the beginning, in the first bad year, when the harness-wrights fed the great cords into her shoulders and her spine and her open palms and told her, not unkindly, that she would learn to carry it or go mad, and that both had been known to happen. She had not gone mad. She had done the other thing, the thing they had no word for because so few ever lasted long enough to do it — she had grown so wide around the load that the load became the shape of her, the way the sea is the shape of being a fish, so that a person meeting Beya at the end could not have said where the woman stopped and the city began. That was the horror they praised as sainthood. It was also, she would have been the first to tell you, the most interesting thing anyone in Osmark had done in two hundred years, and she had done it in the dark where no one could watch, and she was not sorry, and she was so tired.

So when the first cord lifted off her right palm and did not come back down, she did not understand it.

She thought she had lost another piece of herself. That was the ordinary event of her days now — a cord going quiet, going grey, one more of the great strands failing as the old strength ran out of her, and she had learned to feel each one leave with a small clean grief and let

it go. She waited for the grief. It did not come, because the cord had not died. She followed the strange lightness with the part of her that had spent sixty years learning where every ounce of Osmark stood, and she found the weight again, and it had not gone down into the dark the way everything in this city had come down into her since she was twenty years old. It had gone out. Sideways and up and out, into the living cords of the low reach, into a dozen backs that had chosen it, and it was holding there, and it was humming, and it did not need her.

“Oh,” she said, on the out-breath, to the vault, to the dark that had been her whole sky. “There it is. There it is at last.”

Then they began to lift in earnest, and Beya, who had not wept in forty years because the order did not like to see the Anchor weep and she had long ago stopped giving them anything to see, felt her ruined face go wet in the rising air.

She had spent sixty years unable to tell the city apart. That was the thing no one understood — that to be the point where every cord in Osmark came to rest was to feel the whole of it as one sound, one vast undifferentiated weight, a million kept promises poured down a single throat until they were not promises at all but only pressure, the flat grey roar of a city leaning on you in your sleep. She had held ten thousand people and never once been able to hear one. And now, as the single anchor came undone and the weight paid outward into all those separate chosen threads, the roar was breaking apart in her hands like light through a cracked lens, and for the first time since she was a girl Beya could hear them one at a time.

A net-mender out on the Sarrow rail, holding it so the children would not come off. A fish-lift man. A woman holding her sister's span. Somebody holding the plank where a good man had gone into the fog, holding it because they had known him. Each of them a single true note, its own exact pitch, and under all of it the boy — she could feel the boy, unbound, unbitten, upright on the great bridge with a borrowed district on his young holder's back, letting his voice

ride out on the note she had given the sever to give to him. Not chosen. She had told them for weeks he was not to be chosen, had spent breath she could not spare pleading it, and they had not listened, and it had not mattered in the end, because the boy had gone and made himself into the thing the city needed instead of the thing the order wanted, which was the only way anyone was ever any use. He was asking. After two hundred years of a city that only told its people what they owed, a barely-literate orphan stood in the throat of the Concord Bridge asking, and Osmark, thread by golden thread, was answering.

This was her work. She let herself think it plainly, with the last of the pride they had never managed to grind out of her. Not the boy's, not the sever's, though theirs were the hands. Hers. For sixty years she had lain in the harness with nothing to do but feel, and she had used the one freedom left to a buried woman, which was the freedom to pay attention, and she had noticed the thing the founders had buried: that the poor of this city were already holding it. Every time a quit-runner mended a stranger's fraying line for the plain love of a line well mended, every time a child waited at a low gate for someone who might not come and waited anyway, a small true promise took shape that no one had forced and no ledger had counted. And each time, unseen, Beya had reached out along the cables and laid a breath of the city's weight into that little cord, and let it rest there a moment, and lifted it again before the strain could show and frighten anyone off. Teaching the city to bear itself the way you teach a wasted leg to take weight again. A step, and rest. A step, and rest. For sixty years. Until the loom was half-threaded and no one knew it but her, and all it wanted was a hand that could cut and carry in the same breath, and a voice fool enough to ask out loud.

The sever was on the rim. Beya turned what was left of her attention to her — the other hand, the one she had waited sixty years for, kneeling on the cold lip of the world with the turned-cord blade in her fist, unpicking the Concord strand by strand and paying each one

out along her own live cords into the waking city. Cut and carry. Cut and carry. She was buckling with it. Of course she was; she was one woman doing the work of an atrocity, too proud and too frightened to stop, and Beya loved her for it with the fierce impersonal love she had come to feel for everyone who kept their word past the point where it cost them. *Steady*, she sent down the shivering weave, not in words, she had none to spare, only the pressure of an old hand under a young elbow. *Steady. It is nearly light. Hold until it is light and then you may put it down, and so may I.*

And the weight kept lifting off her.

It was the strangest sensation of a strange life. She had forgotten her own edges. Sixty years of being a city, and now the city was withdrawing from her like a tide going out across a flat, uncovering, inch by inch, the small worn thing it had been drowning: a woman. Only a woman. Her shoulders, which had held a tier, held nothing now and ached with the memory of it. And her hands — her hands had lain open for sixty years because open was how you received, palm up, the loom and not the cloth, and as the last cords ran out of them her hands were, for the first time since she was young, empty, and hers.

She closed her right hand.

Just that. She made a fist of it, slowly, feeling each stiff finger come in against the palm, and it was nothing, it was a thing a baby could do, and it was the first freely chosen motion Beya had made with her own body in sixty years, and she lay in the harness and closed her hand on nothing at all and laughed, a cracked rag of a sound, because it was so small and it was everything, and because being free turned out to mean only this — that your hand was your own, and you could close it, and no one had told you to.

“Mother.”

Sesta had come to the foot of the harness. Beya let her breath go all the way out and drew it in slow, In, and Held, and found her daughter’s face in the failing dark on the way back. Sixty-three years

old. Grey coat, grey face, the pale eyes that were Beya's own eyes worn harder, gone to iron where Beya's had gone to fog. Her hands were unfolded. All her life Sesta's hands had been folded, the still folded hands of a woman with an answer for everything, and they hung open now at her sides and shook.

"Sesta," she said, on the out-breath.

"I can undo the harness." The Warden's voice, exact and level, the voice that had sent a hundred candidates down the stair, and under it something with no floor. "If I bind you back before the last cord goes, the old anchor holds. I can keep you. I can still—"

"No," Beya said.

"You are dying."

"Yes." In. Held. Out. "For the first time in sixty years. It is a great relief. Let it happen."

Sesta's iron face did not break so much as it stopped holding itself together, the way a cord you have watched for a lifetime finally, quietly, goes. "I kept you," she said. "Forty years, Mother. I put my own hands on your cords twice a year and called it my devotion, and you asked me once to let you go and I told you no. I told you the city needed you. I told you it was holy." Her breath came ragged. "It was never needed. She proved it. That woman on the rim is proving it with her hands right now. It was always able to be shared, and I gave you to the dark for a thing that was never—"

"Sesta." Beya waited for the breath, because there was one thing left she meant to say correctly, and she would say it on the out-breath the way she had said everything true for sixty years, so that it would carry. She looked at her daughter, who had been three years old in this vault with her cold hands on her mother's neck, who had been raised on the order's grey milk to be proud of the exact wound that was killing her now.

She was so angry at her. That was the truth Beya would not spend her last breath prettying up. She had asked to be let go at forty and been refused by her own child, and had lain here another forty years

for it, and there was a rage in her about it she had nursed in the dark for four decades, hard and bright and just. She let herself feel it, one last time, all the way. And then she did the thing she had learned to do with weight — she did not cut it and she did not let it crush the two of them; she held it, and she set it down gently, in a place that could bear it.

“It was never your fault that it was possible,” Beya said. “Do you hear me. It was never your fault that a thing like this could be done. Men older than either of us built the harness and buried the first one and told the lie, and you were a child raised inside the lie, and you cannot be guilty of the floor you were taught to walk on.” In. Held. Out. “It’s only your fault if you make it happen again. That is the whole of it. The past is not yours to be forgiven for. Only the next one.” Her closed hand opened, and she turned the palm up one last time, not to receive the city now but to offer the empty of it to her daughter. “So do not make it happen again. And you are released. Not forgiven — there is nothing to forgive a child for. Released. Go and be a person and not a warden. I would like, at the very end, to have a daughter and not a keeper.”

Sesta made a sound Beya had not heard her make since she was small, and put her folded-no-longer hands over her face, and was, for a moment, simply a woman whose mother was dying.

Beya turned away from her, because the light was coming and she wanted to spend it on the city and not on grief, and grief would keep; grief was the one promise that always kept itself.

The last of the great cords was lifting. She could feel the top of the world now, the gilded Highspan strands that had refused so long taking up their share at last — she felt, without knowing the how of it, that some fierce spent thing at the bottom of the city had bought the top’s surrender with her own body, and she sent that unknown holder the old salute of one bearer to another, *well held, well held*, and did not know she was saluting a woman who had come to drop the city and stayed to carry it, and would have liked her enormously.

The weave closed at the grey lip of dawn. Beya felt it whole and at once, but this time from the outside, as a thing she was no longer inside of — the golden ring running all the way around the top of Osmark and meeting itself, and the whole vast weight of the city resting level, for the first time since the War of the Slip, across ten thousand chosen backs instead of pouring down to a single point in the dark. She was the point in the dark, and she was empty now, and the city stood without her.

She had one breath of attention left and she chose where to spend it the way a rich woman chooses a gift. She sent it down, all the way down, to the oldest iron gate in the city, to a single thread going gold there far too bright for its size, ringing so piercingly true it made the whole bottom of the weave sing. A child had said she would wait at the low gate. And had waited. And was holding a corner of the city now, clean and true. Beya had laid the city's weight into a hundred such small waits across sixty years and lifted it again before it could be felt. She let it rest in this one, and did not lift it, because there was no longer any need — the child could bear it now; the whole city could bear it now; that was the entire work of her life, and it was finished, and it was good.

Her breath, which for sixty years had been the city breathing through her, In and Held and Out, the great slow rhythm strangers had heard on the updraft and never named — her breath came apart from the city the way the weight had, and became, in the last minute of Beya's life, only her own. Small. A dying woman's breath, shallow and quick and entirely hers. The body they had kept alive sixty years by making it the anchor of a city had no more reason to go on, and it did not, and Beya found she did not mind. She had been the whole sky. Now she was one small breath in a slack rope harness at the root of the world, free, her hand her own, her name her own — Beya, it had been Beya, it was Beya still — and her daughter released and weeping like a person and the city singing above her in ten thousand chosen voices.

The Cinch emptied. For the first time since Year 0, the vault at the root of Osmark held no one at all.

It was, she thought, on the last of the breath that was finally hers, a good morning's work. And then she thought nothing, and was free of that too, and the dawn came up cold and gold off the Sile and warmed, for once, all the way down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Sever's Price

She had made the largest cut in two hundred years, and now, kneeling on the rim of the world with the shear gone quiet in her fist, she waited for it to take what it was owed.

She felt the weave close above her first. It came down through the cables as a change in the sound — the whining, half-made racket of the long night resolving all at once into one low even hum, the note Beya had burned into her chest hours ago now ringing out of the whole city. It had worked. Isla knelt on the cold stone and felt Osmark take up its own weight tier by tier, and she had no strength left to be glad, only to notice, the way you notice the top of a long climb without being able to feel your legs.

Then the great rhythm stopped.

There had been a breath under everything down here — In, and Held, and Out, the vast slow tidal draw she had first heard as a rumour on an updraft and come to the bottom of the world to find. It stopped now, mid-draw, on an Out that did not end, and the vault went silent in a way it had not been silent since before Isla was born, and she understood, kneeling there, that Beya was dead. She did not need to see the harness. The city itself told her, in the one language it had — a promise gone to quit, the largest promise in the world, sixty years of it, going grey and still and harmless in the dark. The old

woman had held on until it was light, and then she had put it down, and so, now, could Isla.

So Isla let go of the working.

And the price, which had been standing off at the edge of her since the night she opened the great cut — patient and enormous and sure of its turn, the way grief stands off and waits — came in to be paid.

She had known it would be large. A sever pays for every cut with something real and permanent, a memory or a feeling burned out to soak the recoil, and she had spent her life paying in small coin: the smell of her mother's hair, for a stranger in an alley; the inside of the room she grew up in, for a fraying offshoot at a bollard. But she had never cut anything like this. She had unpicked a city, held the whole weight of Osmark open through her own body from the dark of the night to the gold of the dawn, and bled the recoil that should have killed her outright into the only vault deep enough to take it, which was herself. Now the account came due all at once.

She braced the way she always had, made a small cupped place inside her, and it was like cupping your hands for the sea. It reached into her without hurry and without malice — the cut had never had malice, only physics, only the weight of what a promise costs finding its level — and it went looking through her for something the size of the debt, and found the largest thing she had.

She had time, in the reaching, to understand what it meant to take, and she did not try to stop it.

Her mother's voice.

Not the sound her mother had made at the end — the sound on the stair, the barbed cord letting go, the small terrible noise a body makes when its heart is stopped by a thing it swore to keep. That she had carried for twenty years like a stone swallowed whole, that she would have given every other thing she owned not to own. She had assumed, in the part of her that bargained, that if the cut ever took a

sound it would take that one — had almost, God forgive her, hoped it would.

It took the other one.

It took the living voice. Her mother at the mending in the grey Underhang morning, humming under her breath the tuneless working-song the menders all hummed, the one with no words that meant *I am here, keep going, the light will come*. Her mother saying *Isla* in the particular way she said it, two soft notes, the sound that had meant, before the whole world went, that *Isla* was found and safe and small and pressed into the warm where nothing could reach her. Twenty years she had kept it perfect, the one clean thing, the sound of being loved before she learned what love cost — and the recoil closed around it and lifted it, and it went the way the smell of her mother's hair had gone in that alley, out through her fingers like a cup off a table, except that this time she did not reach after it.

This time she opened her hand and let it go.

Because she had chosen this cut. That was the whole difference. In the alley she had cut a stranger free out of a compulsion she could not name and lost her mother's hair-smell to a bargain no one had asked her to make, and she had reached after it, clutching, robbed. This she had chosen, open-eyed, the price known and the cause worth it, and so she did with her mother's voice what *Beya* had done for sixty years with the weight of a city, and what her own mother had done in the last second of her life with a word she would not break — she held it, she did not clutch it, and she paid it out on purpose into the thing it would buy: a city that would never again bury a woman to hold itself up. It was the most expensive promise she had ever kept, and she kept it, open-handed, and it was gone, and where it had been there was a smooth blank nothing, a shape with no thing inside it. She would know, forever after, that her mother's voice had said her name in two soft notes. She would never again know how they sounded.

What it left her, because the cut takes and does not give and does not choose kindly, was the other sound. The dying one. She reached,

once, helplessly, for the voice — and found only the noise on the stair, whole and untouched, the one memory of her mother she had begged the dark to take. The dark is not merciful. It does not trade the thing you hate for the thing you love; it takes the largest coin in your hand, and the largest coin was always the love. She had her mother's death now and none of her mother's life. She put her forehead to the cold stone at the root of the city and made no sound at all, which was how she had learned, at eleven, to do the loudest grieving of her life.

When she lifted her head the dawn had come into the vault, grey going to gold down the long throat of the stair, and she was, impossibly, alive. Worn. Emptied in a place that would not fill again. But alive, which severs who cut things a hundredth this size were usually not, and she sat back on her heels and looked at her own two hands, and saw the thing she had spent her whole adult life without.

She was covered in cords.

She, who had gone bare-handed her whole adult life, who had worn almost-nothing like a disguise, was strung now with more live cord than she could count, and every strand of it gold. The thin bright one that ran down and down to a child at a low gate. A newer one to a boy on a bridge. A dozen to the low reach, to the netting-woman, to people whose weight she had caught through the night until the catching became its own kind of vow. She was tied into the city she had saved at ten thousand points, luminous, load-bearing, held.

She had thought freedom was the cut. She had believed it so long that she had made a private Cinch of herself, one anchored loneliness in the dark so no one who loved her would ever feel the strain of losing her. And here she was with her mother's voice spent and her hands full of chosen cords, freer than she had ever been, and she understood the plain enormous joke her whole life had been the setup for: that the woman who wore no cords had never been free, only alone. This humming net of things she had agreed to, this being needed and needing back — this was the thing her mother had. The

thing her mother died with her word still on. She had never once been free until she was bound.

“Isla.”

A man was coming down the last of the stair, slow, favouring one leg, an honest wrecked face gone grey with more than the dawn. She knew him a little — Doss, the doubter, Yrsa’s lieutenant, the one who took longer to be sure and was therefore worth trusting when he was. He came to her across the rim, and she saw he had been weeping and had stopped only because he had run out, and she knew what he had come to say before he said it.

“She’s gone,” Doss said. “Yrsa. At the low gate.” He had to stop and find the rest of it. “The top wouldn’t hold its share. Highspan refused, and the weight came down, and there was nobody under it but her. A sever can’t hold a thing that size. She knew it. She got under it anyway, and she held the Crown’s whole refused portion on her own body until the shame of it shamed the rim into taking its own. The city’s standing level right now because your sister stood under the part of it nobody rich would carry.” His ruined face worked. “She turned us. We came to cut and she made us hold. Rhee walked. The rest of us held.”

Isla knelt very still with her mother’s death ringing in the new silence, and took this too.

“She had a message. For you. She made me say it back twice so I’d have it right.” He closed his eyes to find it and spoke it careful and plain, a man carrying water in his hands. “Tell Isla the destroyer held. Tell her I finally learned the difference between a break and a cut, and it turned out to be neither.” He opened his eyes. “And she said this was the part that mattered. She said say it slow.” He steadied himself. “Denna didn’t die by your hand. You’ve thought it twenty years and you’re wrong, and she wanted you to stop. The cord-lord killed your mother two winters before you ever touched her, the night he barbed the oath. A barbed cord kills whoever’s inside it the first time they pull to be free; your mother was always going to pull one day, and

you only happened to be the child holding the blade when his trap went off. You didn't cut her loose into death. You cut a thing already made to kill her. And Denna died holding — in the last second she kept her word instead of tearing free, kept it on purpose, and it stopped her heart, and that was not weakness and not your doing. It was the bravest thing either of your parents ever did. Yrsa spent twenty years too angry to read it, and read it at the end, standing where your mother stood. She said to tell you you'd carried the wrong weight the longest of any of them."

The dawn came the rest of the way down the stair.

Isla found she was holding the shear against her chest with both hands — the turned-cord blade her mother had folded over three shaking nights, her father's break and her mother's keeping wound to a single edge, the proof that a cord did not have to be only one thing. Her whole family had been trying to tell her the same thing across twenty years and three deaths, in the only language any of them had. Her father had found half of it in one night with his body. Her mother had folded the other half into a blade and hidden it for a daughter not yet grown. Her sister had died learning it out loud at a low gate. And Isla had knelt at the root of the world and done the thing all three swore was possible: cut and carried in the same breath, unmade a chain, and made it a bond. It had cost every one of them everything, and it had been the truest promise any of them ever kept — to show her, whatever it took, that a cord could be turned.

She would have liked to tell her mother she had learned it. She reached, from long habit, for the voice to say it to. There was no voice there. There would never be a voice there again. She had spent it on the city, and it was a fair price, and it was unbearable, and both of those were true and neither would ever now be otherwise.

She got to her feet.

Across the vault the Warden of the Cinch stood over her mother's body with her cord-burned hands hanging open at her sides, and when Isla rose the two of them looked at each other across the slack grey

ruin of the thing they had both spent their lives on from opposite ends — two daughters of dead mothers, the one who had cut hers free and the one who had held hers fast, who until this dawn had not known there was any road between those two but the fog.

Marrow did not say *take her*. Marrow had an answer for everything and, at last, no answer at all. Isla watched her look down at the small freed body in the harness, at the ash-white hair no longer drifting on any updraft, and then look up the long stair toward the city she could feel through the stone holding itself level without a single soul buried under it.

“They think it is civic virtue,” Marrow said, her exact level voice with the no-floor thing under it now forever. “Two hundred years they have thought the Concord keeps itself, that we are held aloft by our own goodness.” She was not speaking to Isla but up the stair, to the tiers, to the whole waking span that had carried itself through the night without knowing what it had been spared. “It was a person. It was always a person. A woman named Beya, twenty years old when they put her in the dark, who held this city on her body for sixty years so the rest of us would never have to feel the weight of what we owe each other. She was my mother. I kept her here. And it was never—” the voice broke now, at last, one clean snap like a cord strained past true “—it was never needed. Not once. It could always have been shared. She proved it. Every back in this city is proving it right now.”

She turned to Isla, the Warden of a thing that no longer existed, and Isla saw her decide to do the one act she had trained forty years never to do: tell the truth and let it fall where it fell.

“Let them all know,” Marrow said. “Send it up the weave, sever. You have the ear of every cord in Osmark this morning. I have kept the secret my whole life, and it kept me, and I am done. Let the whole city know whose body it stood on, and that it need never stand on anyone’s again. Let them wake knowing the name. Beya. Tell them it was Beya. And tell them the Warden of the Cinch surrenders the Cinch, because there is nothing left in it to guard.”

And Isla, tied into the whole singing weave at ten thousand points, luminous and worn and bound and grieving, lifted what was left of her and let the truth run out along every gold cord in the city at once — not the note this time, not a working, only the plain fact of it, the thing buried for two hundred years surfacing all at once into the morning: *it was a person, her name was Beya, it need never be again.* She felt it climb the low reach. She felt it reach the Concord Bridge, where a boy stood who could not read the two words over the head-gate but had spent the night saying what they meant. She felt it reach, at last, the sunlit rim, where the gilded houses that had refused all night held now, level with the fog, for the first time since the War of the Slip.

The dawn came up cold and gold off the Sile and did not, this morning, pour all the way down to a single point in the dark. There was no such point anymore. There was only a city holding itself up because ten thousand people had chosen to, and one woman at the root of it — worn to the wick, alive past all sense, and unable, for the spent and priceless silence where a voice used to be, to do anything but let it hold.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Aftermath

By the ninth morning you could see the Concord.

That was the change no one had been ready for, stranger even than the empty vault or the missing breath under the world: the weave had come up out of the dark. For two hundred years the city's true holding had run underground, cabled down to one buried throat, and the only cords a person saw in daylight were the small private ones — a marriage, a debt, a boy's apprentice-bond — while the great civic weight hid itself and called itself virtue. Now it hung in the open over every tier, gold and grey and living, a second Osmark laid across the first, and on any span you could stand and watch your neighbours holding it up. A woman on a Lowspan walk with a thread bright as a struck bell coming off her shoulder, keeping a stranger's corner because she had said she would. A whole tenement roped into one warm chord. The children's quit-lines, which a fortnight ago had carried nothing but taps and gossip, gone load-bearing and singing in the wind. The city had spent two centuries not looking at the thing that held it aloft. It could not stop looking now.

Isla walked through it hollow as a spent cord, and could not hear any of it the way she once had.

There was a silence in her where a sound used to live, and it went everywhere she went. She had traded her mother's living voice for exactly this — for the gold over the tiers, for the empty harness —

and she did not regret the trade and could not stop reaching for the thing she had spent. A dozen times a day some small hinge of habit swung her toward it: she would see a mender's crooked line and think *there, that's how she held her needle*, and go to hear the humming working-song her mother sang over the mends, and find the smooth blank nothing, the shape with no thing inside it. Grief she knew. She had been an expert in grief since she was eleven. This was a subtler cruelty, a room in her memory with the furniture still in it and the person filed off, and she was learning, the way you learn a maimed hand, to stop reaching with the part that was gone.

The sensitives did not look at her twice any more. That was its own strange grief. For twenty years she had walked the city as the eerie bare-handed woman, the wrongness in the corner of a cord-reader's eye, and now she was strung with more live gold than a Highspan matron and it made her invisible — one more ordinary citizen tied into the ordinary human weave, disappeared at last into the thing she had spent her life standing outside of. She had wanted, once, to be no one's. She was ten thousand people's now, in small, and no one marked her at all, and it turned out to be the closest thing to peace she had ever been given.

The trouble was already in the weave, and she could feel it, because now everyone could feel it.

That was the second thing no one had foreseen. Under the old order the buried woman had eaten the strain — had lain in the harness and absorbed the ambient ache of a million kept promises so that ordinary people felt their vows as no more than a faint pull, the way you do not feel your own heartbeat. Now the ache was everyone's, shared out thin, a share to a back. It was not heavy. But it was constant, a low soreness of the will that never quite set down, and Osmark was two hundred years out of the habit of feeling it. By the ninth morning Isla had heard the murmur three times in the quit-markets, always low, always half-ashamed: *it never used to tire a body like this. There was a way it was carried before. There was*

somebody who carried it. No one finished the thought aloud. She could hear the shape of it under the words anyway, patient and enormous, the oldest bad idea in the world putting on a new coat. Better one wretch in the dark than all of us aching. The Cinch had not been a building. The Cinch was a thing people wanted, and it had not died with Beya, and it never would.

She found Coll on the Trueknot's Lowspan footing, teaching two smaller children the tap-code on a dead line, and for a moment the thing in her chest eased.

He had come out of the harness alive and unchosen, and something in him had turned over in the turning. The boy who had walked down into the dark hungry to be *special*, to be picked, to be the one — that boy was gone, spent in the same night as so much else. What had come up in his place wanted the opposite thing so plainly it made her want to laugh and weep at once. He wanted to be *counted*. He had gone, the second day, to the Knotwrights' Hall and stood in the queue of the newly unbarbed and asked a clerk to write his name in the rolls — Coll, of the Underhang, no house, holder — because a boy who had come within a strap of being buried nameless under the whole city had discovered that the sweetest thing in the world was to be a name on a list of the living, seen, tallied, one of the counted people of Osmark. And having got his own name written he had caught the fever of it and could not stop collecting everyone else's. He knew the netting-woman's name now, and the fish-lift man's, and the name of every child on the quit-lines. He had learned the tallow-faced young guard's name in the vault at the worst hour of the worst night — Teb — by the simple revolutionary act of asking it, and Teb followed him about the low city these days like a large uncertain dog, out of the grey coat now, learning to mend.

"You're not eating," Coll said to her, not looking up from the children's small fists on the rope. It was Onil's line. Onil had said it to her for thirty years and now Coll said it, having caught it off the dead

man the way you catch a way of standing, and neither of them remarked on it, and both of them heard it.

“I ate,” she lied, which was also part of the liturgy, and he snorted, which was the response, and one of the children tapped out *come — come — low gate* on the dead rope, clean as anything, and did not know she was ringing the two words Isla had not yet been able to walk toward.

She had gone everywhere else. That was the private shame she carried through the singing city. She had helped tune the low reach and talked three tenements down off the edge of terror; she had sat with the netting-woman while the woman wept at the weight of a thread she would not put down; she had done everything a worn sever could do for a city learning to hold itself — everything except go to the low gate, the oldest iron in Osmark, where Onil had thrown a child back through the dark and gone into the fog, where nine mornings ago her sister had stood under the part of the city no rich man would carry and let it stop her heart. Isla had buried her grief the way she buried everything, in work, in usefulness, in the cut. She knew exactly what she was doing. She was a woman who had spent her life not going to the low gate. She was going to have to go.

But first there was the matter of the Warden, because the city had decided it could not wait any longer to be just.

They convened it on the Concord Bridge itself, in the wide throat of the Trueknot under the worn words, because there was no council chamber left with the standing to hold it — the Concordat’s authority had gone grey the same dawn the secret did, and Councilor Vessimer, who had refused the city his share all night from behind the high gate, now kept to his gilded rooms and sent word he was unwell. The whole span was packed, tier leaning down over tier, gold cords crossing overhead so thick the morning came through them the colour of honey. They brought Marrow out between two of her own former guards. She had taken off the grey. She stood in a mender’s undyed wool with her cord-burned hands open at her sides, sixty-three years

old, and did not defend herself, and that was somehow the thing the crowd could least forgive — that she would not fight, that she gave them nothing to break against.

And Isla, standing at the front because the city had put her there whether she willed it or not, watched the mob arrive, by the shortest road, at the perfect and monstrous idea.

It came up out of the crowd the way the murmur in the market had, low and reasonable and then all at once a roar. *She kept the secret. She fed her own mother to the dark and called it faith. She would have buried the boy.* True, all of it. And then the symmetry that was too beautiful for people to resist, shouted first by a man who had lost a father to a barbed debt and then by a hundred throats: *put her in it. Put the Warden in the harness. Let her hold it. Let her feel the weight forever, since she loved it so. Let the Cinch have the one who kept the Cinch.* It sounded like justice. It rang like the closing of a perfect circle. It was the most natural thing in the world, and Isla understood, standing under the honey-coloured light with her mother's death ringing in her silence, that it was the atrocity being reborn in front of her, right now, wearing the one mask she had not thought to guard against. Not pity this time. Justice. They would rebuild the Cinch in a single morning, freely, gladly, and bury someone in it forever, and this time they would call it fair, and the second buried body would hold up exactly the same city as the first.

She stepped out onto the empty stone before she had decided to, and the span quieted, because she was the sever, and every soul on the bridge knew she was the one person alive who could actually do it — who could bind the Warden into the harness with her own hands if she chose, and make the circle close.

“No,” Isla said. Her voice was not loud. The weave carried it; she was tied into every cord on the bridge and the bridge heard her in its body. “You want me to put her in the dark. I could. I’m the only one who could, and I know exactly how it would feel to watch her go down, and there is a part of me that wants it so badly I can taste it.”

She let them have that; it was true, and a truth held out plainly steadies a frightened room better than any lie. “My sister died nine mornings ago at the low gate holding up the weight this woman spent her life hiding. My friend Onil died at the same gate because the system she guarded finally slipped. I have more reason than anyone on this span to want Sesta Marrow in that harness.” She turned and looked at the Warden, who looked back at her with Beya’s own worn fog-pale eyes, and did not flinch. “And if I put her there, we will have a Cinch again by nightfall. That is all we will have done. We will have found a body we’re allowed to hate, so we can bury it with a clear conscience, and go back to not feeling the weight — and in sixty years your grandchildren will be told the woman in the dark was wicked and deserved it, the way we were told the first one was a saint who chose it, and both stories will be for exactly the same purpose, which is to let everyone up here stop holding on.”

The bridge was silent. Somewhere below, the children’s tap-code went on, oblivious, *come, come, low gate*.

“We don’t get to keep the Cinch,” Isla said, “by filling it with someone we hate. That’s the whole thing. That’s the only thing. No one goes back in the dark. Not the innocent and not the guilty. Not ever, not for pity and not for justice — because the harness doesn’t care which word we use when we strap someone in, it only cares that we did.” She was shaking, she noticed, the way Marrow’s hands had shaken at the last. “You want her punished. Good. So do I. So punish her the hard way. Not the cut — the cut is easy, the cut is what we’ve always done, bury the problem where we don’t have to look at it. Make her carry. Make her hold a thread on the open weave like the rest of us, in the daylight, where we can all see her doing it. Make her stand on this bridge and tell the truth of what was done down there to every tier, every season, for as long as she lives, so that no child in Osmark ever grows up not knowing the name Beya or what it cost. Let her spend the rest of her life as the one who says out loud, over and over, *we did this and we need never do it again*. That’s not

mercy. Ask her.” She did not look away from Marrow. “It’s the heaviest thing I can think to lay on a person who spent forty years certain she was holy. Let her be counted among us, and ache like us, and never once get to put it down. That’s the sentence. That’s the only one that doesn’t rebuild the thing we’re standing here to end.”

It was Beya’s gift given onward, and Isla knew it as she said it, felt it run out of her mouth in her own dead mother’s cadence and her lover-of-the-city’s logic both — *you are released; not forgiven, released; go and be a person and not a warden*. Two daughters of dead mothers stood on the bridge, the one who had cut hers free and the one who had held hers fast, and between them for the first time was a third road that was neither the cut nor the keeping, and Isla watched the older woman understand that she was being handed, instead of the death she had half-hoped for, the far worse and far better thing: a life, in the open, at labour, telling the truth.

Marrow’s ruined hands came up and covered her face, and she wept, standing, and the span did not roar for her blood again. It was not agreement. It was something slower and more durable that a city has to build the way it builds everything, thread by grudging thread. But no one went into the dark that morning. That was the whole of the victory, and Isla had learned by now to take the whole of a victory when it was that size and call it enough.

Afterward Doss found her at the rail, and told her Rhee had been seen on a Midspan span two days back, alive, uncut, wearing no one’s cord and walking east along the rim toward the far towers where the weave thinned out. “She wouldn’t hold,” he said, without heat. “Came to cut, couldn’t turn, wouldn’t carry. Just — left.” He looked out at the fog. “Your sister would’ve gone after her. I’m not going to. Some people you have to let walk, or you’re just the Cinch with better manners.” Isla thought that was the truest thing anyone had said to her in nine days, and told him so, and he almost smiled, the honest wrecked face cracking at one corner, and went back down to the low city to mend.

She stood at the rail a while with the honey light coming through ten thousand chosen cords, and then she stopped being able to put it off, and turned, and went down toward the low gate to see her dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Hold Fast

She went up before she went down.

The low gate was at the bottom of everything and she meant to end her morning there, but first, for the first time in a life spent crossing under it, she climbed to the Crown end of the Concord Bridge to stand at the head-gate and look the two old words full in the face. She had touched them a thousand times without once meeting them. Every Osmarker did it — reached up on the way across and laid two fingers on the carving for luck, **HOLD FAST** worn to a soft-shouldered shine by two hundred years of hands doing exactly that. She had done it as a girl holding Yrsa's coat. She had done it the morning she took the job that unmade the city. She had never in all those crossings understood that the shine itself was the answer — that the words had been polished smooth not by weather but by the very holding-on they named, generation on generation of frightened hands reaching up to take hold, so that the meaning had been living in the gesture the whole time the city was misreading the letters.

She stood under them now in the thin high cold and made herself read them the way she read a cord: not for what she had always been told they said, but for what they were actually doing.

Beside the gate the Founder's shrine kept its two-hundred-year lie in stone: a kneeling woman, arms lifted to take a weight, and cut beneath her **THE FOUNDER GAVE HERSELF THAT THE CITY**

MIGHT STAND. Isla knew the truth of that stone now, had knelt at the root of it and watched the last founder die free with her own name in her mouth. No one had torn the shrine down. Someone — the low city, she thought, the menders, the counted people — had done something stranger and better. The iron rings that had held the votive-cords for two centuries still held them, hundreds of them, but the cords ran differently now. For two hundred years those prayer-strands had run down, secretly, into the dark, every lit candle and murmured vow another ounce laid on the buried back below. She had seen it herself on the Crown, the day she first understood, the votives aimed down not out. They were aimed out now. Some patient hand had unpicked every one from its old downward course and led it across instead, cord to cord, ring to living ring, so that the whole shrine had become a small public loom, the prayers of the frightened running sideways into the hands of their neighbours and being held there. The kneeling stone woman still lifted her arms. But the weight she reached for did not press her into the ground any more. It went out over the span, into ten thousand backs, and left her only the gesture, which had always been the true thing: not a woman crushed, a woman reaching up to take hold.

Hold fast.

And standing there Isla finally heard the words in her own trade, and understood that the Crown had been mispronouncing them for two hundred years.

She was a rope-worker. She had been one all her life, under the cover of one, harvesting quit and mending line, and in the language of rope *fast* was not a stillness. It was a knot. You made a line fast — you took the loose end and you tied it, you fastened it, you bound it to the next thing so it would bear. *Fast* was the most active word a rigger owned; it was the whole of the job. Only people who had never in their lives made a line fast, who had never felt a hemp end bite their palms, could have looked up at HOLD FAST and read *endure*. Read *stay put*. *Bear it*. *Do not move*. *Hold still under the weight*

forever. That was the Crown's reading, the Warden's reading, the reading that buried a girl of twenty in the dark and called sixty years of not-moving a virtue — hold fast as one held a post in a flood, rigid, gripping, permanent, one body clenched forever so the rest need never grip at all.

But the people who worked the ropes had always known the other reading, in their hands if not in words, because it was the only one their hands could make. Hold fast. *Take hold, and make it fast*. Tie on. Bind yourself to the next person and bear a little between you. And then — because no knot in Osmark was trusted to hold forever, because every rigger knew a line went slack and had to be taken up again, every dawn, in the cold, by hand — do it again tomorrow. That was the secret folded into the founders' two words all along, hidden in plain sight over the busiest gate in the city, in a verb the poor used forty times a day and the rich had never once performed. You did not hold fast by never letting go. You held fast the way you made any line fast: by tying the knot again, and again, and again, every single morning, forever, together. Not one body, rigid, permanent. Ten thousand hands, re-tying. The old Concord had tried to hold fast by making one woman a fixed point and never moving her, and it had taken sixty years to teach the city that a fixed point at the bottom of the dark is not a knot at all — it is only a thing you have hung someone from. The new Concord held fast the true way, the rigger's way, the way her mother had mended line in the grey mornings: you never finished. You took it up again with the light.

Isla reached up and laid two fingers on the worn stone, the old luck-gesture, and this time she meant every part of it, and then she turned from the Crown and went down.

She went down through all of it, tier under tier, the whole vertical city she had spent her life climbing and dropping through — Highspan's gilt giving way to Midspan's lamplight giving way to Lowspan's rope-over-rope, and everywhere the gold weave overhead, tended, frayed in places, mended in others, a thing that would never

now be finished and never again be secret. People were up on the spans taking in the slack of the night, the way you tighten a washing-line at dawn. The work was everyone's forever. That had frightened her, at the start of the nine days. It did not frighten her now. Forever was only a great many tomorrows, and you did not have to carry all of them this morning; you had to carry this morning, and choose again when the next one came, and that was a thing a person could actually do, which was more than could ever have been said of the harness.

The stairs gave out. The last iron let her down onto the underlip of the Underhang, where the city's lowest fixed thing waited over open fog — the low gate, the oldest iron in Osmark, sunk in the raw cliff where the plank-walk went out beyond it and became, a few spans on, nothing at all. Beyond the gate the walk was gone; it had dropped into the Underbreath nine mornings ago with the weight of a woman who would not step back off it. The gate itself stood. It always stood. That was the whole point of it, the reason it was where the children came — the low gate did not fall, so it was the place you waited to be found.

Onil's name was chalked on the iron.

Someone had done the fog-rite for him while she was up in the singing city being useful. There it was in a child's hand, ONIL, and beside it, newer, in Doss's blockier fist, YRSA, and a dozen more names down the cold iron in a dozen hands, the low city's dead of that long night, each one written plain so that the living could lay a flat hand over it and say it and be heard saying it. Isla knelt on the cold stone at the root of the world, where she had knelt to unpick a city, and she laid her open palm — the loom-hand, palm up become palm down — over her friend's name first. Onil Sump, who had told her thirty years running that not being a bastard was structural, who had died throwing a child back through this gate into the light. She said his name once, the way the rite asked, out loud, and heard herself say it, and it was enough, because that was all the rite had ever been

for: to make sure the dead were said aloud by someone who was heard.

Then she moved her hand to her sister's name and could not, for a while, say anything at all.

Tell Isla the destroyer held. She had. Yrsa Venn had come to the low gate to make sure a cut got made and had stayed to stand under the part of the city no rich man would carry, and had held it with a sever's body that was never built to hold, and it had killed her, and it had shamed the Crown into taking up its own weight, and the city was standing level this morning because of it. Isla had spent twenty years believing she had killed their mother. She had learned, nine mornings ago, kneeling in this same posture a mile down in the dark, that she had not — that the cord-lord had done it two winters before Isla ever lifted the blade, that Denna had died holding, on purpose, keeping her word with the last beat of her heart. Her whole family had been trying to teach her one thing across three deaths and twenty years, in the only language any of them had. Her father broke a cord to shield them and let them curse him for it. Her mother kept the same cord in the same breath and folded the contradiction into a blade. Her sister died learning that a break and a cut were neither of them the answer. And Isla had knelt at the bottom of the world and finished the sentence for them — cut and carried in a single motion, and turned what had been a chain into a bond.

"I learned it," she said to the chalked name, low, the words she had reached for at the root of the city and found no voice to say them to. "You were all trying to tell me a cord could be turned. I turned it. I'm sorry it took every one of you to teach me." She pressed her flat hand to the cold iron over her sister's name and held it there until the stone under her palm was as warm as a hand.

"You came," a small voice said.

Pib stood in the mouth of the gate where the stair came down, seven years old, a quit-runner's coil over one shoulder, thin and grave and entirely alive. She had a smear of chalk on her fingers; she had

written some of the names herself. Between the child and Isla, plain in the underlight, a single cord ran — thin, gold, load-bearing, humming at a pitch that made the whole bottom of the weave ring true. It had lit nine mornings ago when a buried woman spent the last breath of her life on it. Isla had felt it seat in her own chest the night she made her first true promise, the night she told this child *I will come back to the low gate for you, if I can*, and had not been sure, saying it, that she would live to keep it.

“I said I would,” Isla said. “If I could. I could.”

“I waited.” Pib came and sat down on the cold iron beside her, close, the unselfconscious closeness of a child who has decided about you. “That’s the low gate. You wait here and you get found. Onil told me. Before.” She looked at the chalked names without fear, the way the low children looked at everything, straight on. “I keep waiting for people. Some of them come.” She said it without complaint, a rigger’s daughter stating a property of ropes. Some hold. Some go to quit. You wait anyway.

And Isla, who had spent her whole adult life making no promises because a promise was a cord and a cord was a cage and the only freedom she could imagine was the cut — Isla looked at the small grave child at the bottom of the mended city and made the last promise of the book of her life, out loud, choosing it, unafraid.

“Then I’ll make you a proper one,” she said. “Not the big kind. The big kind is what put a woman in the dark for sixty years — one promise, made once, held forever, till it kills you. I’m done with the big kind. I’ll make you the true kind.” She turned so the child could see her face and see that she meant it. “I’ll come back to the low gate tomorrow. Just tomorrow. That’s all a promise has to be. And you can hold me to it, and if I keep it we’ll make it again for the day after, and again, every morning, the way you take up a line at dawn — and if the day ever comes that I can’t, if I’m sick or I’m gone, I’ll send it down the taps first so you’re never once left waiting in the dark not knowing. That’s the promise. Small enough to keep. New every

morning. You'll never wait for me the way you waited for Onil. Do you take it?"

The child considered it with the seriousness the low city gave to rope and weight and the exact sound a cable made before it went, all the seriousness of people who lived over the fog and knew what a promise was for.

"I take it," Pib said.

The cord between them was already lit; it had been lit for nine days. But Isla felt it now the way you feel a knot come up snug under your hands when you make a line truly fast — the small living tug of a thing tied on purpose, chosen, bearing. It hummed. She did not clutch it and she did not cut it. She sat at the lowest fixed place in Osmark with her mother's voice spent forever and her friend's name warm under one hand and a child's promise humming under her heart, and she let it hold.

Above her the whole city held with it. It was not finished and would not be; the weave frayed even now in a hundred places and a hundred hands were up in the cold taking in the slack, and tomorrow they would do it again, and the day after that, forever, together, by hand. There was no single point in the dark any more. There was no woman at the bottom of the world holding what the rest would not feel. There was only Osmark, strung between its cliffs over the bottomless fog, standing level in the gold morning for one plain reason that would have to be renewed with every dawn and was, this dawn, enough:

that the city stood because, this morning, it had chosen to hold on to itself — every soul a little, on purpose, out loud — and would choose it again tomorrow.

Isla Venn sat at the low gate among the names of her dead and the promise of a living child, worn to the wick and luminous with chosen cords, bound at last and therefore, at last, free, and held fast.

THE END