

The Bound Water

Chapter One

The Silent Measure

Jessa had the bucket hooked on and the rope taken up when she heard the count go wrong.

It was under the hum of the well, where it had been every dawn for five wash days. One beat, and a rest. Two beats, and a rest. Three. After the three it always waited, long enough for her to lift a yoke and settle it, for a fourth beat that never came. Then it went back to one. She had told her father in the first week, and he had told her to carry her jars and keep it to herself.

This morning it reached three, and the wait went on.

“Any day now, girl,” said the man behind her. There were eleven in the queue, most of the Lower Six lanes with their jars at their feet, and the sky over the east wall had only just gone grey. Old Brina sat at the front on the mounting stone. Merel the dyer was leaning on the rim of the well. She did that at every well, and said stone told her more than people did.

Jessa spoke the opening phrase, the old plain words every carrier learned at fourteen. The hum should have risen to meet them. It went out. A breath ago the well had been a thing with a voice, and now it was a hole in the ground.

She let the rope down all the same. Never strike water twice was the one rule even the children knew, and she kept to her one stroke, hand over hand, forty arm-lengths, until the rope went slack. There

was no splash. The bucket knocked on something and lay over on its side.

“Well?” the man said.

She hauled. The bucket came up light and swinging, and it was dry. She ran the last of the rope through her fist. It was stone dust to the end.

Nobody in the queue spoke. Merel stepped back from the rim.

“It’s cold,” she said. “It’s gone cold right through.”

That was wrong too. The jar lids in the steward’s office had been warm when Jessa loaded the yoke, warm like a thing that had been gripped, and the steward had watched her notice and said nothing.

“That’s four,” somebody said at the back.

“What did you do?” The man behind her had come round to look in the bucket. He was a labourer off the lower ring, with lime on his boots, and he was looking at her hands and not at the well. “You struck it twice. I saw your arm go.”

“I didn’t.”

“I saw—”

“She drew once,” Brina said from the mounting stone. She had not got up. “Five years I’ve watched that girl draw. Once, every time. Leave her be.” She leaned and looked down the shaft, and her mouth worked. “It went like this when I was small. The stone sweated first. Then it went quiet.”

“When was that?” Jessa said.

Brina looked at her and thought better of it. “Fetch your father.”

He was already coming. The east-wall well stood hard against the outer ring, under the rebuilt course where six names were cut, and

the binders had been on the staging above it since first light. Tarek Oun came down the ladder without hurrying, because the Master Binder never hurried where people could see him, and the queue opened to let him through. He looked at the bucket and the dry rope. He put the backs of his fingers to the rim. Then he looked at her.

“Lower Six draws from the cistern today,” he told the queue. “Go on. The steward will open it early.”

They went slowly, looking back. The labourer went last. “It’ll want a finding,” he said. “Somebody’s hands were on that rope.”

“There’ll be a finding,” her father said.

When the lane was empty he crouched at the rim with his back to her. The skin over his knuckles was rubbed raw. He had slept on the ring for nine nights, since the first well stopped, and it was longer than that since she’d had him to herself.

“What did you hear?”

So he had believed her. He had believed her for five weeks and told her to carry her jars. “It counted. One, two, three, the same as always. Then it didn’t start again. The wait just went on. And then the hum went.”

“Before you spoke the phrase, or after?”

“Before. It was already going when I spoke.”

Up on the staging somebody was pressing clay, and she could hear the trowel scrape.

“You heard nothing,” he said.

“Father—”

“You came at first light. You spoke the phrase whole. You drew once, to the mark, the way Selai taught you, and the rope came up dry.” He stood and turned round, and she had not known his face could look like that. “That’s all that happened. Say it.”

“But that isn’t—”

“They found a pair of hands for the east wall, Jessa. A boy of sixteen. He’s cut into that stone up there.” He didn’t point. “The hall will be called this morning, and the hall will want to know whose hands were on this rope. Say it.”

She looked at the bucket on its side. In her head the count was still running, the way a tune runs on after the singer has stopped. One. Two. Three. And the long wait.

“I came at first light,” she said. “I spoke the phrase whole. I drew once and it was dry.”

“Again.”

She said it again. He took the chalk from his belt and marked a cross on the rim of the well, and the chalk snapped in his fingers.

End of Chapter One

The Bound Water

Chapter One, a reading sample

Book One of the Bound Water Cycle
by MG McCoy

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