

The Kept Fire

Chapter One

The First Forgetting

The central basin was already uncovered when Kael arrived.

The cloth should have stayed on until the second bell. Everyone knew that. Still, the stone lay bare, the rim cool in the morning air, the water held low and still under the curve of the roof. The builders had known how to make a hall that didn't echo unless it was asked to.

Kael touched the doorpost with two fingers, counted once, and went in.

Three of the younger stewards stood a little too far back from the rim, blue cords knotted correctly, hands clean, faces calm in the way people's faces were calm when nothing had gone wrong yet. Pell was the tallest of them, with his careful way of holding his shoulders.

"Who uncovered it?"

"I did," Pell said. "I thought—"

"Cover it next time. Until the bell."

He inclined his head and stepped back. No apology was offered, and none was needed.

Kael crossed the floor and looked down. The water sat below the inner mark, not low enough to alarm and not high enough to

please, and it held its shape without trembling. That mattered more than the level. She rested her palm on the stone. Cool. Even.

They took their places. She stood at the north edge, where the rim had been worn smooth by hands long gone, laid the striker on the ledge and waited.

The second bell came thin and distant across the roofs.

She struck the stone once, and the sound didn't ring. It spread. The water shivered and stilled, and Kael listened, and the tone was flatter than it should have been. Thinner, the way a tone is thinner when something has been taken out of it and not put back.

One breath. Two. Three. The water didn't rise.

It had been slow before. Seasons did that. Stone aged and people adjusted. Kael looked at the youngest of the three, a girl with a clear voice who knew how to hold it.

“Sing.”

The girl put her hand on the rim as she had been taught and let the note come. It was the right pitch, held steady, neither forced nor withdrawn. It moved across the basin and settled, and nothing happened. The water didn't lift. The girl faltered, just slightly, and cut the sound, and nobody spoke.

Kael stepped forward without looking at any of them, leaned over the rim and struck again, this time below the mark, where the older lines crossed. The sound came rougher. Less clean. The water stirred the way a sleeper stirs, rose to the inner mark and held.

She waited until the sound had finished moving.

“That will do. Record the draw.”

Pell went to the wall and marked the line. He wrote carefully. Too carefully. His hand slowed at the end of the stroke, wanting to add

something and not knowing what, and Kael watched him decide not to.

The basin was covered. The hall emptied. The morning went on, and Kael stayed.

She sat on the low bench by the north wall, where the stone kept the first cold longest, and took out the small ledger she kept for herself. It carried no seal. The pages were thin and already worn. She wrote the level, the time and the adjustment.

She didn't write about the sound, because there was no column for it.

The hall was never silent. There was always the sound beneath, the low pressure of stone holding weight and water waiting, and she had grown up with it and learned to notice it before she learned to name it. Today it felt further away.

She went to the far wall, where the old marks had been left untouched. They didn't align with the current measures. Everyone knew that too. Nobody adjusted them; they were kept because they had always been kept. Some of them were older than the hall. Kael put her finger on one.

Selai had stood here once with her hand in the same place and her head tilted, listening to something just out of reach, and Kael had been young enough then to still ask questions.

"What are you hearing?"

Selai had smiled, not unkindly. "Not what. When."

Kael hadn't understood it, and she didn't pretend to now. She let her hand fall.

Outside, the settlement was drawing water and breaking bread, smoke going straight up in the still air, the schedules aligned. She

walked the perimeter before going back to her quarters and stopped at the old well on the eastern edge, the one nobody used any more. The cover was whole. The stone round it was worn smooth, though nobody could remember when it had last been opened, and the ground beyond it, where the maintenance path went down to the sealed shaft, had grass on it.

“Never strike water twice,” Selai had said, once, when a different basin had failed to answer, and then she had struck it herself, below the mark, and it had answered. The same strike twice was what she meant. Kael had kept the rule all her life as Selai had shown it, and had never asked why.

* * *

In the afternoon she heard the western basin before she saw the crowd.

It wasn't loud. It was wrong.

People stood in a loose ring round the rim with their voices low and the water lying flat and unmoving. The striker lay on the stone. The marks were correct. The cover had come off at the proper time.

“Who sang?”

A man raised his hand. Omal, the draw-master, older than the girl from the morning and twenty years without a missed measure.

Kael struck once. The sound moved and the water didn't. She struck again, lower, as before, and the water lifted, barely. She didn't let anyone sing.

“Cover it. We'll draw later.”

There were murmurs, and no protest. The cover went on. The crowd went away to carry from the eastern basin in smaller buckets

than yesterday, and Kael stood alone by the rim with her hand on the stone.

The sound beneath was still there. It didn't feel like listening any more. It felt like waiting for something else to speak first.

* * *

She didn't go to her quarters. She took the narrow path behind the storage sheds where few people went unless they had to, to the test hearth she kept at the far end, half hidden by stacked stone and old tools: a basin no wider than a bucket, built against the living rock instead of cut into it, with no mark on it anywhere.

She knelt, brushed the ash off with the side of her hand and struck once. The sound was dull and didn't carry. The water in the little basin stirred, uncertain, and didn't lift and didn't settle, and she didn't strike again.

"Kael."

Vey stood a short way down the path with her hands folded in front of her and her shoulders hunched, ready to be sent away. She was the youngest steward who was still trusted with a striker, and the only one who came to Kael on her own account.

"You shouldn't be here."

"I know." Vey didn't come closer. "The western basin. It sounded wrong again."

"When?"

"Just before dusk. Not flat. Not strained. Just... split."

"Did it respond?"

"Yes."

“Did you sing?”

“No.”

Kael looked at her properly then. The girl didn’t look frightened. Only uncertain, like somebody carrying a thing she didn’t know how to put down.

“Go home. Write it in your own notes.”

“I did.” Vey hesitated. “There was something else.”

Kael waited for it.

“It felt like the water was listening past us.”

End of Chapter One

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Chapter One, a reading sample

Book Two of the Bound Water Cycle
by MG McCoy

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