

CHAPTER 1

The Third Wellhouse

The first thing Wren Ashford learned every morning, before she learned anything else, was whether Wisp was in a good mood.

She learned it the way she learned everything about the well: with her palm flat against warm iron, three floors below the streets of the Underlevels, in a chamber that smelled of hot metal and cloud-water and, faintly, of lightning. This morning the great chain ring shivered under her hand in short, uneven pulses, like a held breath let out in pieces.

"You're doing the thing again," she said.

The Choir-ring did not answer in words. It never did, not really. But the hum that lived inside Wellhouse Three's walls dipped a half-note flat, and the lanterns strung along the gantry guttered, just once, like a shrug.

"That's not an answer, that's a mood," Wren said, and pulled her tool belt tighter, and climbed the narrow catwalk toward the source of the sound.

Wellhouse Three rose eleven stories above her and plunged four below, a hollow iron drum built around a column of captured wind that never stopped moving and never went anywhere. At its heart, chained in nine concentric rings of Aurric ironwork, lived the thing the whole city called Wisp — not because that was its name, but because no human mouth had ever managed to shape its actual name, and *Wisp* was

easier to shout across a gantry when something needed fixing.

Wren had grown up inside this sound. Her mother used to say the well's hum was the closest thing Virelia had to a heartbeat, and that if you listened long enough you could hear the whole city's health in it, the way a physician listens to a chest. Wren had been listening for nine years, ever since her mother stopped being able to listen at all, and this morning the heartbeat was skipping.

She climbed the way she always climbed — quickly, and without looking down, because the one genuinely embarrassing fact of Wren Ashford's life was that a girl who had spent three years apprenticed four hundred feet above the ground was still, after all that time, entirely unreconciled to open drops. It was a private joke among the other apprentices, gentle enough that she'd long since stopped minding it: Wren could rebuild a Choir-coupling blindfolded with one hand numb from cold, and she still went faintly gray crossing the open grate walkway between Wellhouse Three and its neighboring gantry, where the city's iron bones gave way, for eleven unnerving feet, to nothing but mesh and cloud. Denna, the oldest journeyman on the crew, liked to say that the wind had a sense of humor, putting a girl afraid of falling in charge of the thing that kept the whole city from doing it. Wren had never found a satisfying way to argue with that.

The gantries themselves smelled the way they always did at this hour — hot iron cooling from the night shift, machine oil, and underneath both, the

faint mineral sharpness that Wren had never smelled anywhere outside a Wellhouse and had no name for beyond *well-breath*, the particular scent of old wind moving through older metal. She passed Denna on the third landing, already elbow-deep in a coupling housing, and got a grunt of acknowledgment that passed, between the two of them, for a perfectly warm good morning.

"Ring's flat again," Wren said, not slowing.

"Ring's been flat all week," Denna said, without looking up. "Tell Hale when he gets in. Man needs to stop pretending a mood is a maintenance schedule."

"Master Hale is going to ask me what's wrong with you," she told the ring, climbing higher, "and I am going to have to say *I don't know*, and he is going to give me that look."

The hum dipped again. Somewhere above her, metal ticked as it cooled, though nothing in the Wellhouse ever should have been cooling at this hour.

She found the trouble on the seventh gantry: a hairline crack running along the inner face of the fourth Choir-ring, no wider than a thread, weeping a thin silver vapor that caught the lantern light like breath on a cold morning. She had been an apprentice mechanic for three years and had never once seen a crack in a ring. Rings did not crack. Rings were older than the Council, older than the Guild, older by all accounts than the Uppercircle itself, forged in the years right after the Falling by hands that no longer existed and methods no one now living could repeat. You could scratch a ring. You could not break one.

Wren put two fingers to the crack, carefully, the way you'd touch a wound.

The vapor curled around her fingers and, for just a moment, she felt something that was not quite words and not quite feeling — a flinch, small and startled, like a hand pulled back from a stove. Then it was gone, and the hum steadied itself into something almost normal, almost fine, the practiced calm of someone who has decided you are not to be worried about them.

"I saw that," Wren said quietly. "You don't have to do the brave thing with me."

The ring said nothing. It never did, when it didn't want to.

She sat back on her heels and looked at the crack for a long moment, the way Master Hale had taught her to look at any problem: not with her hands first, but with her eyes, asking what it wanted to tell her before she decided what to do about it. What it told her was that something had put strain on the ring that the ring was not built to carry, and rings that were older than the Council did not simply decide, on an ordinary Tuesday, to develop new weaknesses.

Something had pushed it. She just didn't know what yet.

She was still turning that thought over when the floor moved.

It was not a lurch. Virelia did not lurch — the whole point of the four wells, the entire reason the city had stood in the sky for three hundred years, was that it never lurched, never dropped, never so much as swayed enough to spill a cup of tea in the

Uppercircle. What happened instead was smaller and far worse: a fraction of a second where Wren's stomach knew, before her mind did, that down had gotten heavier. A held breath in the world itself.

Then it passed, and the gantry was steady again, and somewhere far below in the well's iron throat, the hum of Wellhouse Three cracked — just once — into something that was almost, almost a cry.

For a moment, nobody on the gantry moved. Two floors down, Wren heard Denna's tools clatter to the floor and stay there, and somewhere further off, on the open walkway between towers, a voice she didn't recognize said, very quietly, "Did you feel that," to no one in particular, the way people speak into silence when they need to hear someone else confirm they aren't imagining things.

Wren pressed her palm flat against the chalk-marked crack again, and this time the vapor did not curl politely away from her fingers. It clung, thin and cold, and beneath it she felt the ring's whole body trembling — not the ordinary hum, not even the ragged unevenness from before, but something closer to the shiver of an animal that has just understood, all at once, that the thing it feared was real.

"I felt it," she said, to no one, to the ring, to the whole listening chamber. "I felt it too."

The hum did not answer in words. It never did, not really. But it steadied, fractionally, the particular relief of not being alone in a frightening moment, and Wren sat with her palm against the iron for a long minute after the tremor had passed, listening to a