

## CHAPTER ONE

**F**IRST THERE WAS THE DARKNESS – HEAVY AND CHOKING, BLUE-black and tangible, filling the mouth and ears and mind. Then the smell – huge, as solid as rough stone beneath bare feet or a pillow over the face, suffocating thought. Finally, the sound of the sewer – the never-ending sigh of the stream, the drips and the splashes and the gushing.

And the pitter-patter of sharp claws on wet brick.

The rat was big and old, and he was canny. He needed no light to follow the contours of the labyrinth in which he lived out his days. His paws detected the minute variations of texture on the bricks he raced along, high above the never-ending stream of life. The astonishing discrimination of his twitching nose told him how high the stream was flowing, the quality of its contents – a high, thin flood brought vegetation, small dead things, sometimes larger ones; a low thick turgid flow held its own treats for the discerning rodent – and the quality of the air, which was sometimes enough to make even a rat ill. He could tell by the pressure on his sensitive ears whether he was running through a small tight tunnel, or where the ceiling opened high above him into one of the soaring vaults designed by a long-forgotten master architect, raised by a team of City builders, a wonder of mathematics, unseen for centuries, forgotten.

The rat could hear his friends pittering on the other side of the

brick wall he followed, pattering in the next damp tunnel above him. But for a while he had outrun them all, following his nose's relentless demand.

The corpse was barely bloated, barely dead, the rigor of mortality only recently departed. It was naked save for a rag drifting round its neck, the skin pale and cold as winter sunrise. It had fetched up against the worn teeth of a broken metal grille, which for a short while resumed its long-abandoned role of stopping large objects moving further downstream into the deeper depths of the sewer.

A burgeoning of the stream would happen later that day, and the dead man would travel on alone – but for a while the rat kept him company.

The boy awoke with a start on the tiny ledge where he slept. He kicked out. The kick might have been an errant muscle or the dead-end of a bad dream, but it was only a small movement. He'd been taking his rest on this ledge for long enough to know – even in sleep – he could not afford any sudden move, far less a sleepy roll which would dump him into the stream of waste unreeling endlessly below him. But when he went to his rest at night he was always dog-tired, dead to the world (dead, certainly, in the world's mind), and he lay unmoving, unconscious until it was time to wake.

Elija, who had been living in the sewer for four years, was ten years old.

He knew he held a privileged position. When he and his sister had first found sanctuary there their protector, an older boy, a red-head called Rubin, had to fight for their right to stay in that place of warmth and safety. Then for nights without number one of them had to stay on guard lest they be dumped into the stream by those jealous of their territory. But that was a long time ago; his little sister Em couldn't remember back that far. Now they had been in the sewers for longer than most of the Dwellers and their status was, for the time, secure.

Elija shifted carefully, his bare foot detecting the variations of texture on the bricks until it hit an outcrop of broken cement, its contours better known to him than the palm of his hand. He levered up to sitting. Watery light was filtering through broken stonework high in the roof above him. It wasn't enough to see by, but it thinned the air and gave it a texture of motes Elija felt he could trap in his

hand and keep for later in the day, deeper in the sewer, where it might be needed.

His memories were mostly of a crying woman and a hard-handed man, fist constantly raised, face red. Then there was the time of being alone with Em, running and hiding, always frightened. His dreams often contained blood, although he remembered none. The fear still lay on the edge of his consciousness, but he had no memory of it; he was glad to be safe.

Rubin had explained to them about the stream. It was a small river which rose high above the City in the south, in a place of blue hills and silver trees under constant sun. It was called the Sheepwash there. It dived underground to take on its new guise as a sewer many leagues from the City. Goats dipped their feet in it in final tribute before it left the daylight for ever.

The light was stronger now. Elija had been aware of the presence of his sister since he woke, but now he turned carefully and could see the curve of her dark head above the huddled lump of her body.

‘Wake up, slugabed,’ he said quietly, with no real intention of waking her. She needed more sleep than he did. She didn’t stir, although he could hear movement around him as the Dwellers roused themselves for another day of darkness. There were stirring sounds, the occasional muttered exchange, a sudden echoing shout or imprecation to the gods of the Halls.

Elija stood and relieved himself into the stream which now ran the height of a man below his ledge. He walked confidently along the narrow shelf and picked up the small bag of belongings which lay between him and Em at night. He sat down and opened it, taking out the piece of valuable sapphire moss they had found beyond the Eating Gate. The moss still smelled fresh and he tore a piece off and rubbed it into his face and hands, relishing the fast-fading sweetness, the tang Rubin had told him was called lemon. He was supposed to use it on his feet, he knew, to ward off foot-rot, which claimed so many of the Dwellers. But they only had a little left and he didn’t want to waste it on his feet. He would see that Em did, though.

His hands clean, he foraged in the bag again and came up with strips of dried meat he’d bought from Old Hal. He chewed them slowly and thoroughly, coping stoically with the familiar cramps in his middle which flowed then ebbed.

He called again. ‘Wake up, Em. Time to eat.’

He kicked her gently and knew she was awake though she didn't move. From the sack he used for a pillow he took out the rags for his feet and spent the next few moments carefully winding and rewinding them round ankles and heels, paying special care to the ankle bones, insteps, toes. In his years in the Halls he had got to know many people who were now dead, many of them from sicknesses arising in the feet.

Em was moving at last, going sleepily through her own morning rituals. Her brother did not speak to her and focused his eyes on far walls and the movements of distant Dwellers, giving her privacy.

It was as light now as it would get. Above him the vaulted dome was filled with a shining silver mist which never entirely went away but sometimes thinned and drifted in clouds. Hundreds of ledges ran along the curved walls, mostly above the height of Elija's shelf, mostly inaccessible and untenanted. The Dwellers called it the Hall of Blue Light. Elija and Emly called it home.

Rivers flowed in from three brick arches at the base of the dome, met in a maelstrom of water at the centre, then exited through a pitch-black maw towards the perils of the Eating Gate, the little Hellespont, Dark Water and, finally, to the ocean itself uncounted leagues away.

A harsh voice behind him brought Elija quickly to his feet.

'Lije. Em. Let's march.'

And the new day began.

The leader of today's foraging party was called Malvenny. He was tall – a disadvantage in the Halls – and his face was long and thin, his nose hooked and bent sideways. Em said his eyes were green. She had the disconcerting habit of looking straight into people's faces, whereas Elija always addressed Malvenny at chest level.

He followed the tall man closely, Em to his right, well within the sputtering light of Malvenny's torch. There were seven in the party, and only the dog-tail had a torch too. They carried plenty with them, of course, but used them sparingly in well-travelled Halls.

It was more than an hour's march to the Eating Gate, then more than that to their foraging ground today. Malvenny had not told them where they were going – it was his privilege, he was the leader and he had the food – but Elija knew there would be poor pickings any closer. He had confidence in Malvenny. Elija walked briskly

through the dark, watching Em's small feet and feeling her hot hand in his.

They reached the Malefactors' Cross, a sturdy bridge built of tarred rope and planks which led to the main highway. They crossed it – as Rubin used to say – with respect.

As he always did, Elija stopped in the middle for a moment to lean on the thick ropes and look down into the Whithergo, a diversion from the main stream which, everyone knew, shortly plunged down a great hole deep into the fastnesses of the earth. Nobody went into the Whithergo tunnel. It led to only darkness and death.

'Get on there, boy,' a gruff voice said behind him. The dog-tail.

Elija watched his feet as he walked, and he thought about food, as he usually did if his brain wasn't busy elsewhere. He guessed what Malvenny was carrying – mealie cakes and dried meat, maybe some dried fruit if they were lucky. Once the tall man had given them some eggs, rock hard and pickled in spicy vinegar, which they had all fallen on, delighted by something different to eat. Today Malvenny's sack looked sadly thin.

They stopped to rest at the Last Talking Point, beyond which the paralysing roar of the Eating Gate would make conversation impossible. They all sat and Malvenny took the sack from his back and handed out fresh water and thin oatcakes. These were eaten ferociously and in silence. Elija felt his stomach grip them and he rubbed Em's back gently as she ate hers.

Malvenny returned his cup to his sack, cleared his throat and spat into the stream. 'We're going to the Westering Shores.' The others took the news without comment, except the man with the gruff voice, a newcomer whose name Elija didn't know.

'Where's that, man? How far?'

'It's a long way. There's good pickings, treasure sometimes.'

'How far is far?'

'We cross the Eating Gate,' Malvenny explained, 'then take the rising Hall furthest on the far side. It's a long haul, but it's dry.' He burrowed again in his sack as if to discourage more questions.

All he said was true. The shores rose for a long way, then plunged down again. As a result it was often drier there than in other places and pickings were found more easily. Even treasure, as Malvenny said. Em had found a silver imperial and a piece of citrine glass there on the same day. But it was also true that it was more dangerous. If

there was a flood, from a heavy storm in the distant outside, then the Westering Shores became a trap. By the time any Dwellers there realized the water was rising, it would be too late.

The gruff man, who now called himself Bartellus, had had many names in the world above. The world had called him Shuskara. It had called him father, and son, and husband, and general. It had called him criminal and traitor. Now it called him deceased.

He thought the world was probably right as he followed two grimy children along a narrow slippery ledge through the darkness of the sewers deep beneath the City. The boy held tightly to the girl's hand, yet she walked on the side of the ledge nearest the sewer and Bartellus watched anxiously as her steps veered towards the stream then away to safety again. He was not sure the thin little boy had the strength to hold her if she slipped and fell. He wondered if *he* had.

The attrition rate among the City's soldiers, in their never-ending war with the world beyond the walls, was so high that the birth rate was plummeting. Children were becoming an increasingly rare sight. So each child should be precious, the old man thought, kept safe like a jewel, hoarded and nurtured. Not discarded, flushed into the sewers, or left as prey for evil men. He brought his hand to his chest in reflex invocation, praying to the gods of ice and fire to watch over two such small children in this terrible place.

Elija didn't *like* the Eating Gate – it was dangerous to cross, it was so noisy your brain went dead, and the stench here was worse, if possible, than anywhere in the Halls – but he found it reassuring. It was a fixed point in his world. From the monstrous structure were measured the distances to all the other places under the City. Wherever he had been in his time as a Dweller, he could hear its cacophony, and know how far he was from home. Elija knew he would never get lost in the Halls, because of the gate. He never went anywhere except as part of a foraging party, so he was unlikely to get lost anyway. Drowned, yes, caught by a trap-tide, crushed in a roof fall, murdered for pickings by a gang of reivers, killed by the emperor's patrols, but not simply lost. Expeditions never got lost, certainly not those led by Malvenny.

The Eating Gate was a high weir, built of timber and metal, dripping with water, slick with slippery weed. It rose taller than three tall men above the walking ledge, and measured the width of the

stream, which at this point was more than thirty spans. He could barely make out the other side. The stream was running high today and Elija could not see the twenty great rolling barrels which formed the gate's machinery, but they were not far below the surface; the water was churning violently, heaving and rolling. They sucked in the stream high on the south side, pulverized anything floating in it between them, then spat it out lower down. High on either side of the gate simple filters allowed the stream to flow continuously, should the tide be very full.

In the torchlight Elija could see the new man had his free hand over his ear. Elija said, 'You get used to it.' He knew the man couldn't hear him, but he would have known what he'd said. It was something you heard daily in the Halls. *You get used to it.*

Getting across the Eating Gate was no more dangerous than most exploits in the Halls. A wooden ledge crossed the structure a man's height below the top. It was reached on each side by spiral steps. It was slippery with water and rat droppings and the pale sinister plant life that mysteriously flourished in the darkness and damp. You had to step carefully. Elija had seen a woman fall from the top of the Eating Gate once. A nasty death, but a quick one, crushed between the turning barrels in moments. Elija had no intention of falling.

A small hand pulled at his sleeve and he turned to see Em gazing at the top of the Gate, a rare smile on her heart-shaped face. Elija saw what she was staring at.

It was a gulon, a rare sight this deep into the Halls. The creature was walking casually along the top of the gate, stopping to look down at them, sniffing its way, then walking on, tail high. The company watched as it reached the end of the gate then padded lithely down the steps. It was a big thing, big as a pig, dark as the Halls themselves, with a sharp whiskery snout, crumpled ears and golden eyes. Its face was sharp, like a fox's, but its body had feline grace. It sat and wrapped its bushy tail neatly round its paws and stared at them.

Em ran forward and crouched down in front of it, one grubby hand outstretched. The gulon stood and stepped back two deliberate paces, then stretched out its neck and hissed, showing strong yellow teeth. Elija was going to tell her not to get too close – you could die from a scratch down here – but the grey-haired newcomer strode forward and snatched up the little girl and put her down again next to Elija. Startled, Em looked about to cry, but then the familiar look

of tired resignation came over her face. She held on to her brother's hand as the company passed wide of the watching creature and started up the winding stairs.

The gulon sat down again in a puddle of filth and started delicately washing its paws.

The company was more than a league's march beyond the Eating Gate before the noise of its machinery was sufficiently muffled to allow speech. The way was uphill and Malvenny signalled a halt, raising his torch. They stopped gratefully and were about to sit when Emly stepped forward to the edge of the ledge and stared across the stream. She turned to her brother and pulled at his sleeve, pointing to the other side.

Bartellus held his torch high and, as he squinted through the thick air, he thought he could see a pale blur upstream. He lowered the torch and blinked and shifted his gaze back and forth slightly to focus his eyes.

'A corpus,' commented a stooped old Dweller, not without relish. 'Ay, that's a corpus.' He nodded and looked around the company, seeking agreement.

Bartellus squinted again and could barely see what Em's sharp young eyes and the veteran's ancient ones had picked out. On the other side of the stream another, smaller, waterway joined it through a pitch-black tunnel, and at the junction there was a grille that had broken in two halves, one fallen outward. Between the two halves a body had lodged. Bartellus could make out nothing of it, except an arm, or possibly a leg, stretched out, appearing and disappearing in the flow of the stream.

'Good,' said Malvenny, 'there'll be pickings.' He glanced around his team, then said, 'You, new man, with me.' He jerked his head. 'Rest of you stay here.' He set off without looking back.

Bartellus started up after him, then, realizing they had both the lit torches, turned back and thrust his burning brand into Anny-Mae's hand. When he turned again Malvenny was far ahead, just a bobbing point of light in the darkness. Bartellus caught up with him and they continued on until the newcomer started to wonder if the leader knew where he was going. He had no doubt of the possible value of a corpse in the Halls. Where a copper pente could lead to a fight to the death, the chance of finding a gold tooth – perhaps several – was worth considerable risk.

They came to a break in the stream, where a mighty shifting of the land had broken the tunnel, moving it sideways, so the near side came close to the far side. A man could easily jump the gap, he thought. A man could easily jump the gap – if it weren't dark, wet, and slippery. And a slip of the foot didn't mean a hideous death.

Malvenny handed him the torch, took three steps back, then forward, and jumped lightly, landing rock solid, his weight perfectly balanced. He turned back to Bartellus and gestured for him to throw the torch. Bartellus threw it carefully and the leader caught it nonchalantly. He stepped back.

Bartellus dismissed the image of the river of sewage beneath his feet, replacing it in his mind with a lush greensward. He jumped the stream easily, and by the time he landed Malvenny had turned and was already returning along the stream.

The corpse was that of a man. The body was bloated, so it was hard to judge if he was once fat or thin. His head was shaved and his torso decorated with the pale blue and green lines of tattoos. He was naked. A sad rag of clothing remained round his neck. Rats had been at him, Bartellus saw.

Malvenny squeezed through the broken grille and hunkered waist-deep at the man's head. He pulled open the mouth and peered quickly in, then stood up. 'Tongue's cut out. No gold.' He spat in the stream with venom. 'Let's go.'

Bartellus gazed at the corpse. It was an arm, lighter than the rest, that waved in the flowing water, waved in the direction of their little group which Bartellus could now see huddled on the opposite side of the main stream. The tattoo lines on the chest and back had faded, just as the colours of the skin had faded, until they looked like the lines on a map, a plan of campaign, thought the old campaigner.

Just as Malvenny was about to return through the gap in the grille, Bartellus stepped forward and squeezed through, forcing the leader to make room for him.

Tattoos were common enough, especially among the soldiery. Some carried pictures of spiders or panthers. That was the mark of the tribe. This man was a walking picture book, his torso closely inked with birds and beasts and obscure signs. He even had tattoos on his scalp. Bartellus saw the man's hair had started to grow again in a dense stubble.

'Give me the torch.'

He held his hand up, but Malvenny said, 'Time to move on.'

Bartellus looked up. 'Give me the torch!'

Malvenny paused. A Dweller for more years than he could count, he knew the movements of the stream and the times of the tides better than any. When he said it was time to move on, it was.

But he realized the quiet-voiced newcomer could well break his neck if he refused. A long-time student of the practical, he handed over the torch, and watched as the older man bent again to the corpse.

There was an old scar, thick and white, high on the man's right shoulder, an S-shape which stirred a memory in Bartellus' mind. He studied it, frowning.

'Time to move on,' said the voice behind him.

It was a brand, Bartellus realized. The memory stirred again, then disappeared, ungrasped. His memory was full of lacunae now. It worried him that whole episodes of his past had vanished into those gaps. The old soldier foraged in the pouch at his waist and took out a small sharp knife. He looked up. 'Do we come back this way?'

'Gods willing.'

Bartellus paused, uncertain, then put his knife away and stood up. He looked down at the fading tattoos again, trying to commit them to his unreliable memory. Then he bent at the last moment and snatched the piece of cloth drifting round the corpse's neck. Malvenny looked at him oddly, but Bartellus nodded to the leader and they both climbed back through the broken grille. Malvenny waved to the waiting group on the other side of the stream, then set off uphill again. Bartellus paced thoughtfully behind him, the piece of cloth squeezed dripping in his fist.