

The Golden Fool

#Chapter 11: Bread And Blood - Read The Golden Fool

Chapter 11: Bread And Blood

Chapter 11: Bread And Blood

He made his way through the maze of alleys, following the river's oily shine toward the stew house.

Voices drifted from its open front, a low, uneven tide of argument, laughter, then a sudden shriek that made the hounds at the stoop flinch but did not, apparently, trouble the patrons within.

Apollo ducked inside, scanning for a spot where the walls were less likely to collapse or the crowd to turn.

He found a place at the far end of the rough-hewn bar, where the wattle-and-daub wall formed a sharp corner with the windowless back.

The barkeep, a woman with arms like cured meat and a jaw that had clearly been put back together at least once, poured him a bowl of red stew that tasted, miraculously, of actual meat.

She added a mug of thin, bitter beer without being asked.

He ate slowly, surveying the other drinkers: dock hands in salt-stained canvas, a trio of market women with eyes like fish, a pair of city militia in mismatched blue.

None seemed to notice him except the hounds, who circled his legs in hopeful, arthritic orbits.

The warmth of the food hit his belly like an old friend, and for a while he simply let himself exist: not as a god, or an exile, or a scapegoat, but as just another animal grateful for calories and the illusion of safety.

He was halfway through the stew when someone took the stool beside him.

Apollo did not look up at first, but the newcomer's presence was too forceful to ignore: a tang of sweat, cheap spirits, and the powdery aether odor of someone who trafficked in more than just mortal trade.

"Gods, but you eat slow," said the man.

His accent was city, but peeled of the usual affectations, each word dropped with the casual brutality of a stone from a tower.

Apollo turned. The man was broad in the chest, even broader in the shoulders, and wore his black hair cropped short except for a rat tail left to tickle the base of his spine.

His eyes were a sharp, washed-out blue, almost phosphorescent, with a scar cutting through the left eyebrow.

He had the face of a man who'd survived every barfight he'd ever started, and the hands of one who preferred to finish them with minimal effort.

He wore a hauberk of battered scale, patched with odd bits of boiled leather and a few fragments of what looked like priestly vestment stitched in for luck or as a joke.

A jagged cut bisected his lower lip, giving every smile the aspect of a threat. He eyed Apollo's bowl with frank resentment, then stole a hunk of the bread and bit into it.

"I haven't seen you before," the man said, talking as much to the beer as to Apollo. "You're not local, and you're not a guard. So what the fuck are you?"

Apollo considered lying, but the man's expression made it clear he had already rehearsed most of the answers. "I'm a healer," he said, settling on the closest thing to truth.

The bread paused at the man's mouth. "Oh, that's rich," he said, and laughed. "You? Skinny as a louse and half-dead yourself?"

Apollo shrugged. "I heal better than I am healed, apparently."

The man gestured for the barkeep to bring another mug. "You'll need it, friend. The town's crawling with pest and rumor both. Half the east quarter's already dead, and the rest are just waiting their turn."

He set down the bread, wiped his hands on the sleeve of his hauberk, and stuck out a hand: "Name's Nikolaj. Call me Nik if you want, or don't, I've been called worse."

Apollo took the hand, callused, hot, the grip somehow both lazy and absolute. "Lio," he said, choosing the name Othra had christened him with. "Just Lio."

Nikolaj grunted approval. "That'll do. So, Lio, what's your business in Marrowgate? Not the healing, unless you want to end up in a ditch, same as the rest."

Apollo sipped his beer, kept his eyes on the foam. "Passing through. Thought the road might be kinder than the woods."

Nik barked a laugh, so loud the bar quieted for a moment before remembering itself. "Road's never kind, friend. It's just faster to the grave."

He drained his mug and let it clack against the bar, then leaned in, lowering his voice to a private register. "You new enough to not know the lay of things, or just pretending?"

"I don't know anything," Apollo admitted. The words brought a surprising relief.

Nik smiled, showing a line of chipped teeth. "Ah, honest. That's fresh. Marrowgate's run by three crews. The river lords, who claim the docks and the east, the old temple, who run the sick-houses and the dead, and the Blackhearts, who run the rest. If you're not with a crew, you're livestock. Or worse, a mark."

He sized Apollo up, as if debating which category he might fit.

"Who rules?" Apollo asked. "Is there a king? A council?"

Nikolaj snorted, then flagged down the barkeep with a flick. "You want a king, go to Glassmar. If you want a council, try the salt cities, though they'll rob you even cleaner, just with better paperwork."

He glanced back, his eyes gone briefly sharp. "Here, it's whoever has the most bodies and the least sense of shame. Officially, the city's run by High Magistrate Cale. A puppet, strung up by the Blackhearts ages ago. The real ruler's Lady Petronia, the 'Dusk Queen,' though if you call her that to her face she'll have you skinned and hung from the bridge."

Apollo let the names settle, trying them on the tongue of memory. "And what about the river lords?"

"That's the Wyrms family. They're traders, up from the marshes. Slavers, poisoners, sometimes even honest merchants, depends on the season, and if there's a plague on. Rumor is, they're in bed with the Sable Duke, but nobody's seen him west of the flats in years."

Nik blew a crumb from his palm. "You stay out of the east quarter if you want your purse and skin."

"And the temple?" Apollo asked, voice barely above a whisper.

Nik grinned, this time with genuine pleasure. "You really are new. The temple hasn't been a temple since the old gods went under. Now it's a school for orphans, mostly, except the orphans run the rackets on the side, and half their priests are just cutthroats who got tired of getting their hands dirty. If you want opium or a boy, they'll sell you either. If you want a blessing, bring a weapon."

Apollo smiled, not unkindly. "Sounds like home."

At this, Nik's mouth twisted sideways. "That's the spirit. Or you might call it survival, but that's a matter for philosophers."

He caught the barkeep's attention with a click of the tongue, then nodded toward Apollo's emptying mug. "You ever fight, Lio? Not the polite, southern kind, but here, with fists and chairs and maybe a knife if you get unlucky?"

Apollo lifted his mug, noting the tremor in his own hand. "I can defend myself."

Nik's shoulders shook with a silent laugh. "That's not what I asked." But before he could press the point, a commotion erupted behind them, a chair scraped back, a shout, the unmistakable crack of a bottle against thick bone.

Someone hit the floor with a wet, meaty sound.

Nik rolled his eyes, drained what remained in his cup, and twisted on the stool. "See, here's the trouble with stew houses," he said, almost to himself. "Nobody cares what they bleed on."

He stood, squared his hauberk, and stepped into the fray, dragging Apollo in his wake.

The fight was already well underway: a pair of dockhands, one heavy and balding, the other tall and whip-thin, were set upon a third, younger man who cowered behind an upturned table, face streaming with blood.

The crowd had parted just wide enough to give the combatants room to maneuver, but not so wide that anyone missed a good swing.

A woman at the bar was shouting obscenities in a dialect even Apollo hadn't heard, while the barkeep methodically cleared glassware from the counter, unfazed.

Nik waded in, not with the hesitation of someone weighing the odds, but as if the outcome had already been decided.

He collar-grabbed the whip-thin dockhand, spun him around, and delivered a single, humiliating slap across the mouth.

The man reeled, blinking in disbelief, then charged Nik with a roar. Nik sidestepped, hooked a foot behind the man's ankle, and let gravity finish the job.

The dockhand crashed chin-first into the table, then sprawled onto the floor, senseless.

The heavy one, seeing his partner's defeat, lunged at Nik with a broken tankard. Nik ducked, caught the man's wrist, and twisted until the tankard fell. He leaned in, whispered something in the man's ear.

The words must have been properly chosen, because the dockhand's face lost all color. He stumbled back, hands raised, and scuttled from the bar without so much as a backward glance.

Chapter 12: They Come In Quiet

Nik dusted his hands, then turned to the bloodied victim behind the table. "Up you get," he said.

The young man, still shivering with adrenaline, stared up at Nik with the dawning awe of a man who has just glimpsed the operating logic of the universe and found it both meaner and simpler than he'd ever guessed.

His mouth worked, but the only sound that came out was a wet, babbling gratitude.

Nik ignored it, brushing the blood from his knuckles. "Next time, pick a better place to hide," he muttered, and with a flick of his boot, nudged the young man toward the exit.

Apollo stood at the edge of the fray, feeling the heat of a dozen stares on his skin. The crowd had already started to close in, the way wounds do: eager to heal, but just as eager to leave a scar as a reminder.

A burly woman in a sea-soaked cloak began gathering bets, her ledger already half-filled with the names of victors and victims.

A few patrons eyed Nik with the speculative interest owed to either a future leader or a future corpse.

Before the mood could swing back to violence, a knot of militia in city blue pushed through the entrance, the iron studs of their tunics catching the lamplight in tiny, malignant flashes.

The tallest among them, a woman with a face like a knife and a nose split twice across its bridge, surveyed the damage with an expression of profound boredom.

"Which one of you started it?" she said, more to the room than to anyone in particular.

A babble of denials and finger-pointing ensued. The woman produced a small, notched baton and rapped it once on the bar, the sound as crisp and final as a death sentence.

"We can do this the quick way, or the broken way. Makes no difference to me."

Nik, who'd resumed his seat and was eyeing the beer with the longing of a man torn from his best friend, raised his hand. "Self-defense," he offered, voice syrupy. "Two to one, and they were about to gut the boy."

The militiawoman eyed him up and down, then cocked her head at Apollo. "And you?"

"Only an observer," Apollo said. It was technically true, he had touched nothing, and no part of the fight owed itself to his brief, bewildered presence.

She grunted, then dragged the whip-thin dockhand, still unconscious, from the floor by the collar.

She pointed to Nik and Apollo. "You two, outside. Now." There was no room for argument in her tone, even the hounds, who had crept back under the tables, cowered at the command.

The cold hit them like a slap as they stepped into the alley.

The other militia followed, flanking the two of them with professional efficiency.

The woman, her name, as stitched on her jerkin, was RUSKA, fixed Nik with a look that said she'd seen every trick he'd ever even considered.

"Names," she said, pulling out a battered slate. "And what you're doing in Marrowgate. Use the truth, for a change."

Nik grinned, unrepentant. "Nikolaj Blackthorn, up from the salt coast. No warrants. I checked." He nodded at Apollo. "He's Lio, a healer. Just passing through."

Apollo nodded. "Lio. No family, no papers."

Ruska's eyes narrowed, and for a moment he thought she might arrest them just to save paperwork. Instead, she spat into the slush at her feet and returned the slate to her belt.

"Don't start any more trouble," she said.

"Marrowgate has enough dead, and no one to bury them." She jerked a thumb at the alley's end. "You're barred from the stew house tonight. Go home, or to hell. Makes no difference."

One of the blue-jacketed men snickered, and Ruska cuffed him on the ear with the flat of her palm before shoving the insensate dockhand into his arms.

"And you, drop him at the sick-house. Nara owes me two."

She looked back at Apollo and Nik, her expression unreadable. "You walk the alleys after curfew, you answer to me. Understand?"

Nik gave a lazy salute; Apollo bowed his head in the old, deferent way.

The militia vanished, trailing their prisoner and the night's cold with them. For a long moment the only sound was the distant laughter from inside the bar, and somewhere, the yowl of a cat scavenging for its last meal.

Nik lit a battered clove roll and exhaled a cloud of blue smoke. "That could've been worse," he said.

"She didn't even search us," Apollo said, a little in awe.

Nik grinned, showing the same ruined teeth. "She'll remember us. That's the trick: get remembered for the right reasons."

They walked together down the frozen gutter, past shuttered doors and the shadow-puppets of neighbors gossiping behind thin glass.

Nik led the way to a lean-to at the edge of the river, its walls shingled in old tin and its roof patched with burlap and hope. Inside, a single candle guttered, fighting against the cold.

Two cots, one occupied by a rolled blanket and the shape of a sleeping dog, the other empty.

"Not much," Nik said, "but the rent's paid, and nobody comes around after sundown. You can have the cot. The dog'll keep you warm; just mind his bad side."

Apollo hung his cloak on a nail and sank onto the cot, the exhaustion of the day, no, the week, the exile, the life, settling over him like a lead shroud.

He heard Nik moving about, pouring a cup of something bracing and cheap, feeding the dog a scrap of crust. He realized, with a dull surprise, that he was grateful.

"Why help me?" Apollo asked.

Nik shrugged. "You look like you need it. Besides, better you than the next band of brutes."

The dog, sensing a new hierarchy, curled by Apollo's knees and commenced a slow, rattling snore. Nik sprawled on the other cot, hands behind his head, eyes glimmering in the candle's uncertain light.

"You from the west?" Nik asked, as if the question had been waiting for the right moment to surface.

Apollo hesitated, then nodded. "Far west," he said, and the truth of it was so small and so immense that silence grew around it, a seed in the dark.

The candle guttered. They lay in their cots while the city breathed its cold and sour melodies, until even the dog's snoring faded into the blankness of exhaustion.

In the deepest hour before dawn, the dog woke first. It let out a low, guttural whine and dug its claws into the thin straw mattress, sending a tremor down the length of Apollo's leg.

He cracked an eye, saw the animal bristling at the door, hackles raised and gums pulled back in a silent snarl.

The lean-to's only window was a slat of glass warped by generations of freeze and thaw. Through it, Apollo saw nothing, only blackness, the absence of city lanterns, the alley choked by fog.

But the dog's body told a different story, it was a tuning fork for danger, and something in the dark was playing it.

Nik stirred, instantly awake in the way of those who have spent long years sleeping with one eye open and a weapon within reach.

He rolled off the cot and moved to the wall, flattening himself against it. "Lio," he whispered, voice tight as a tourniquet.

Apollo sat up, ignoring the knives of protest from every joint. "What is it?"

"Don't know." Nik's hands moved with an efficiency that was nearly beautiful, he drew a blade from under the cot, checked its edge, and slipped a brass knuckle over his left hand. "But it's not drunkards. Drunkards don't move that quiet."

The dog whined again, and the sound was so close to the note of a hunting horn that Apollo felt his heart stutter.

He reached for the walking stick that Othra had pressed on him, birch, stripped and smooth, its head carved into the crude shape of a wolf or a dog, depending on the angle.

It felt good in his palm, grounding.

The silence outside stretched, then snapped: a sudden, light scuff of boot against frost, followed by the almost imperceptible click of metal against wood.

Nik grinned, wild and happy, the prospect of violence a relief after so much boredom. "They're coming in."

Apollo heard it now, the slick, calculated scrape of bodies maneuvering just beyond the door, the whisper of a practiced voice giving final orders.

Nik counted down from three with his fingers, each digit a brief, private history of scars and half-healed wounds.

The door caved not with a bang but a patient, deliberate pry, as if the attackers expected resistance but were in no hurry to meet it.

The first man through was slight, hooded, his hands gloved in what looked like butcher's linen. He carried a garrote, its wire already taut, and a bone-handled knife clamped between his teeth.

Two more followed, one headless in the sense of faceless, black mask, black eyes, nothing but the narrow slot of intent.

The third was a woman, judging by the hips, but she moved with a heaviness that denied any softness.

Chapter 13: Bounty Paid In Full

Nik planted his feet, a brawler's stance, shoulders loose, jaw relaxed, as if the violence were a second language he spoke better than his mother's.

He met the hooded man's eyes and, with a nimbleness that belied his bulk, whipped the brass-knuckled fist into the attacker's temple. Bone crunched.

The garrote slackened, then spiraled to the floor alongside the man, who spasmed twice before curling up around his own blood.

Apollo had only an instant to marvel at the efficiency before the woman ducked in low, aiming a sap at Nik's knee.

He lurched backward, swore, and caught the blow on his shin. The shock of it produced a sound halfway between laughter and a scream.

It was the masked man who came at Apollo, knife drawn, steps measured and precise. For a moment, Apollo expected the old terror, the hesitation, but what he felt was only boredom and a dull contempt.

He let the man close, let the blade come within an arm's length, and then brought the walking stick up in a clean, classical arc, striking with the butt, not the head, so the impact rammed up through the assailant's wrist and into the soft meat behind the jaw.

The mask fractured. Teeth snapped together with a clack like dice on a marble table.

A second, then a third strike, Apollo did not remember planning these, only the way they resolved themselves as if written in a libretto. The masked man collapsed, pawing at his ruined mouth.

The woman, momentarily off-balance, fainted at Nik again, then shifted her weight with a dancer's discipline and thrust for Apollo's gut.

He sidestepped, but her free hand caught him by the collar and jerked him forward. He felt the knife slide along his ribs, not quite breaking skin but close enough for the heat of it to register as pain.

He let himself be pulled, used the momentum to drive his skull into her face.

She reeled, bellowed something obscene, and staggered back into the doorframe, where Nik, already recovering, swept a leg and dropped her flat.

She hit the ground with a thud that scared the dog, the animal, situation fully grasped, lunged for the only exposed flesh: the soft inside of the woman's thigh.

The scream that followed was robust, operatic.

Nik finished it with a pragmatic heel to the jaw.

The world went briefly quiet, save for the ringing in Apollo's left ear and the wheeze of the dog as it savored its triumph.

The three attackers lay in a tangle, bleeding and insensate but breathing, at least for now.

"I was right," Nik said, breathless, grinning as he pried the garrote from the floor. "Not drunkards."

Apollo bent to examine the woman's mask, then peeled it off. The features beneath were neat and flat, pale as curdled milk, the eyes a nondescript gray already glassing over with the shock.

No tattoos, no jewelry, nothing to say who she was or why she'd risked her life for this sack of rags and canned beans.

He turned her wrist, found a brand-bruise on the inside: the shape of a moth, or perhaps a serpent, burned in with the casual permanence of people who believed in neither regret nor discovery.

He rolled the woman over, ignoring the sobbing choke as air returned to her lungs. Her belt was a scavenged length of boat cord, but the buckle was custom, etched with a pattern, a lattice of barbed spirals.

He glanced at Nik, who had already stripped the mask off the first man and was rifling through his pockets with a thief's indifference.

"Anything?" Apollo asked, voice hoarse.

Nik shook his head, but his eyes were sharp and hungry. "Too clean. No papers, no coin, not even a fucking ring." He spat, then checked the boots, the lining, even the soles. "Professional. They were paid to do it, but not to get caught."

The dog, having tasted blood, was now licking the woman's face with a panting, half-mocking affection.

Apollo grabbed a rag from the shelf and wiped the blood from the woman's mouth. She bit at his hand, missed, then glared up at him with a hatred so pure it was almost a relief to look at.

He leaned in, close enough to smell the copper and the cheap, acidic perfume she had smeared at her wrists. "Who sent you?" he asked, not expecting an answer.

Her lips twitched. "Does it matter?" The voice was accented, city but not local, something from the midlands, maybe, Nik would have recognized his own.

Nik had finished his search and now stood over the masked man, prodding at the ruined jaw. "You're not from here," he said, and the certainty in his voice left no room for pretense.

"Which means you came through the south gate. Which means you're working for the Blackhearts, or the temple, or the Wyrms. Which is it?"

The woman tried to spit, but her mouth was too dry. "We don't have names. That's the point."

Nik's laugh was a single, cold bark. He knelt, knife at the woman's throat, thumb pressed gentle as a lover to the blue pulse beneath her jaw.

"You'll tell us, or you'll go out with the trash. And if you think I'm bluffing, ask the crows on the field."

The woman's jaw flexed once. "You're wasting—" she began, but the words failed as Nik pressed harder.

The knife's edge traced a red parenthesis beneath her chin.

"We were paid," she said at last, the bitterness cutting deeper than the blade.

"You humiliated men in the stew house. They said you'd cost them four weeks' wage, broke one's nose, shattered the other's jaw. They pooled for a retaliation. The word came from the Blackhearts to make an example. That was all."

Apollo felt a faint, involuntary laugh ripple through him. "A barfight?"

Nik let up, just enough to let the woman suck in breath. "That's how it is here. You shame a crew, they can't just let it pass. I'm surprised it took until dawn."

The woman's gaze flicked from Nik to Apollo. "They want you alive, healer. The rest is optional."

"Who wants me alive?" Apollo asked, and was surprised by the evenness in his voice.

In another life, such a threat would have been laughable, but here, stripped of both power and purpose, it was only the certainty that wounded him.

The woman hesitated, then shrugged against the pressure at her throat. "Your name's on a list. They have a buyer in the city. You're worth more than you know."

Nik's laugh was low and almost admiring. "Well, Lio, seems you've got a bounty on your head. Welcome to Marrowgate."

The dog, sensing the tension ease, settled back into a wet, self-satisfied curl on the floor.

Apollo let the information settle, the edges of it fitting too neatly with the sense of being watched since arrival.

He knelt down beside the woman, saw the blood tracking from her temple into her ear, and wondered for a moment what she thought of as loyalty, or if it ran in her at all.

He took her hand, steady, deliberate, and pressed two fingers to the base of her palm. "You'll live," he said, and meant it neither as a threat nor as comfort.

Nik wiped his blade on the woman's sleeve, then stood and kicked the other two groaning forms into a pile near the wall.

"We can't leave them here," he said. "If the Blackhearts find out we killed their hired trash, they'll send worse."

Apollo nodded. "Do you have a plan?"

"Always," Nik said, and winked. "We dump them for the Watch to find. The Watch hates the Blackhearts. Nothing makes people forget a bounty like a nice, messy turf war."

He shouldered the first attacker, frail, dappled with sweat, unconscious but alive, and handed the second to Apollo, who hauled the man up with what grace he could muster.

The woman, still trembling, was left to Nik's mercy, which turned out to be rough but not unkind. He bound her wrists, gagged her with a strip from her own shirt, and then, with a gentleness that made Apollo's skin crawl, patted her cheek.

"You're lucky," he said. "Some crews start with the knives."

They slipped out into the yar, avoiding the lamp-lit main road and instead threading through the frost-crustured alleys.

The city's breath was close and wet, every shuffling step tracked by a thousand unseen eyes. Twice they ducked patrols, bands of Watchmen in dented steel, faces so young that Apollo wondered if they had ever seen a day without curfew.

Each time, Nik steered their cargo into abandoned stables or under the sagging arc of old aqueducts.

No one called after them; only the cat-quiet tread of those with more pressing deaths to attend.

They left the bodies facedown in the filth behind a tannery, with a brick tied to the hooded man's legs and a note, scrawled in Nik's gnarled handwriting, pinned to the woman's jerkin: "Bounty paid in full."

The Watch would find them by daybreak, and if fortune favored, the Blackhearts and the law would busy themselves with mutual vengeance while Nik and Apollo found somewhere to vanish.

They returned to the lean-to just before the city's last bells.

The dog, unsentimental, had already soiled the floor and eaten half its blanket in nervous hunger.

Nik fed it the trimmings from a charred ham, then wrapped his knuckles in boiled linen, humming what might have been a lullaby if sung by a man who had never once been a child.

Apollo sat, shaking, on the cot and forced himself to breathe. The blood on his hands was cold, clotted under his fingernails.

Nik stretched out on the floorboards, eyes open to the slats in the tin roof. "We'll need to run at first light," he said. "Out the east gate, before word spreads. You'll need a cloak, or something to hide your face. The bounty's real, but the buyer's likely worse than the cutthroats. If you want to live, you follow my lead."

Apollo nodded. "Understood. Where are we going?"

Nik closed his eyes, as if visualizing the map of the world beyond Marrowgate.

"Out past the marsh, there's an old glassworks. Friend of mine keeps a safehouse there, well, safe enough for our purposes. She's a touch strange, but reliable." He grinned. "You'll like her. She's got a thing for lost causes."

The dog, finished with its meal, circled once and flopped onto Apollo's feet. He let the animal's warmth seep into him, and when he closed his eyes, sleep arrived not as a luxury but as a blunt force.

Chapter 14: Safehouse Of Glass

East of Marrowgate, the dawn came slow, a gradual unfreezing in which the river's fog retreated inch by inch before the push of sunlight.

The glassworks crouched at the edge of the marsh: a humped, rambling structure of kiln-brick and patched-together timber, outbuildings like barnacles on its flanks.

The windows, some shattered, some warped with age, gave back only dim reflections, and the main door had long ago been replaced with a curtain of copper chains that tinkled a warning at every wind.

Nik led the way, shouldering through the beads with the self-assurance of a local.

Inside, heat pressed against them, heavy with the memory of old fires and newer debts.

Racks of warped glass, bottles, beads, tubes for who knew what, lined the walls, and scraps of failed experiments glittered on every shelf. The air itself tasted faintly of lye and something medicinal.

A woman stood at the far workbench, arms plunged to the elbow in a bath of blue liquid. She did not turn as they entered, but the line of her back stiffened, and Apollo saw the glint of a dagger poised at her hip.

Her hair was braided in a style Apollo didn't recognize, it was tight against the scalp, then loosed in a cascade of pale gold.

When she straightened, her eyes, a deep, improbable green, landed on Nik, then flicked once to Apollo.

"You're late," she said. Her voice was clear, almost uninflected, as if she'd practiced neutral for so long it had become her only true accent.

"We had company," Nik replied, sweeping a hand at the bruises on his chin. "And I brought a friend."

She came closer, drying her arms on a towel that left fine streaks of blue along her wrists.

Apollo noticed the scars there, old and new, some deliberate, others a side effect of chemical ambition.

She was not beautiful, exactly, but she had the kind of face that left nothing to imagination: all angles, no pretense.

"Lyra," Nik said. "This is Lio. He's the reason we're both alive."

Lyra glanced at Apollo, then at the dog, who had wedged itself between his ankles as if forming a firewall. "You look like shit," she announced.

"I feel it," Apollo said. "But I've seen worse."

Lyra made a small, skeptical noise, then jerked her chin toward a battered set of steps leading to the upper floor.

"Up. Third door on the left. There's food, and something to clean your hands. Don't touch the white jars." She turned away, already re-immersed in her project.

Nik led the way up, pausing only to grab a raw onion from the pantry and toss it to the dog.

"As I said, she's got a soft spot for orphans and disaster cases," he stage-whispered.

"But never mistake her for a friend. Last man who did lost two fingers and a week's memory."

Apollo nodded, taking in the space: the strange, clattering warmth of a house built for invention and paranoia; the tangle of glass, wire, and boiled leather on every surface.

The third door opened onto a small, sunless room with a cot, a basin, and a tin of lard that served as soap.

Nik waited until the door was closed and then let his breath out in a slow, careful hiss.

"She's the only safe bet for miles," he said. "But if you cross her, she'll sell the meat off your bones before the blood dries."

"I'm not planning to cross anyone," Apollo said, though the words sounded more like a prayer than a strategy.

Nik smirked. "Nobody plans to." He stepped out, leaving Apollo to the basin, the lard, and the first moments of privacy he'd had in months.

He stripped off the stinking shirt, peeled bandages from his side, and prodded the wound with surgical detachment.

The skin was healing, the violence of the previous days compacted into a single, angry welt. He washed, lathered, and rubbed at the blood until the water ran nearly clear. In the corner, the dog watched with the solemnity of an older priest witnessing confession.

Apollo sat on the cot and let the exhaustion settle, the hush of the room thickening around him.

For a moment, he considered sleep, but the prospect of dreams, of the sick, the dead, the children with their blue-rimmed eyes, made him flinch.

Instead, he studied the map Othra had given him, tracing the path from Marrowgate to the glassworks and, beyond, the forests and scars of the world.

Voices rose from below, Nik, Lyra, and a new one, deep and abrasive, the sound of gravel poured into a crucible.

Apollo listened, trying to parse the cadence, the threat or invitation hidden in each word. He dressed in what passed for clean clothes, then descended the steps, the dog ghosting after him.

The first thing Apollo saw at the base of the stairs was a hand: broad, square-palmed, each nail half-mooned with black.

The hand clutched the neck of a glass bottle, its amber contents sloshing with each gesture.

The rest of the man resolved itself around the hand: a dwarf, not the mythic kind of storybooks but a living artifact of mountain and forge, his beard braided tight with bands of copper, his head shaved to a glistening dome.

His skin was the color of old parchment, and his eyes, strikingly pale, almost ice, stared with the focus of a mathematician plotting a murder.

He wore a tunic stained with burn marks and the chemical signature of a hundred failed experiments.

When he laughed, the sound trilled up through his sinuses, as if delight were a debt he paid on the installment plan.

Nik made the introductions. "Lio, this is Thorin Ironfist. Don't let the name fool you—he's got a sense of humor, somewhere under the layers." Nik clapped the dwarf on the back, which did nothing to alter Thorin's posture or expression.

Thorin sized Apollo up, eyes flitting from his face to his hands to his feet, then back to his face. "You don't look like much," he said, not unkindly. "But they say you can patch a wound, and that may be all the magicians are good for anymore."

Apollo inclined his head, uncertain whether to reply or wait for the next test. "I do what I can."

Lyra, arms now scrubbed clean, moved to the hearth and stirred a cauldron with a glass rod. "You'll forgive Thorin," she said. "He trusts metal, not flesh."

"Flesh is a liability," Thorin agreed. He took a swig from the bottle, wiped his mouth, and set it down with a thunk.

"And so is magic, if you ask me. Too much cantrip and glamour in the world, not enough honest work." He eyed Apollo sidelong, then shrugged. "Still, I've seen worse. If you're able, you'll patch me up before this is over."

Nik raised his eyebrows. "You didn't mention you were hurt."

Thorin grunted. "Didn't want to show weakness in front of strangers." He unbuttoned his tunic with blunt fingers, peeling it back to reveal a bandage above his left hip, hastily wrapped and already seeping rust-dark blood through the linen.

"Was mending a kiln door when a bastard from the Blackhearts decided to collect payment for last month's rent. Shanked me on the way home." He glowered at the wound as if it were an insubordinate apprentice.

Apollo stepped closer, unwrapping the cloth with a practiced efficiency. The flesh beneath was gouged and puckered, the edges raw but not yet septic. "You waited too long," he said, voice soft but without accusation.

Thorin bared his teeth, which were blocky and worn but surprisingly white. "Kiln was hungry. If folk don't get their glass, the orders stack up and the Watch gets nasty. I'm used to working with pain."

He watched as Apollo rinsed the wound with a splash of clear liquor from the bottle. "One condition," Thorin added, gripping the edge of the table until his knuckles shone. "No gods-damned magic. Just stitch it."

Apollo nodded, but as he threaded the needle and set to work, he let a trace of the old warmth into his fingertips.

Not a miracle, just a gentle nudge, enough to keep the flesh from dying, enough to slow the river of pain. He worked quietly, ignoring the sidelong glances from Lyra and the dog's soft panting at his knee.

Thorin's breath hissed through his teeth, but he did not flinch or curse. When Apollo finished, he wiped the wound with a strip of boiled linen and tied it off with a square, tidy knot.

The skin had already begun to knit at the edges, the worst of the rawness retreating. Thorin eyed the work, then grunted. "Not bad. You could've been a smith, if your hands weren't so pretty."

Nik clapped Thorin on the back, ignoring the fresh dressing. "See? He's worth keeping alive."

Lyra spooned out bowls of the cauldron's contents, a sort of thick, root-flavored porridge studded with chunks of beet and charred sausage. She handed one to Apollo, who accepted it with gratitude.

"Eat," she said. "You'll need your strength. Word is, the Blackhearts are already hunting. They sent runners before dawn. By tonight, the bounty will've doubled."

Apollo ate, each bite anchoring him more firmly to the present.

He listened as Lyra and Thorin argued logistics, debating whether to hunker in the glassworks or try for the old supply tunnels that ran beneath the marsh.

Chapter 15: Buyer At The Door

Nik laced the conversation with jokes, some subtle, most not, but there was nothing subtle about the tension.

They ate like survivors, bowls clutched, eyes flicking to the blacked-out windows at every snap from the croft outside.

Even the dog, belly distended and head low, watched the door with a readiness that was all nerves and no training.

Nik wiped a thumb through his beard and gestured to the window behind Lyra. "Did you close the west shutter?"

Lyra shot him a look. "Twice. Why?"

He dipped two fingers into the air, as if plucking a thread. "I hear something. Cart, maybe. Or shoes. Not Watch, they don't walk like that. Too heavy. Too... staged."

Thorin rolled his eyes but stood from the table, every motion done with the minimum required effort.

He reached under the bench, retrieved a length of pipe fortified with a soldered lead shot, and gripped it so casually it looked like an extension of his forearm.

Nik and Lyra set down their bowls in tandem.

Apollo, a half-chewed root chunk caught at the back of his tongue, rose and followed them toward the stairwell.

He felt the dog tense, then drift to his side, ears canted forward.

The first knock came as a series of polite, deliberate raps at the main door, each separated by the exact interval needed to telegraph intent.

Not Watch, as Nik had said. Not even the Blackhearts' normal flavor of idiot. This was someone who knew the house, and wanted its occupants to know him in return.

Lyra moved to the side of the door, pressed her back to the wall, and mouthed the word "Buyer" at Nik.

Nik grinned, wiped his palms on his thighs, and called out: "Shop's closed, friend. Come back after the market."

A pause. Then a voice, smooth and deep as honey in winter. "That's a disappointment, Nik. I hate to waste time, even for old acquaintances."

Apollo felt the old crawl of nerves, the animal certainty of being sized up by a predator that had more appetite than patience.

Thorin slotted in behind the door, pipe raised. "If Blackhearts are up, we're not worth a knuckle sandwich. Unless you're in the mood for charity work."

Lyra counted down with her fingers. Three. Two.

The voice at the door: "Be nice, Lyra. It's your best feature." Then the chain curtain parted with a slither and a man ducked through.

He was tall, built like the kind of statue you'd see in the old imperial parks, long bones, deliberate grace, shoulders that would have seemed ludicrous on anyone but him.

His hair was a fall of pale gold, straight as a plumb line, and his eyes, impossible, arctic blue, set deep under brows sharp as the rest of his face, burned with a cold, offhand delight.

He wore a jacket of black doeskin, open to the waist, and beneath it a shirt so clean and white it seemed a declaration of war on the glassworks' grime.

He moved with the certainty of a man who had already mapped every possible outcome.

Nik bared his teeth in a smile that might have been hunger if it wasn't so openly hostile.

"Didn't think you'd risk your pretty boots for us, Cassian. Word in the quarter is you're too busy collecting debts to bother with the old crew."

Cassian, if that was his name, flashed a smile so even and white it seemed almost a trick of the light.

"I'm here on business, Nik. Arrangements need to be made."

He glanced around, eyes flicking over Thorin's pipe, Lyra's braced stance, and Apollo's hands, still raw from stitching.

"And you've made it easier than I expected, all of you lined up so neat. Even the healer. Remarkable."

He advanced, each step measured, his boots soundless on the dust-and-cinder floor.

There was an intimacy to his approach, a confidence that had nothing to do with raw strength.

"We can do this gently," Cassian said, hands open and empty, no visible weapon, but every muscle in his body seemed to know what one would do if needed.

"Or you can play at loyalty and watch Marrowgate's bounty double again by nightfall. I prefer the first option."

"Why?" Apollo asked. The question spilled out, dry in his mouth.

Cassian's gaze flickered over Apollo, calculating, as if weighing product at a market.

"Because you're valuable. To the right people, in the right hands." He smiled again, but the curve of his mouth was more a subtraction than an addition.

"And because, if you walk out of Marrowgate, I don't get my commission."

Nik snorted, spreading his arms wide, sleeves rolling up to show the bruises and the old prison marks. "So you work for Petronia now? Didn't peg you for the type to take orders."

Cassian shrugged, as if the question bored him. "She pays on time. And unlike you, she knows how to motivate a workforce. Now, are we talking, or are we bleeding?"

Thorin tensed, Apollo saw the dwarf's left hand ghost to the pipe's loaded end, but Lyra shot him a warning glance: not yet.

Apollo braced for violence, but Cassian only circled, light on his feet, an apex predator with too much food in his belly for a chase.

Apollo watched the man, aware of every inch of glass, every chemical stink, the web of tripwires and deadfalls that made the glassworks a fortress only if one already knew its map.

He measured the angles. He knew, in the way prey always knew, the moment when running became hopeless.

Cassian stopped two paces away. "Easy way?" he offered.

"You come with me. No fuss, no fingers broken, nobody else gets hurt. You'll be handed off, clean, nice, straight to the buyer. Who, for the record, doesn't seem to care if the healer is in one piece, but I like to exceed standards."

Apollo didn't answer, counting the heartbeats until Nik made his move.

Cassian's eyes met his, cold and droll, and he wondered if the man was reading every uncertainty off him like a ledger.

He was about to reply, anything, something, when Nik hurled the glass bottle at Cassian's head and lunged.

Cassian's head snapped to the side as the bottle burst against his cheekbone, spraying him and the wall in a fan of hot spirits.

He didn't flinch, didn't even blink at the glass shards embedded in his face, he just smiled wider, as if this was the opening move he'd been craving.

Apollo saw the next part in slices: Cassian's hand flicking upward to catch Nik's wrist mid-lunge; the sound of bone popping; Nik's breath forced out in a sharp, ugly bark.

Cassian's other hand, still empty, flicked behind his back and came up with a little black tube no longer than a thumb, which he jammed into Nik's gut.

There was a hiss, Apollo's mind supplied '*acid? gas?*', but Nik only grunted, staggered, and swung again, landing two quick jabs to Cassian's ribs.

Lyra and Thorin moved as a unit, years of some old drill manifesting in her darting to the left, the dwarf to the right, both angling for the door. Cassian's gaze never left Nik, but his voice came sharp and clear: "Now, please."

The glassworks' rear wall exploded inward in a blur of movement, and three more men, these in mismatched leathers and with the unmistakable aura of professional violence, poured through, blades out.

One caught Lyra by the braid before she could even finish her turn; another leveled a short, ugly crossbow at Thorin and loosed. The bolt passed through the dwarf's shoulder with a noise like a rotten fruit hitting stone.

Apollo saw the world slow: Lyra slamming her elbow into her captor's throat and twisting free; Thorin, blood streaming down his arm, hurling the length of iron pipe at the crossbowman's head.

The pipe collided with a wet, catastrophic sound. The man toppled, but the weapon clattered across the bricks, came to rest by the dog, who was barking itself hoarse.

Cassian spun Nik around, using him as a shield, and advanced on Apollo in three precise steps, Nik's neck in the crook of his elbow.

Nik clawed at the arm but couldn't break the hold, and his face had gone nearly purple.

"Don't bother," Cassian said, voice effortless, not even winded. "The instinct for rescue is noble. But it's not in your blood, is it."

Apollo's mind flickered through all the stories he'd ever heard of men like Cassian: the ones who looked for the break, the moment when pain became a lever instead of a warning.

He wanted to believe he was immune; he wanted to believe he could be the version of himself who did not freeze, did not bargain, did not betray.

He looked at Nik, then at Lyra, her mouth working silently around a curse, arms pinned by the man behind her. "Let him go," Apollo said. The tremor in his voice was less fear than rage, but it was rage with nowhere to go.

Cassian dragged Nik in a lazy half-circle, using his body to nudge the crossbow closer to Apollo's feet. "Pick it up," he ordered.

Chapter 16: Teeth And Silence

Apollo hesitated, then reached for the crossbow. Its wood was still slick with the sweat of the dead man, the bowstring caked with splinters and, he realized, bits of skin.

He held it awkwardly, aiming low, the way city guards did when they really meant to kill.

Cassian's smile barely shifted. "Now," he said, "let's be—"

Lyra twisted sharply, a fast, convulsive motion that snapped her shoulder out of the henchman's grip.

She slammed her heel into his instep, then spun and drove a glass beaker, Gods only knew from where, straight into the side of the man's neck.

It didn't shatter, just punched in and hung there, a blue glass tumor pulsing with arterial spray.

The man clapped a hand to the wound and dropped, knees hitting the brick with an audible crack.

Lyra didn't pause, she shot towards Cassian, her hands wide and flat, fingers curled for the eyes.

Cassian's arm was still across Nik's windpipe. For a split second, his attention flickered: Would he let go and deal with Lyra, or hold his leverage and risk her teeth or nails?

The indecision cost him, Lyra's left hand clawed at his face, raking three red tracks across his cheekbone.

She followed with the heel of her palm, aiming for his nose, but Cassian jerked his head back, twisted Nik between them as a shield.

Apollo saw the opening, just the barest sliver, but enough. He lifted the crossbow, let the sights settle on the tangle of bodies, and fired.

The bolt was heavier than he'd judged; it dipped, punched clean through the meat of Cassian's thigh, and buried itself in the far wall with a thunk.

Cassian reeled, bellowing a string of words in a language Apollo didn't know but understood perfectly.

He lost his grip on Nik, who crumpled over and retched, and for a brief, hallucinatory moment all the violence in the room seemed to invert: Lyra was on top of Cassian, Thorin had pinned the other two Blackhearts beneath the shards of a fallen glass rack, and even the dog was up, worrying at the boot of the last man standing.

Lyra's hands closed on Cassian's throat.

She squeezed with a force Apollo would not have thought possible for so narrow a frame.

Cassian's face flushed, then went white, but he did not thrash or plead, he just stared at Lyra, dead calm, until the pressure made his eyes bulge and his tongue begin to blacken around the edges.

Nik, hunched on the floor, gasped in air like a man climbing out of a grave. He looked up, eyes watering, and managed a hoarse, "Don't kill him."

Lyra didn't relax. "Why not?"

Nik coughed, spat something pink, and wiped his mouth. "He's worth more alive. And he'll talk, if we trade him right."

Cassian's hands fluttered, one knee buckling. Lyra let go, and he crashed to the floorboards, where he lay, fingers scrabbling weakly for the wound in his leg.

The rest of the Blackhearts barely moved, one moaning, the other slumped and twitching under the glass rack.

Lyra gave a last, contemptuous look and wiped her hands on her shirt, the smeared blood bright against the blue dye of her cuffs.

Thorin leaned against the wall, his breathing gone shallow and irregular. The quarrel had left a ragged hole through the meat of his upper arm, and Apollo saw the blood soaking through the linen, arterial red and spreading fast.

The dwarf's posture was rigid, as if he could out-stubborn the agony, but his eyes had narrowed to thin gray slits, and his teeth ground together in a rhythm that matched the slow drum of his pulse.

Nik was already rolling Cassian onto his back and searching his pockets, talking in a low, abusive mutter. "You really thought you'd cart us out in a sack, you bastard?" he said, slapping Cassian's face to keep him from lapsing into blissful shock. "Don't drift. Look at me. You're staying, you son of a whore."

A crash from the rear, Lyra, shoving the bodies into a more defensible heap.

"They might have more coming," she said, voice still steady but now edged with something that tasted like adrenaline. She retrieved the crossbow from the floor, wiped it clean with a rag, and tossed it to Apollo.

"Check the bolts. If they're poisoned, we burn the wound out."

Apollo nodded, but his hands were already on Thorin, dragging him by the collar to the nearest patch of clean floor.

The dwarf's arm hung slack, blood pattering in a sick metronome. Apollo pressed his palm to the entry wound, feeling the heat and the slip of torn muscle. The exit wound was worse, shredded, puckered, and leaking.

Thorin glared up at him, his pupils blown wide. "If you use magic, I'll piss in your tea."

Apollo gritted his teeth. "Then I'll use fire and prayer. Bite down."

He ripped a strip from his own undershirt, balled it, and jammed it into Thorin's mouth. The dwarf bit down so hard Apollo heard enamel snap.

He braced Thorin's shoulder, poured half a bottle of the clear spirits over the wound, and then, moving quickly, before doubt could stall him, pressed the heated blade of a glass knife into the gash. The flesh sizzled, white at the edges, stench of burnt hair and blood.

Thorin's body arched, a spasm of pure, electric protest, but the eyes never left Apollo's face.

He worked fast, the way he had known: cut the necrotic tissue, burn the margin, then pack the wound with cloth and pressure.

The blood slowed, then stopped, the last of it welling bright and angry before clotting over.

Apollo wrapped the arm tight, then reached for the dwarf's wrist.

The pulse was slow, but regular, alive. He waited, feeling Thorin's breathing steady, the trembling tapering off.

When Thorin regained enough sense to spit the bloody rag past Apollo's ear. "Hurts less sober," he rasped, then went limp, sweat pooling in the grooves of his brow.

Apollo blinked, half-expecting a collapse, but the dwarf's breathing hitched and then found a regular, if brittle, beat.

Lyra and Nik had Cassian braced against the sideboard, wrists tied front and back, ankles hobbled with a length of electrical cord scavenged from the lamp.

Cassian's head lolled, the ruined thigh leaking onto the floor, but even with his mouthful of blood, the bastard still managed a leering grin.

Nik knelt in front of him, face gone flat and empty. "Who's your buyer?" he asked.

Cassian's lips parted, showing teeth and a film of red. "Does it matter, Niko? You'd sell your own balls for a week's rations. Why posture now?"

Nik's hand moved faster than Apollo could track, a slap that snapped Cassian's jaw sideways. "We're all dead if you don't talk."

"Good," Cassian said, and smiled wider.

Lyra cut in, her voice low. "He's stalling. Look at his eyes."

Nik reached for the knife, but Apollo, still crouched by Thorin, saw it first: the sudden, deliberate tension in Cassian's jaw.

For an instant, Apollo's mind fumbled for the connection, then Cassian's lips peeled back and the man bit down, hard, tongue protruding between teeth.

There was a wet crunch, a snap, and then a gout of arterial blood. Cassian flailed, hands scrabbling but never quite reaching his own throat.

Nik tried to clamp Cassian's mouth shut, but it was too late. The blood came in pulses, painting Nik's hands, Lyra's shirt, and the warped floorboards.

Cassian's eyes rolled, the blue washed out and empty. He gurgled, coughed, and then, impossibly, laughed, a bubbling, sibilant noise that curdled even the dog, which slunk to the far corner and whined until it found a forgotten onion to gnaw.

Apollo shoved Nik out of the way and forced the man's head back, pinching the tongue remnant and trying to stem the blood.

But Cassian's body convulsed, then relaxed, and the last exhale was a reek of cheap liquor and triumph.

They stared at the corpse, all of them, as if it might get up again, but Cassian was gone, the tongue a shredded pink flag between his teeth.

Nik wiped his face, knuckles white on the knife handle. "Gods," he muttered. "They told suicide jobs on the Blackhearts, but I never believed it."

Lyra grabbed a rag and pressed it into Apollo's palm. "Clean up. We can't stay here." She jerked her chin at the window. "People will have heard."

Chapter 17: What Bleeds, Runs

Apollo numbly wiped his hands, then Thorin's shoulder, then the table, but the blood kept coming, no matter where he looked.

He fought the urge to retch, focusing instead on the line in the grain of the table, the flick of Lyra's hands as she scrubbed down surfaces with salt and water and a stain of blue that would not come out, no matter how she tried.

By the time the room was clean enough to fake innocence, Thorin had levered himself upright, cradling his arm as if it were a new, sullen animal.

The wound seemed to be clotting; Apollo would check it again at dusk, if they lasted that long.

Nik had dragged Cassian's body to the rear, swaddled in a tarp and wedged behind a pile of kiln bricks.

The others, Lyra's blue-tumor corpse, the two crossbowmen, heaved out the back and into the sopping salt marsh, where they would feed the rats and the crows.

Lyra stripped off her shirt, ragged now and dyed from blood to a bruised purple.

She changed into a new one without shame, then found a bottle of something clear and bitter at the bench. She poured three shots, Apollo, Nik, and herself.

None for Thorin, who shook his head, already hating the taste of the healing spirits Apollo would be pouring into him next.

"There's no time," Lyra said, voice low, barely above the hiss of wind against the patched glass. "Cassian came too quick. There's a leak."

Nik leaned back, arms slung over the bench, as if the violence had been a kind of massage.

"So we run. Old roads, like before. Shift south. We can cut past the marsh, take the fishers' path, nobody sane will look for us there. Give it time, the stink of Cassian will bring more trouble to the Blackhearts than to us."

Thorin glared at the floor. "We can't just run. Not unless we torch the shop first. Too many eyes know this place. If they're hunting a healer and his friends, they'll check every dead drop on this side of the city."

Apollo listened, the map Othra had given him unrolling behind his eyelids.

The city beyond the marsh was a web of ruin, old fortress towns and tangled, half-collapsed aqueducts.

To the east: more marsh, then the river, then a blank, fever-stained wilderness said to be haunted by the remnants of the old empire, heretics and fanatics, and things that even hunger would not chase.

He tried to picture running. It didn't feel like survival. It felt like deferral.

"We can't keep moving," he said. "Not forever. They'll catch us, or the world will eat us, or both. We need..." He trailed off, unable to name what he needed. Rest? Pastoral peace? A point?

Lyra's laugh was abrupt. "You sound like a child. The world never lets you stop moving. Unless you prefer to be hunted."

Apollo studied her. The line of her jaw, the practiced stillness. Was that what he looked like, to Othra? To Liska? Just a cutout, learning to pass as alive for as long as necessary.

He pressed the heel of his palm to his eye and waited for the ache to subside. It didn't.

"What did Cassian mean about the buyer not caring if I'm in one piece?" he asked. "You seemed to know."

Nik shrugged, studied his own battered knuckles. "They like their healers, the syndicates. Not for healing people, mind. For breaking them."

He drummed his fingers, as if unsure how much to say. "Half the torturers in the city are failed medics. The rest were just good learners."

Apollo let his breath out through his teeth. "I've never killed such a....man," he said, surprised at the absence of shame in the admission whilst having trouble finding the correct word. "But I'm starting to think there's a first time for everything."

"Not always a choice," Lyra replied. In the morning light, her face looked bleached, almost translucent. "Sometimes you're just the only one left who can hold a blade."

Thorin grunted, then spoke without looking up. "City's falling apart, faster than even the rats can eat it. If you want to be buried in one piece, you leave before sundown. If you don't—" He shrugged, left the rest for silence.

Apollo stood, the movement pulling at the half-healed scars on his chest. "I need five minutes," he said, voice gone quiet. "Then we go."

He stepped into the glassworks' side room, where the world was a haze of blue bottles and the dust of a thousand broken attempts at alchemy.

The dog followed, paws silent on the tile. Apollo went to the window, peeled back the paper shade, and looked out at the marsh.

The towers of Marrowgate already wavered in the thin heat; later, the city would be a hallucination, shimmering in the east as if only hunger and violence could hold it together.

'No prophecies,' he told himself. *'Just the next morning, and the one after.'* The thought was less comforting than he'd hoped.

He knelt, scratched the dog behind the ears. "If you have a name," he said, "now would be a good time to share it."

The dog licked his hand once, then lay down, head resting on its own paws. Maybe it understood. Maybe it was just tired.

He packed what he could: the ointments from Lyra's shelf, a coil of bandage, the half-bottle of clear spirits. His hands were steadier than he'd expected.

He paused at the door, and for a moment he just listened, wind in the reeds, the distant snap of a kiln cooling, the shuffle of his own breath in the hollow of his chest.

Back in the main room, Nik and Lyra had loaded Thorin into a barrow and covered him with a tarp.

The wound had stopped bleeding for now, but a red patch was blooming at the shoulder again, like the memory of fire refusing to be snuffed.

Nik grabbed the heavy end; Lyra manned the front. "We follow the canal," she said. "After a mile, there's a breach in the marsh-wall. We'll lose anyone tailing us in the bog."

Thorin, burrowed under the tarp, muttered, "If you stop for my sake, I'll haunt your children."

Lyra gripped the handles tighter. "We'll be lucky if any of us see a sunrise, let alone breed," she muttered, but she jerked her head at Apollo, and he fell in at the rear.

They kept to the canal as instructed, hugging the banks where the reeds grew shoulder-high and the mud stank of sulfur and old fish.

Apollo's legs ached in a way that felt ancient, as if the weight of every backwards glance had re-settled in his bones. His breath steamed in front of him, and the dog padded behind, tongue lolling, ears flat to the wind.

Within minutes the glassworks was a memory, a faint cough of smoke, then nothing but the bulge of city wall and the long, low moan of wind over water.

At a shallow bend, Lyra slowed the cart and scanned the horizon, then plunged off the main path onto a barely visible trail, more water than land.

Every step was a wager; sometimes the earth held, sometimes his boot sank to the ankle in cold, black silt.

They pushed until the city was a blur behind them, until the only sound was the ragged churn of the barrow's wheel and the wet, tired curse of those who had nothing left but running.

Thorin's breathing, already rough, went ragged and shallow before they'd made half a mile.

The color had drained out of his lips, his fists balled and unballled under the tarp. Apollo said nothing, but kept one hand on the barrow's rim, counting the heartbeats and the slow, bad thrum of heat coming off the wound.

At the first stunted willow that looked like it might stand a wind, Lyra called a halt. "He's leaking again," she said, and didn't wait for argument.

Nik and Apollo wrestled Thorin out and onto the grass.

The dwarf batted at their hands, then tried to sit up, but the left arm hung useless and the right only mopped sweat from his brow.

"Didn't think it'd be the marsh," he managed, voice slurred by blood and something worse, "but I suppose there's poetry in it."

Apollo knelt and pulled the tarp back.

The bandage was soaked through, the blood now almost black in the morning light.

He peeled it away, gently, but not slow enough for sentiment, and found the wound had gone septic at the edges, the flesh ragged and hot. He looked up at Nik, who wiped his face on his sleeve and said, "We need to burn it deeper. No time for finesse."

Lyra produced a flask with a skull etched on the side. "It's a caustic," she said, and popped the stopper. "Stole it from the glassworks' back room. If it doesn't fix you, it'll at least kill whatever's living in there."

Apollo steadied Thorin's shoulder with both hands, and Nik poured a fat, yellow slug of the caustic straight into the wound.

Chapter 18: What the Marsh Doesn't Bury

The reaction was instantaneous: a hiss, a steam of acrid smoke, and Thorin's scream, which didn't fully crest the wet, willow-shadowed air before collapsing into a fit of hacking.

Apollo dropped the flask onto the grass, only distantly aware of the way his hands shook, of the way the chemical burn feathered the edges of his tongue and nose.

His vision tunneled down to Thorin's face, spit-flecked beard, the brow knotted in a hatred higher than pain.

The caustic caught, hissed, and the wound sloughed off old blood and tissue in a runnel of gray-green. It smelled like the end of all things.

Nik held Thorin's arms, one across the chest and another pinning the legs.

Lyra stood back, eyes on the marsh, a single knife held loose behind her thigh, like she expected this scene to summon demons all on its own.

Thorin growled, slammed his head back against the barrow's rim, then barked, "Again!" His voice jerked the dog from its post near the willow roots and made Apollo's own pulse screw tight into his ear canal.

He splashed more caustic, watched the wound foam and collapse inward, then pressed a strip of boiled cloth into the ruined flesh and tied it off. It wasn't medicine, it was a bet, and not even a particularly hopeful one.

He looked up at Nik, who just nodded, no comfort, no words, just the bleak efficiency of men who'd long ago learned how to watch a friend suffer.

Thorin passed out, which was a relief all around. Nik and Apollo bundled him back onto the barrow, Lyra slung another flask, this one unmarked, thank the gods, into Apollo's belt as they moved.

"If we're lucky," she muttered, "he'll make it to noon. If not, at least it'll be on our terms."

The words landed like an old, shared joke, but Apollo heard the edge in them, the side of Lyra that still believed you had to laugh or you'd drown.

They moved faster now, a kind of anti-march, nothing orderly about the way they sneaked the barrow down deer trails and ducked under low limbs.

The marsh got wetter, the ground more treacherous; sometimes the dog disappeared entirely, then reappeared on an islet far ahead, barking once to call them forward or, once, to warn them off.

Apollo followed it, trusting the animal's judgment more than his own.

No one spoke for an hour. The only sounds: the squish and snap of bog underfoot, the rattle of Thorin's uneven breathing, and the distant, ceaseless gossip of crows.

The wind changed at midday, bringing with it the skunky sweetness of burning pitch and, worse, a strange, metallic tang that Apollo recognized immediately.

Blood. Not the fresh-cut, honest sort, but old, clotted, battlefield blood, the type that attracted flies even through a mile of fog.

They crested a rise, the marsh suddenly opening to what had once been a road, a string of black, slumped pylons, a few charred wagons, and at its center, a group of bodies stacked tidy as lumber.

The older ones had been worked over by scavengers; the children and the smaller ones left mostly intact.

The crows perched on the wagon tops, shifting foot to foot and watching the newcomers with the patience of undertakers.

Nik stopped first, set down the barrow, and arched his back until it cracked. "Could be worse," he said. "Could be us."

Apollo scanned the scene.

The bodies were fresh, no more than a day old, by the look of the dried blood and the flies just beginning to settle in.

The uniforms were a mix of city blue and the striped sashes of the Watch, but a few wore the leathers of the Blackhearts; there were others, too, a merchant in a ruined velvet coat and a girl with a pageboy cut, her skin pale as frog's milk.

Lyra stepped up beside Nik, her nose wrinkling. "Grab anything useful," she said. "If we're not moving, we're sitting ducks."

She didn't wait for an argument, just started going through the pockets of the nearest corpse, hands quick and practiced.

Apollo set the barrow's handles down carefully, then approached the merchant.

His fingers found a purse at the man's belt, loaded, heavy, the weight of coins and perhaps a locket.

He took both, ignoring the voice in his head that sounded a little too much like Othra. The merchant's eyes, one hanging half-closed, seemed to accuse him anyway.

He moved to the next: a Watchman, not much older than Liska in the village, jaw slack and nose broken.

Apollo searched the body and turned up a tin whistle, a pair of dice, and a rolled note sealed with a crude wax imprint. He broke the seal. Inside, a scrap of directions, probably a handoff or a bribe to be delivered downriver.

He pocketed the note, moved on.

Nik had found a ring of keys and was testing them on the charred wagon's spare compartment. "Locked," he called. "Bet there's something worth the stink in here."

Lyra passed Apollo a flask without looking at him, her hands still busy at a fallen Blackheart's belt. "Drink," she said, "unless you like the smell of death in your mouth."

He drank; the spirit caught in his throat, made his eyes water. He felt more awake, which was not always a blessing, but it scrubbed the memory of burning flesh from his palate.

The dog waited at the edge of the clearing, tail wagging low, nose working the air with a hunger more honest than anything Apollo felt in himself.

By the time Nik jimmied the wagon's lock, they'd collected a coin purse each, some dried fruit, and a few lengths of clean bandage from the Watch's kit.

Lyra found a bundle of crossbow bolts, untouched by the blood, miraculously, and a half-burnt ledger listing shipments and names.

She passed the ledger to Apollo. "If we need to trade later, this might buy us a night's roof," she said. "Or a way out, if someone likes a story."

Nik swung the wagon door wide. Inside: crates, some splintered, a sack of black barley, and a clutch of glass vials, all sealed and labeled with a sigil Apollo didn't recognize: it was a sunburst, the mark of something.

He reached for one, and for a moment his chest tightened, a premonition of the old life, the old name, before he unstopped it and sniffed. The stuff inside was blue-white, granular, and smelled of almonds and crushed bone.

He took three vials, tucked them inside the wrap of his shirt, and closed the compartment. Nik whistled, impressed. "You know what that is?" he asked, voice low.

"Willow salt, mixed with hemlock," Apollo said. "Painkiller. Or poison, if you're careless."

Nik grinned, and for once, the smile seemed real. "Remind me to stay on your good side."

They regrouped by the barrow, the dog nosing at Thorin's legs, and Lyra scanning the horizon with the lazy vigilance of a sniper.

"We need to keep moving," she said. Her eyes were flat but not cold; the violence hadn't changed her posture, only condensed it.

Apollo nodded, and together they left the killing ground behind, the crows resuming their feast as soon as the last footfall faded.

They made camp at the edge of a ruined aqueduct, the arches collapsed, the debris forming an island above the reach of the marsh.

Lyra started a fire with a block of resin and a twist of dry grass, the flame catching with a suddenness that made Apollo flinch.

The sun, if it could be called that in this place, hung low and red, the sky gone the color of old bruises.

Nik found a tin of sardines and passed it around.

Nobody asked for more than a taste. Thorin slept, his breath uneven, the bandages at his shoulder already stiff with crusted blood.

Apollo checked the wound twice, then a third time, feeling the heat radiate through his fingertips and up his arm, into the core of him, a warning, or maybe an invitation.

They ate in silence until the last of the light was gone. Then Nik and Lyra took turns on watch, the dog splitting the time between dozing in Apollo's lap and patrolling the perimeter with a seriousness that bordered on the devout.

Apollo waited until the others were settled, then knelt beside Thorin, the dwarf's face slack in the firelight.

The skin at his temple was wet with sweat, the beard dark with fever. He peeled back the bandage: the burn had stopped the rot, but the damage was deep, the muscle shredded and slow to heal.

At this rate, Thorin would be dead by morning, or worse, alive but missing half his arm.

He looked at his hands, at the fine tremor in the left, the blue veins webbing the inside of his wrist.

He pressed his fingers to the wound, feeling for the old, golden current, the aether, buried now beneath layers of exhaustion and mortal cowardice.

He'd sworn to leave it, not to poke at the fire lest the gods above or below know he still remembered how.

But nobody in the world was watching; nobody cared.

Chapter 19: Salt, Smoke, and Mage

"Gods damn it," Apollo muttered, but under his breath so no one, especially the gods, would hear.

As he pressed his fingers to the skin. A tremor ran up his arm, not the weakness of hunger, but a warning: the aether inside him was low, a candle burned down to its own wax.

He closed his eyes. It was impossible to recall the old rituals, the right order of words, the way the power used to flood him with nothing more than the memory of a sunbeam.

Now, it was effort. Now, it hurt.

He bit his tongue and focused. At first there was only the pulse of his own blood, the oil and salt of Thorin's sweat.

Then, slowly, something opened: a twin to the wound, but inside Apollo's head.

A matching rawness, a hunger that called and answered at the same time.

He reached for it, let the trickle of light run down the length of his arm, through his fingers, into the heat of the wound.

Thorin jerked, a low animal sound caught in his throat, but did not wake.

The flesh around the cut tightened, the blackness receded, and the fever's heat dropped by half, Apollo could feel it, the way a wound feels when the scab finally takes and the pain becomes memory instead of prophecy.

It was done in seconds, but cost years. Apollo staggered, bile in his mouth, the world a rinse of blue-white and then nothing at all.

When he woke, the moon had set. The only light was the slow, pink creep of sunrise, and the pain in his own bones, a debt he'd borrowed from Thorin and now owed to himself.

The dog nuzzled at his hand, mouth wet, eyes anxious. "I'm fine," Apollo whispered, though he didn't believe it.

Thorin's breathing was normal. The bandage was crusted, but the flesh beneath no longer glistened, and the veins ran healthy and blue, not the angry red of poison.

Lyra sat up, scrubbed her face, and glanced over at the dwarf.

"Still alive?" she asked, voice hoarse.

Apollo nodded. "He'll make it."

Nik rolled over, half-smiling even before his eyes opened. "You're a better healer than liar, Lio."

Apollo shrugged, not trusting himself to words.

They packed up camp. Nik saw to the cart, Lyra checked the perimeter, and Apollo fumbled with the last of the bandages, hands clumsy but steady.

He caught Thorin's eye as the dwarf woke, the pale blue of it wary but, just for a moment, grudgingly grateful.

"Don't fuss," Thorin said, voice no softer than before, but with less of the old hate behind it.

Apollo grunted, kept wrapping. "Next time, try to dodge," he said.

Thorin snorted, but kept his arm still.

They ate what was left of the sardines, washed it down with marsh water that Lyra strained through her sleeve.

The dog licked the tin clean, then trotted ahead, nose to the wind.

They walked with the city to their backs, the marsh stretching wide and flat, the air sharp and cold enough to clear the head.

By midday they reached the first hill, a knob of rock and old blasted trees, the road little more than the memory of a path.

Lyra called a halt. Nik scouted ahead, Thorin dozed in the cart, and Apollo sat, arms wrapped round his knees, letting the wind dry the sweat from his hair.

He was so tired he almost missed the figure coming up the far side of the hill.

It was a man, or something passing for it. He wore a robe the color of cat piss, spattered with stains new and old, and a hat with a brim so wide it doubled as a shield.

His gait was lopsided, as if one leg was slightly longer than the other, and he carried a stick topped with a fist-sized lump of amber shot through with veins of green.

Lyra squinted at the newcomer, then muttered, "Shit." She motioned Nik back, who circled round and crouched at the ready, one hand on the hilt of a knife.

The man stopped ten paces away and leaned on his stick. His face was narrow and pale, the kind of skin that never saw sunlight; the eyes were the yellow of old candle grease.

He smiled, showing teeth sharpened to points, each one capped with a line of gold.

"Travelers!" he called, voice high and a little unbalanced. "Greetings and felicitations! Might I share your fire, oh, but you haven't one. Economical, yes. Yes. Are you headed east, or are you lost and too proud to say it?"

Apollo said nothing, watching as the man's gaze flickered over each of them like a candle flame. The magician for what else could he be?

Wore a dozen pouches, each sewn with a different sigil, and his boots, if they were boots, were stitched from the hides of animals Apollo couldn't name.

"We're headed east," Nik said, the lie so smooth it almost sounded like a question.

The newcomer grinned wider. "Then we're kin for a time. The road's not safe. Something's eating the Watch patrols, and the Blackhearts have started putting heads on sticks. Bracing for those with an appetite for novelty, but I prefer company."

He sat, without waiting for permission, and drew from the folds of his robe a battered flask.

He took a swig, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and offered it around. Lyra took it, sniffed, and passed it to Nik, who drank.

The magician watched Apollo, eyes bright. "You're the healer, aren't you?"

Apollo stiffened. "Why do you say that?"

The man wagged his fingers, as if testing the air. "Old news runs fast on the roads. Word is, someone in Marrowgate paid a fortune for a healer, and someone else paid more to see him dead. I'm just a humble traveler, but I know a mark when I see one."

Apollo didn't reply. The magician seemed to find this delightful.

"My name's Torgo," he said, as if that explained anything. "I collect stories, stray cats, and the occasional debt of gratitude. You can think of me as a magician, but that word's lost most of its meaning."

He eyed Thorin, who had roused and was staring at Torgo with a look of deep, philosophical disgust.

"Dwarf, you look like you could use a drink," Torgo observed.

"Don't trust any liquid that comes from a man in a hat like that," Thorin said.

Torgo laughed, a peal that rose and fell like a badly-tuned bell. "Wise! I respect that." He produced from a pocket a handful of sugared nuts and began eating them, each crunch loud in the quiet.

They sat like this for a while, the sky gone white and the wind running colder. Torgo told stories, some about Marrowgate, some about the salt cities to the south, some about the gods and why none of them answered prayers anymore.

He was good at it, and Apollo found himself listening despite the exhaustion, or maybe because of it.

At dusk, they moved on together, the magician slotting himself into the group as if he'd always belonged.

He walked beside Apollo, whistling tunelessly, sometimes muttering to the stick, sometimes to himself.

"You're not from around here," Torgo said eventually, voice low. "You don't move like the rest. Old injury?"

Apollo shrugged. "Something like that."

Chapter 20: The Collector of Broken Things

"You didn't answer my question," Torgo said, picking at a strip of lichen stuck to the sleeve of his robe. "You ever notice how people who've been hurt walk like they know a secret?"

Apollo kept his head down, using the motion of picking their way through the last of the boulder field to avoid the man's stare.

'Of course he's noticed. He's made a career of noticing.' The magician's nails were bitten down to the quick, and the lines along his mouth hinted at years spent smiling where it didn't belong.

"I'm not interested in stories about me," Apollo muttered. He had meant the edge in his voice to cut, but it came out blunt, almost tired.

Torgo shrugged, unconcerned. "Then let's trade. Quid pro quo. You tell me why the gods went silent, and I'll tell you what chews through Watchmen like they're bread crust."

Apollo nearly tripped on a root, caught himself. He'd known Torgo was lying about being "just a traveler" the minute he saw the man's wrists, scarred not just from burns, but

from years of binding with the kind of ritual cord used by magicians who served at temples rather than in back-alley sleight-of-hand.

The fact that Torgo wore his old affiliations the way most men wore a hangover, obvious to anyone who cared to look, made Apollo nearly like him.

He said nothing. He wasn't sure if it was stubbornness or self-preservation.

Torgo whistled, not quite a tune. "I met a priest in the next town over. Sallow fellow, smelled like lamp oil. He said the gods went quiet after the last moon shadowed its own light. You believe that?"

"No," Apollo said, too fast. "The gods never outright vanish. They just get better at hiding."

Torgo cackled, the sound bouncing oddly off the bare stones. "If you're hiding, you're scared. What's a god got to be scared of?"

Apollo shrugged, unwilling to answer. He wondered if Torgo even knew who he was. He doubted it. Whatever past Apollo wore now, it didn't show on the surface. At least not to anyone human.

Lyra called from up ahead, voice sharp as flint: "We cut cross-country here. There's a hunting cabin in the scrub, half a mile. Shelter for the night."

She didn't look at Torgo when he passed her by; she acted as if the magician was another bad patch of rain that had simply attached itself to the travelers.

The cabin, when they reached it, was more ruin than refuge, half the roof gone, the hearth suffocated in old tallow smoke, but the bones of the place were dry and the stone still held some memory of warmth.

Nik scouted through the perimeter, eyes narrowed, while Lyra cleared a space near the fireplace. Thorin, mostly upright now, grunted as they settled him onto a roll of old sacking.

Torgo set about making himself useful, hands dancing through the pouches at his waist, pulling flints and dry shavings, a handful of dead bees he tossed in with the kindling.

The fire caught easily; the bees snapped and sparkled in the heat. "Best fuel for the cold," he said to no one.

Apollo wondered if the man ever stopped speaking, or if his own voice was the only company he'd ever really kept.

Nik slumped against the wall, opening and closing his left hand as if testing the ghost of the fight. He didn't speak for a long while. Lyra busied herself at the door, knife in hand, whittling a point onto a slat of old wood.

Torgo leaned close to Apollo, one elbow on his knee. "You're wasting," he said quietly. "Whatever is in you, it's running out. Fast."

Apollo looked at him, surprised by the absence of mockery in the words.

"If you had more, you'd have healed him already," Torgo nodded toward Thorin. "Full, not half. I can feel it when you walk."

Apollo blinked. "So? What is it to you?"

Torgo shrugged, eyes suddenly flat. "Just that I know what it's like. To be a cracked vessel." He drew a thumb across the rim of his cup, tracing the chip so it caught the light.

Silence. Apollo let the man have his little metaphor.

Lyra returned, planting the sharpened wood upright by the hearth. "We'll take watches," she said. "Nik first, then Torgo. Torgo, if you drift, I'll gut you before breakfast."

Torgo splayed his hands, grinning. "I don't sleep. Easier to keep watch that way."

Apollo stretched out by the fire, feeling every tendon, every ugly pulse under his skin. He looked at Thorin, who had managed to doze, a soft snore vibrating his beard.

The wound was better. Not perfect, but better. Apollo allowed himself to feel...not pride, exactly, but a sliver of old satisfaction.

He closed his eyes, letting the warmth of the fire lull the heaviness from his chest, and for a breath or two he slept the sleep of someone who hadn't earned it.

—

Sometime before dawn, he woke to the smell of burning sugar and the low drone of Torgo's voice.

The magician was talking to himself, or perhaps to the stick, which now glowed faintly at its amber tip.

The light threw odd shapes on the walls, snakes and birds and things that didn't belong in a world built by men.

Nik was out cold in the corner, one hand on the hilt of a borrowed dagger. Lyra, ever the sentinel, was upright against the door, eyes open but probably not seeing.

Apollo sat up. "What do you want?" he asked, more from fatigue than curiosity.

Torgo didn't turn. "I like to meet those like myself, as near as I ever get to kin." He plucked the air with two fingers. "You know what it's like? The hunger that comes when you don't do what you were made for?"

Apollo pulled the blanket tighter. "What are you?"

Torgo considered. "A collector, in the end. Of broken things. Fragments of power. Aether shards, mostly, but also stories. Sometimes, though, I wonder if they're not the same."

He looked over, iris gone flat and reptilian in the false sunrise of his staff. "Once, I had enough energy to burn a city to the ground with a word. Now it's all I can do to keep the cold away from my bones."

He punctuated this with a laugh, dry as moth wings.

Apollo found himself smiling, against his will. "You could be lying."

"Of course I could." Torgo winked. "But 'lie' is just another word for 'story we haven't agreed on yet.'"

The fire guttered, and for a moment the only thing alive in the room was the dog, tail occasionally thumping against Thorin's side.

"You know," Torgo continued, in a voice pitched just for Apollo, "if you wanted to live, you'd have stayed in Marrowgate. Someone wanted you enough to pay a bounty. Not many people get offered a future, even a broken one."

"I don't want to work for killers," Apollo said.

Torgo shook his head. "Everyone works for killers, lad. The only choice is whether you bleed for them or outlive them." He reached into a pouch and drew something out, a coin, but not any Apollo had seen.

It was the size of a thumbnail, gold hammered thin as a leaf, a sun sigil stamped on one side and a single, staring eye on the other.

Torgo tossed it to Apollo, who surprised himself by catching it. "For luck," Torgo said. "Or for memory."

Apollo turned the coin over. The sun was familiar, troublingly so, there was something about the shape of the rays, the way the metal bent light. He tucked it away. It felt like an old friend, or maybe a warning.

Before he could ask more, he heard the creak of Lyra's boots and the scrape of her knife on stone. "Time to go," she said. "Road's worse in the daylight. If Watch or Blackhearts catch us, we're done."

They packed in silence. Even the dog seemed subdued, moving with a reluctance that made Apollo suspect it had been mistreated, maybe even in a past as rough as his own.

They left the cabin behind, four and a half bodies moving at different speeds, none of them quite whole, but together, at least for now.

At the fork in the road, Torgo stopped. "I'll take the north path," he said. "There's work for me in the salt cities, and a peach brandy waiting if I can keep my own skin intact."

He turned to Apollo, eyes clear for the first time. "You keep to the high ground, friend. The world gets thinner the higher you go, but the stories get better."

Then he was gone, his stick tapping irregular beats against the hardpan until even the echoes faded.

Apollo shaded his eyes and watched the sun rise through the haze, yellow and mean as a toothache. *'Better to walk as a broken thing than not at all,'* he thought, and let the path decide his next step.

"Which way, Lio?" Nik asked, looking not at the horizon, but back at Apollo.

"East," Apollo said. "Always east."

They set out, the dawn at their backs, the world waiting to see what they would make of it.

He didn't look back, but he heard, or thought he heard, Torgo's voice on the wind, telling another story. Not a new one, but his own.

And for the first time in a long while, Apollo let himself believe that not every path had to end with someone bleeding in the dark.

Some just kept going, into the morning, step by uneven step.