

The Golden Fool

#Chapter 21: The Rite of the Hollow Temple - Read The Golden Fool Chapter 21: The Rite of the Hollow Temple

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The temple had been built by men who believed that stone could outlast the memory of famine, of flood, of the old gods' indifference.

Its spires showed first, punching through last year's fire-killed scrub like the bones of a forgotten beast.

Even from half a mile away, with the sun behind them and the wind at their backs, Apollo could feel the place's hunger.

He did not slow. If anything, he kept a dogged, childlike pace, willing the others onward with the stubbornness of a man who knew there was nothing behind them but bad weather and recent ghosts.

Nik noticed it first. He pointed with his chin, the rest of him too busy shifting most of Thorin's half-dead weight up the slope. "Is that a watch post, or am I seeing things?"

"Temple," Lyra said, not even pretending to guess. She'd walked this part of the world before; her body settled into a wary, animal readiness as they drew near. "Old one, maybe from the time before the empire. Doubt there's anyone left inside." But she did not speak as if she believed it.

Thorin, awake for the first time since the marsh, squinted against the wind. "Used to be a shrine at the crossroads. That one's bigger. Wrong shape for a church, though." His voice was hollowed out, but steady.

Apollo watched the silhouette of the building resolve itself: walls blackened by rain, roof patched with something that might have been hides or slate.

A set of flags hung listless along the parapet, color bled out by decades of sun.

The closer they came, the more the air changed, denser, tainted by a sweetness he could not name. The dog went tense at his ankle, hackles up, but did not whine.

He tried not to read symbolism into the place. Tried not to see in its sullen arches the memory of a different temple, one built by his own hands, ruined by his own stupidity.

He failed. Every step toward it was a step toward the past.

They passed the outer wall, crumbled, more suggestion than barrier, and found the courtyard littered with the leavings of travelers less desperate than themselves: bundles of sticks, half-burnt candles, a wax doll impaled on a nail. "Offerings," Lyra said. "Or warnings."

Nik set the barrow down and stretched his back until it cracked. "If there's shelter, I'll risk the gods' disapproval," he said, not bothering with the usual sarcasm. The air was too thick for it.

They approached the main door, battered wood rimmed in rust and old blood. It stood open, not wide, but enough for a body to slip through if it wanted.

The inside was dark, riven by shafts of colorless light. Apollo scanned the entryway, saw the shadow-shapes huddled along the pews, and felt the pressure in his teeth, familiar, but wrong.

It was the same sensation he'd had in Marrowgate, that night with Cassian and the Blackhearts: a slow, deliberate squeezing of the world's edges, a charge that made his bones go hollow and his vision sharpen to a knife point.

But this was older, more practiced. It reached across the distance and pressed on him, waiting to be recognized.

Lyra stopped just inside, voice low. "There's people," she said. "A lot of them." She pointed to the altar, where a cluster of figures knelt, heads bowed, hands raw from prayer or penance. The scent of old incense was drowned by the sharper tang of sweat and unwashed skin.

Nik grunted. "Devotees?"

Lyra shook her head. "They're not praying. They're just...waiting."

Apollo saw it, too: the slackness in the limbs, the glazed, hungry way the nearest face watched the dust motes swirl in the light.

Not sick, exactly, not the fever that had eaten through Marrowgate, but something deeper, a rot that was more of the soul than the flesh.

He stepped past Lyra, ignoring her hiss of warning, and walked down the center aisle. The echoes of his boots came back strange, elongated.

The nearest of the faithful turned to look at him, and the movement was so slow it barely qualified as alive.

Their eyes were wrong. The irises had leached to a muddy gray, the pupils shot through with filaments of white. When one blinked, the lid closed the wrong direction, bottom to top, like a curtain.

He swallowed, counted the faces. Twelve at the altar. Four more scattered through the nave. All were dressed in the same dirty white, the hems of their robes caked with mud and, in places, something darker.

A priest stood at the altar, back to the room, hands clasped in front. His cowl hid most of his head, but the skin at the nape was smooth and unmarked by age. He spoke, voice clear as glass. "Are you here for redemption, or for a place to hide?"

Apollo stopped at the first row of pews. The others filed in behind him, Lyra now openly gripping her knife, Nik with one hand on the barrow and the other holding Thorin upright.

The dwarf's face had gone sallow and cold, but his eyes were awake, even lucid.

"I'm told you offer sanctuary," Apollo said, the formal words feeling strange in his mouth.

The priest turned, revealed a face so ordinary that Apollo flinched; there was something about the mouth, the way it pinched at the corners, that made the whole head seem unfinished.

The eyes were pale blue, rimmed in red, no sign of the earlier mutation—but the gaze was as empty as the echo of a hollow bell.

"We offer absolution," the priest said, stepping down from the altar. His robe was immaculate from the knees up, but the hem trailed behind him, stained in a way that suggested years of crawling or worse. "If you seek safety, you must first be cleansed. The world outside is sick, here, we are made new each day."

Lyra snorted, but the sound died in the hush. "We just need a roof for a night," she said.

"All who enter are welcome," the priest replied, "but to stay, you must join us in the rite. It is our one rule."

Chapter 22: Drink the Rite, Bleed the Dawn

Apollo felt the pressure in his head spike, a drumbeat that matched the priest's cadence. He wondered if anyone else could feel it. Nik looked bored, Lyra wary; Thorin had closed his eyes, lips moving as if in silent calculation.

"What is the rite?" Apollo asked, surprised by the steadiness of his own voice.

The priest's smile was a wound. "You drink, and you are forgiven." He gestured to the altar, where a set of clay cups waited in a careful line. Behind the cups, a basin brimming with a thick, iridescent liquid.

'Don't do it,' Apollo's instinct spat, but he moved forward anyway, compelled by the logic of the place, the certainty that whatever this was, it would not let them leave unmarked.

He reached the altar, looked down at the cups. The liquid inside smelled of honey and vinegar, and something else, something that reminded him of the blood that ran in the old temples, the taste of iron and dusk.

He took the nearest cup, weighed it in his hand. "Does it matter which one?"

The priest smiled again, wider this time. "They all lead to the same place."

Apollo turned, looked at his companions. Lyra's expression was pure refusal; Nik's, blank calculation; Thorin's, a resignation that bordered on relief.

He brought the cup to his lips. The liquid was thick, almost gelatinous. It clung to his mouth, coated his tongue, slid down the throat with a slow, deliberate heat.

The taste was not entirely unpleasant, but it lived in the back of the throat like a memory of smoke.

He set the cup down, wiped his mouth. The priest watched, expectant.

"Now what?" Apollo asked.

The priest bowed his head. "Now you are one of us, for as long as you wish."

Apollo waited, but nothing happened. No lights, no rapture. Just a steady, deepening sense of being watched, not by the priest, or the acolytes, but by the stones, the air, the memory of the building itself.

He turned to the others. "It's safe," he said, though he wasn't sure what he meant.

The priest pointed to a side chamber. "You may rest there. In the morning, you will understand more."

They filed into the chamber, which had once been a vestry but was now a cold, stone cell with a straw mattress and a basin of water. Apollo lay down, closed his eyes, and waited for the world to catch up.

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He dreamed of the old gods: a parade of faces, all wearing his own features, but each twisted by a different version of regret.

They marched through a field of white flowers, which withered as he passed, curling into black ash.

At the center of the field stood a well, its water thick and red. He lowered a cup, drank, and felt the fire blossom in his chest, spreading outward until every nerve was alight.

He woke to the sound of Lyra whispering. "He's burning up," she said. "Look, sweat, everywhere."

Nik's face hovered above, shadowed and uncertain. "You want me to hold him down?"

"No," Lyra said. "He's not thrashing. Just...glowing." She sounded awed, or maybe exhausted.

Apollo tried to sit up, but his arms were leaden. He could see the world through a filter of gold and blue, as if someone had poured sky into his eyes. The pain was gone; the hunger, gone; but in their place was a new, clean emptiness.

He looked at his own hands. The skin was the same, but the line of old scars had faded, replaced by a faint lattice of gold veins visible just under the surface.

He coughed, and the sound echoed like a shout. The dog, sleeping at the foot of the mattress, looked up, ears cocked, then settled back, unconcerned.

Lyra pressed a hand to his forehead. "That priest drugged you," she said, but she didn't move her hand away.

Apollo shook his head, slow. "No. It's not a drug. It's..." He couldn't finish.

Lyra watched him, eyes narrow. "You're not making sense."

He tried to explain, but the words refused to come. He felt a memory, sharp and precise, of the moment he'd drank the cup: the way the priest's face had split, just for an instant, into hundreds of overlapping expressions, rage, hope, boredom, hunger.

He remembered the taste of the liquid, the way it seemed to recognize him.

He let his head fall back. "We need to leave," he said. "Now."

Nik grinned. "You partying already, Lio? You just got some color in your cheeks."

Apollo set his jaw. "We need to go. It's not safe here. Not for us, not for anyone."

Lyra looked at Nik, then back to Apollo. She nodded. "Say the word. We can be out in five minutes."

Apollo tried to stand. The world pulsed; the gold lines in his arms glowed, then dimmed. But he did not collapse. He found his balance, and when he looked in the mirror, a cracked, fogged thing above the washbasin, he saw something that was not quite his own reflection. It was more alive, more cruel, more awake.

He turned to Lyra, voice flat with certainty. "Get the others. We leave now, or not at all."

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Outside, the temple had changed. The acolytes now stood in neat rows, blocking the exit with a patient, impersonal menace.

Their faces were identical, the same unfinished features, the same hungry eyes. The priest stood at the head of the line, hands folded as if in prayer.

"You drank," the priest said. "You belong."

Apollo felt the pressure again, stronger this time. He let it fill him, then pushed back, not with magic, but with the stubbornness of a man who had spent his life resisting every easy answer.

"We're leaving," he said. "Try and stop us."

The priest smiled, but it was the smile of a man who had never once considered losing.

The priest's smile surfaced and froze, translucent as ice on graveyard water. The air inside the nave thickened, pressure, but not the ordinary kind.

Apollo knew this sensation: the hush before a lightning strike, the moment when a crowd at the games leans in to see the blade drop.

He saw nothing on the priest's face, but the acolytes behind him began to shiver, their pale hands fisting and unfisting at their sides.

The priest's arms rose. His cowl fell back. The skin underneath was already seaming, bubbles forming along the jaw, the lips splitting open to show a second, row of teeth, childlike and crowded.

He spoke a single word. It was not from any tongue Apollo had heard, but the syllables were shaped like hunger, and every acolyte in the room doubled over, retching threads of white mucus onto the floor.

Their bodies spasmed, then went rigid, then stood again as if nothing had happened, except for the small, wet heap left behind at each set of feet.

Apollo reached for the power under his own skin, felt it answer in a slow, reluctant bloom. Not enough. Never enough.

He braced for the priest's attack, but it was Torgo, absurd, hat askew Torgo, who darted past Lyra and hurled a fistful of something blue and fizzing into the priest's open mouth.

The priest gagged, bulged. The front of his robe puckered, then split.

He doubled over, hands clawing at the altar until his nails snapped off and blood, thick, not red but dark as rust, splattered the basin.

What he vomited was not liquid, but a twist of something like rope, studded with teeth and tiny, frantic fingers. The air reeked of copper and burnt honey.

Chapter 23: Priest of Lost Light

Lyra, knife in each hand, circled wide and pulled Thorin back. Nik went low, left hand shielding his eyes from the spray. The acolytes surged forward, arms extended, their fingers blackening and elongating as they moved.

The priest convulsed again. His spine rose, arched almost to the point of breaking, and the flesh at his shoulders rippled up, splitting the skin like a jacket too tight for its owner.

New arms unfolded, twitching and jointless, slick with birth-slime and studded with pale claws.

His head, now half-molten by Torgo's powder, twisted 180 degrees, then another 90, so that the mouth faced Apollo directly, the teeth clicking and gnashing in a sick, mechanical rhythm.

The acolytes wailed, but their voices blended into a single, choral whine.

They did not attack as a mob, but as a design: two flanking Lyra, two for Nik, one, heavier, stitched with old muscle, lunging for Thorin, who could barely stay upright.

Torgo raised his stick and swept it in a wide, showman's arc; a fan of orange fire stitched the air and caught the leftmost acolyte full in the chest.

It burned like paper, crumpling inward, the smoke already thick with the promise of more.

Apollo gauged the distance: three meters to the priest, two to the nearest acolyte. He had no weapon.

He had only the ghost of a song, the lattice of gold just under his skin. He sang, not with his throat, but with the bones behind it.

A single, piercing note, thin as a razor.

The acolyte nearest him staggered, hands to its ears. Its face was melting, the eyes sloughing downward in slow, viscous tears.

Another step, and it collapsed, kneeling, then vomiting up a fluttering cloud of black moths that evaporated before they touched the ground.

Apollo felt it in his jaw: the note cost him a molar, maybe two, but it worked.

Lyra's fight was ugly and fast, one acolyte went down with a knife in the eye, the other caught her by the braid and nearly took out her throat.

Nik intercepted, breaking its jaw with the hilt of a pew candlestick, then twisting the head until the neck splintered with a wet pop.

The body kept moving, arms windmilling, but Lyra swept its legs and pinned it down with a knife through the wrist. It shrieked, the sound like a child's first breath.

The priest had finished his transformation. He stood twice his original size, spine bowed by new bone, limbs reworked into a grotesque symmetry—three arms per side, all ending in claws. His robe was an afterthought, the flesh beneath it changing color as if in anticipation of the next blow.

He reached for Apollo. The arm extended impossibly, fingers splayed for the whole width of the nave.

Apollo ducked, barely, but the claw caught his shoulder and flung him ten feet down the aisle. He landed hard, vision blacking for half a second.

Torgo, cackling, lofted another handful of blue powder at the priest. This time the monster dodged, the powder hissing against the floor, eating through stone.

A single drop splashed onto an acolyte's bare foot, and the flesh popped and vanished, leaving only a stump and a cloud of hissing vapor.

Lyra and Nik worked in tandem now, clearing the acolytes with a brutality that bordered on play.

The dog, a surprise to everyone, maybe even itself, had found a bite on the Achilles of the slowest, dragging it off-balance long enough for Nik to finish the job.

The priest lunged again, but this time Apollo was ready. He called up the gold in his veins, let it flood the ends of his fingers, and as the claw reached for him, he jabbed the palm straight into the center of its slick, jointed hand.

The effect was instant: the gold flared, the hand shriveled, and for a moment the priest howled with a voice that was all the lost children of the city, the hunger of every winter, the sound of famine as it learns to speak.

Apollo reeled, every nerve singing with aftershock, but he did not pass out.

The priest reeled, too. Two of its arms hung limp, dead as rope. The face, what was left of it, bore a look of recognition, Apollo's own, he realized.

The thing had recognized him. It knew exactly who, or what, it was fighting.

It spoke, something that was almost a word: "Sun—" but the rest was lost as Nik hurled the remains of the candlestick through its eye.

The priest staggered back, then toppled, the body spasming, the claws gouging long, shallow cuts in the stone.

The remaining acolytes scrambled, some for the door, others to the ruined altar, but only a few made it before Lyra and Torgo finished them.

Silence, finally, except for Thorin's ragged breathing and the drip-drip-drip of blood, or whatever took its place, from the altar to the stone floor.

Apollo leaned against the first pew, panting, the gold in his arms gone cold. He did not feel victorious. He felt empty, as if the transformation had stolen something from him, too.

Lyra approached, blood streaking her hands and face. "You alive?"

He nodded. "I think so."

Torgo dusted his hands and surveyed the carnage with a craftsman's pride. "Could have gone worse."

Nik spat, then squinted at Thorin, who had slumped against the wall, his face ashen but his eyes focused. "You dead, old man?"

Thorin grimaced. "Not yet. But I'll haunt you proper if you leave me behind." His voice was steadier than Apollo expected. The dwarf would survive, at least another day.

Apollo looked at the remains of the priest. The body was already dissolving, the flesh unspooling into a froth of white and red that soaked into the cracks between the stones.

He looked to the altar, to the cups, to the basin still brimming with the iridescent liquid.

He touched the gold in his wrist. It pulsed, once, and he understood: the rite was not a poison. It was a catalyst.

The temple wanted to make him into something, to use him as a vessel for its own memory, its own hunger.

He turned to the others. "We need to be gone before the next group arrives."

Nik nodded, but Lyra lingered. "What did you see, when you touched it?" she asked, voice flat.

Apollo hesitated, then shrugged. "Myself. But not quite." He tried a smile, but it cracked.

They left the temple behind. The dog trotted at Apollo's heel, tongue lolling. As they passed the last of the boundary stones, the sun broke through the clouds, just for a heartbeat, and the gold in Apollo's arms flickered in the light.

He ignored it, and kept walking.

But he knew, now, that it would never leave him. Not entirely.

Chapter 24: The Howl and The Hunger

The sun at their backs cast long, hysterical shadows, and the open plain beyond the temple was nothing but grass and the faint, untrustworthy promise of a spring thaw.

They kept moving, silent except for the dog's ragged panting and the drag of Thorin's bad foot through the crusted snow.

Apollo felt the gold in him settle to a slow, sullen burn, the lines of it seeping up his wrists and into the webbing of his hands.

It showed only in the corners of his vision, but he was aware of every shimmer, every pulse, as if the veins themselves had learned to speak.

They passed the ruined wall, then a skeleton of orchard, the trees hunched and half-collapsed under the weight of a winter that would not admit to ending.

The dog stopped, sniffed the air, then whined. Lyra tensed, shoulders gone rigid under the battered coat.

She said nothing, but Apollo could feel the warning radiate off her skin.

Nik broke the silence first. "If we put enough miles between us and that place, maybe the stars'll forget," he said, but the words sounded borrowed from another life.

They skirted a copse of dead willows, the ground beneath spongy and treacherous.

At the heart of the grove, Apollo saw the remains of a fire, recent, judging by the warmth still venting from the blackened pit.

He knelt, touched the ash, and the gold in his fingertips sparked, just faintly.

"Someone else is close," he said, voice pitched low.

Nik nodded, and for once did not shrug it off with a joke. "We run?"

Lyra checked behind them, then up the low ridge to the east. "No cover. If they're following, they'll see us either way."

"Who?" Thorin asked, voice still notched to the old stubbornness, but thinner than before. He spat, then wiped his mouth with the back of a trembling hand.

Lyra did not answer. She just shifted her grip on the knife and started walking faster.

Apollo followed, every muscle tight with the sense-memory of pursuit. The gold in his arms hummed, almost eager; he willed it quiet, but it was like trying to un-remember pain.

Two hills later, the wind changed. The dog whined again, then bolted for the low ditch to their right, vanishing in a tangle of last year's grass.

Nik and Thorin ducked after it, but Apollo hung back, scanning the horizon. He saw nothing, no movement, no hint of the not-quite-human eyes from the nave.

But the hunger was there, a gravity that bent every thought toward the certainty of being watched.

He risked a glance back at the temple. The sky above it was clear, but a faint, white haze crept from the open nave, fanning out in a wedge that pointed straight toward them.

He caught up to the others, breath gone brittle in his throat. "They're coming," he said. "I can feel it."

Nik grinned, but the show of teeth was for the cold, not the joke. "How many?"

Apollo closed his eyes, listening for the line of pressure just under the wind. "A lot. Maybe everyone who was left."

Lyra spat, then shouldered Thorin upright. "We go for the river," she said. "No one follows past the water. That's what the old stories said."

Nik barked a laugh. "Yeah, and look what believing stories got us."

But he started running anyway.

They reached the river at dusk, the banks swollen and angry with meltwater. The ice at the edge was thin enough to crack under a child's weight, let alone four battered fugitives and a dog. Lyra stopped first, scanned for a crossing. "Upstream," she said. "There's a footbridge. Or what's left of one."

Apollo felt the hunger behind them multiplying, every step drawing the white haze closer. He looked at his hands, at the gold crawling under the skin, and wondered if it would be enough.

At the footbridge, three timbers, none the same length, Nik went first, testing the planks with a stomp, then inching across, one slat at a time.

Thorin next, then Lyra, then Apollo last, the dog hovering at his heel. The plank bowed, creaked, then held. He was halfway across when something shrieked behind them.

He looked back. The haze at the edge of the woods had coalesced into figures: white-robed, faces peeled flat by the wind, each mouth open and black, each pair of eyes shining with the same joyless hunger as the priest's final face. There were dozens, maybe more.

He ran, the plank bouncing under his feet, and reached the far side just as the first of the cultists hit the river.

They did not pause; they waded in, shrieking, the ice splintering under their weight, arms reaching, hands blackening and stretching in the cold.

Nik grabbed Apollo's arm and yanked him up the bank, then slashed the plank bridge with his knife. "Not enough," he said, and spat. "They don't even feel the cold."

Lyra looked at Apollo. "What do they want?" she said, like she already knew the answer.

He shrugged. "Same thing as the priest. Same thing as any god. To not be left alone."

She barked a laugh, then started running.

The river did not slow the cultists for long. They clawed over each other, building drifts of bodies in the shallows, flinging themselves across the span until the air was thick with their screams and the smell of salt and rot.

Apollo felt the gold in him twitch, then lurch. It wanted out. He clenched his fists, ignored the pain, and kept moving.

On the far side of the river the land rose sharp, a bluff streaked with old landslides and scree.

Nik and Lyra half-carried Thorin, who groaned with every jostle but did not complain. The dog kept to Apollo's side, silent, ears back.

They reached the top as the cultists broke through the last of the ice. The sun was gone, but the moon was up, and in its light every white robe below glowed like a torch.

The first of the followers hit the far shore, then the next, then a wave of them, crawling over the broken planks, teeth chattering, arms outstretched.

Lyra pointed to a stand of pines. "We lose them in the trees. They can't hold a line if we split."

"No," Apollo said. "They'll just keep coming. There's too many."

Nik looked at him, then at the gold-lines writhing in Apollo's wrists. "You got another trick?"

Apollo shook his head. "Only the one."

He stood at the edge of the bluff and let the hunger in him answer the hunger below. He willed the gold into his hands, into his voice, and shouted, not words, just a sound, a raw throated howl that let the world know he was done running.

The cultists froze, every head turning at once. For a moment, all was silence. Then, as if called by the howl, the followers dropped to their knees, hands raised, faces turned up in mute worship.

Apollo felt the gold waver, then flare. He pictured the priest's face, the way it had recognized him, the way it had tried to make him into something new.

He rejected it with everything he had. The warmth in his veins turned sharp, then white-hot, then vanished.

The ground beneath them trembled, a low and terrible vibration that sent a shudder through the bluff. Apollo staggered, caught by Nik's quick hand.

The followers below were still now, silent as statues, their raised hands casting long, grotesque shadows in the moonlight.

Then a sound cut through the quiet, a deep, resonant chime that seemed to come from the earth itself.

Not a bell but something ancient, something that had waited long and patient for this moment. It pulsed through the air, vibrating the fillings in their teeth, resonating with the gold that had receded from Apollo's veins.

The cultists' heads began to tilt back further, impossibly far, their mouths gaping wider as if to swallow the sound.

And from those black pits emerged something new, not moths or bile or blood, but light. A harsh, unyielding light that swirled into shapes neither human nor divine.

Apollo's breath caught in his throat as he watched the figures rise from the followers' mouths, taking form against the night sky, a tableau of horrors not yet named.

Lyra gripped her knife tighter, her voice barely above a whisper. "What have we done?"

On the precipice of chaos and revelation, they could only stand and watch as these beings of light began to float towards them, the newest denizens of this warped sanctuary, while far in the distance, an indistinct shape encircled by a nimbus of dread loomed closer with every pulse of that ominous chime.

Chapter 25: The Ember That Remains

Torgo had lagged behind, as he always did, a lantern swinging from his stick like an afterthought. Now he stood alone on the muddy embankment, silhouetted by the sickle of moon, his hat askew and the amber at the tip of his staff bleeding thin green fire into the dark.

The wind guttered, and with it came that resonant chime, a vibration that crawled up Apollo's legs and into his gut, sickly familiar and yet nothing he'd ever known in life or death.

From the other side of the river, the congregation of the temple pressed forward, their numbers swelling as more and more white robed bodies spilled from the woods.

The river took some, the ice giving way with a sound like bones breaking underfoot, but the rest clambered over the writhing mass, undeterred by water or cold or the prospect of drowning.

Above them all, the shapes of light continued to multiply, each one a riot of angles and hunger. They pulsed, starved, impossible.

Torgo's voice split the cold. "Don't stop running, you fools!" He jammed his stick into the mud, scattering sparks. "Go! GO!"

He didn't look back as Apollo and the others scrambled up the far bank, Lyra half-dragging Thorin, Nik with a hand on Lyra's shoulder and the other clutching the dog's scruff.

Apollo hesitated, just long enough to see Torgo plant both feet like he was bracing for the world to end.

The cultists reached the river's edge, and the foremost of them—hair streaming, mouth wide, hands clapped to the temples, threw itself across the gap with a grace that defied every law Apollo could remember.

The figure landed in a crouch, then vaulted again, closing half the distance to the survivors in three horrific lunges. The light-beings trailed after, ribbons of radiance wrapping the cultist's body, burrowing into its flesh and then ballooning outward in a grotesque facsimile of wings.

Torgo waited, calm as a man trimming his nails. When the thing was close enough to taste his breath, he flung himself forward, staff first, and jammed the amber stone at the end of it into the creature's open mouth.

The stone flared, and for a second the world turned white.

The explosion was quiet, no sound but the collapse of the creature's bones and teeth as it caved inward, blue fire peeling the skin away in strips.

The light beings shrieked, a chorus of simultaneous birth and death, and then they collapsed, drawn inward by the gravity of Torgo's staff, until only ash and a filament of gold remained where the cultist had been.

More were coming. Apollo could see them now, dozens, maybe hundreds, rushing the river, some crawling over the backs of the fallen, some already inhuman in the way their joints bent and their faces gaped in ecstasy or agony.

Torgo shook his staff, scattering embers at the nearest, then drew something from a pouch and pressed it to his lips.

Apollo recognized the gesture: the last prayer of a dying god, or a man who knew the odds but had to try anyway.

"Torgo!" Apollo shouted, but the sound was lost to the wind and the shrieks.

He watched as Torgo slammed the staff down, cracking it in two. The light inside the amber gem bled out in a furious spray, drowning the riverbank in a wall of blue fire.

The nearest cultists evaporated, leaving only rags and the memory of limbs. The light creatures screamed, bent backward in agony, and were sucked into the widening maelstrom.

Torgo staggered, but did not fall; he leveled the broken staff at the remaining cultists and let the fire finish what the river had started.

The dog whimpered and Apollo felt the urge to turn away, but he couldn't. He watched as Torgo, now half-shadow, half-fire, hurled the last of his powder onto the ground and ignited it with the stump of his staff.

The blast lit up the river for a hundred yards in every direction, flattening the nearest trees and painting the survivors in a phosphor afterimage that would never fade from Apollo's memory.

Nothing moved on the far bank. The river boiled, the air thrummed with heat, and the only figure left standing was Torgo, so thin now that he seemed sewn together from flame and regret.

Apollo scrambled down the hill, careful not to slip, and dashed back across the ruined bridge. Lyra screamed his name, but he ignored her.

He reached Torgo as the magician collapsed, the hat rolling off into the mud.

He knelt. Torgo's skin was gone, replaced by a mesh of molten crystal and resin, the eyes flickering with a strange, almost childlike clarity.

"You shouldn't have come back," Torgo whispered. The mouth was cracked, but the teeth, still sharp, smiled as if nothing had ever hurt him. "You're the one they want."

Apollo shook his head. "You're the only one who can stop them."

Torgo laughed, and the sound was almost a song. "No. You are."

He reached up, pressed something small and cold into Apollo's hand. A shard of the amber, still pulsing with its own inner light. "Keep it safe," Torgo said. "Or eat it, if you get hungry."

The body shivered, then fell apart, each piece curling in on itself until only a pile of fine, glittering sand remained, the afterimage of Torgo's laugh echoing in the space above it.

For a long moment, Apollo could not move. He felt the gold in his own veins pulse in sympathy with the amber, a shudder that ran down his arms and into the ground.

He pressed the shard to his lips, tasted the bitterness, and remembered the way Torgo had looked at him that first morning: not with hope or envy, but with the camaraderie of men who understood that every story ended the same way.

He stood, brushing sand from his hands, and crossed the river one last time. The others waited for him on the opposite bank, faces hollow, eyes wide.

Lyra did not ask. She just took his wrist and led him away, keeping her grip light but unyielding. Nik followed, the dog pressed to his thigh, and Thorin limped behind, slower than before.

They walked until the river was lost to the night and the sound of pursuit faded into memory. Apollo did not look back. The warmth of the amber shard in his pocket was steady, a small, stubborn light in the dark.

He wondered if it would be enough. He wondered, as they pressed on into the ruins of the world, if any light ever was.

Chapter 26: Ash In The Blood

By morning, the world was glass. Frost rimed every grass blade, every brittle stalk, and the river below the ruined footing of the old bridge hissed under a new sheet of ice, as if intent on erasing the memory of the night before.

Apollo walked with the others in silence, all of them scraped raw by what counted for survival. He could taste the silt of blood in the air, sweet and mineral-rich, and every third breath caught in his throat like a held-back scream.

Behind them, the temple was just a stain, the white haze melted into the predawn fog.

Lyra led, her boots crunching frost, but Apollo could see how she hunched now, not the cautious readiness he'd learned to read, but something looser, more defensive, as if she expected the ground to tilt from under her at any moment.

Nik said nothing. The lines on his face had deepened overnight, and once, when their eyes met, Nik looked away first. The dog alternated between sprinting ahead and lagging behind, caught up in a logic all its own.

Thorin walked without complaint, but the new set to his jaw said he'd decided pain was irrelevant so long as there was still work to be done.

Apollo caught his own reflection in a mirroring pool at a bend in the trail, and for a moment didn't recognize the person staring back: face narrow and colorless, eyes hollowed to the gold.

The veins along his wrists looked like cracks in old bone. He pulled his coat tighter, though the cold didn't feel like anything anymore.

They moved through a dead place that had once been called a city. The land dipped and rose, the scars of collapsed walls and lost fire showing through the thin snow.

No signs of present life, only the curious geometry of ruins, archways that led to nowhere, gods toppled and half-swallowed by earth, stones set with obsidian eyes that glared from their own graves.

Apollo found himself cataloguing the decay, as if one day someone might want a record.

When the sun broke through, orange and thinning at the edges, Lyra slowed and pointed ahead, her hand a pale knot above her quiver.

"No shelter out here," she said. "We cut through the old market, then east to the trees." Her voice was different; Apollo couldn't name what had changed, but it was there. He answered with a nod and a grunt, too tired to speak.

The market was worse up close: stalls strangled with morning glories, frost-wilted pumpkins burst open and left to rot, a pile of shoes in the center, each one nailed through the toe.

Apollo stepped around them, careful not to touch, and wondered whether this was meant as a lesson or a warning. He tried not to think of Torgo.

It was impossible, though. The air still held the fizz and snap of Torgo's last trick, and every time Apollo reached for the pocket that held the amber shard, his hand came away tingling, as if the memory of fire lived under his skin.

They made camp in the lee of a sunken building, three walls and half a roof sheltering them from the wind. Lyra set her back against the stone and sharpened her knife.

Nik went looking for dry wood, returning only with a handful of bracken and an apologetic scowl.

Thorin crumbled next to the firepit, his good arm wrapped around his knees, and stared at the smoke with unseeing eyes.

Apollo built the fire. He worked at it slowly, deliberately breaking each stick to fit, stacking the pieces like a puzzle.

It was the kind of thing he used to take comfort in—proof that the world could be made to fit together if you just forced the right angles.

Now it felt childish, but he did it anyway, watching the flare and gutter of the flames.

He lay down last, rolling up in his own coat at the edge of the ring. Sleep wouldn't come.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the followers on the ice, the white light rising from their mouths, the way the sky had bent around the sound of his own voice.

He wondered, once, if this was a dream designed by the gods, some cautionary story for their private amusement, but there was no logic to it, only the raw scrape of what passed for living.

He drifted for a while, lost to the rhythm of Lyra's knife on stone and the hiss of wind through empty windows, until a hand shook his shoulder. Nik's face, bare inches from his own, the eyes wild and urgent.

"There's someone out there," Nik whispered. "Moving through the market. I heard them twice."

Apollo sat up, feeling the amber shard pulse in his pocket, hot and insistent. He listened, but heard nothing.

He looked over at Lyra. She was already awake, her eyes fixed on the gap at the far end of the ruined wall.

They waited. The dog whined, then crept to Apollo's side, panting hard enough to fog the air. After a while, the tension faded, but no one slept.

Thorin snored, then choked, then snored again, each cycle louder and more desperate. Nik paced the edge of the fire, knife loose but ready.

An hour passed, maybe more, when the sound came again: a scrape, then a long, slow dragging. Apollo tensed, the whole of his body coiling in preparation for hurt.

The memory of Cassian's face, blood-smeared and grinning, flickered through his mind, and he realized he was clenching both fists so hard his nails dug channels into his palms.

The figure appeared just after dawn, shuffling between the toppled stalls, face hidden by a hood and a mass of blackened cloth.

Not a threat, at first glance; not a cultist, either. The thing that passed for a man moved like it wasn't sure of its own body, pausing every few steps to tap the ground with a stick.

When it drew closer, Apollo saw the hands, gloved, ruined, the fingers wrapped in old strips of parchment. It walked with the confidence of someone who expected not to be noticed, and when it saw their camp, it froze.

Nik called out first. "You lost? Or looking for company?" His voice was loud and false-brave, but the echo of it carried authority.

The figure didn't answer at first, just tipped its head as if considering the question. Then it moved forward, careful, slow, like an animal coming to water.

Under the rags, the face was mostly shadow, but Apollo caught a glimpse of eyes: pale, luminous, the color of bare frost. The stick, he saw, was tipped in copper, the end worn to a smooth, round knob.

The figure stopped outside the fire's light, looked from each of them to the dog, and then at Apollo. "I could smell that shard from the other side of the river," it said, voice dry as parchment. "You mind if I warm my bones?"

Lyra tensed, but nodded, motioning the stranger into the circle.

Apollo watched the newcomer, paying attention to the way it moved, the way it weighed every word before speaking. "Who are you?" he asked.

The stranger grinned, lips splitting to show teeth filed nearly to points. "Name's Tigran," he said.

"Used to work for the Watch. Used to matter, once." He sat, folding himself up like a marionette with half its strings cut. "Now I'm just a man looking for stories before the world runs out of listeners."

The amber shard in Apollo's pocket pulsed hotter. "You said you could smell this?" he asked, refusing to reach for it, refusing to give the newcomer the satisfaction of seeing his hand shake.

Tigran nodded. "Heard a story, too, about a magician who drank the sun and spit out an empire." He leaned closer, eyes locked to Apollo's. "I hope you're not him. That story ends bad."

Apollo shrugged, more tired than afraid. "That's only a story," he said, and glanced away.

Tigran smiled. It was the smile of someone who knew better than to argue with the dead. "Suit yourself," he said, and tucked his hands into his coat.

They sat in silence. The newcomer made no move to attack, steal, or even eat. He just watched the fire, gaze flickering from Lyra's face to Thorin's bandage to the dog's ragged coat.

It occurred to Apollo that everyone left in this part of the world had the look of an exile: half-starved, obsessed with the next dawn or the next mouthful, never quite alive but always one step away from dying.

In the night, Tigran told them stories. Most were old ones, tales of the marsh city and the river lords, of the salt towers and the men who took ships into the mirage at the edge of the world.

But even the lies felt more useful than the truth, so they listened. At one point, Lyra asked, "What's east of here? Is there anything left?"

Tigran shrugged, the movement more a twitch than a gesture. "You'll hit the old fort before sundown tomorrow. After that, just the basin and the glass fields. If you're lucky, nobody will even know you passed."

Nik nodded at that, as if the plan had always been escape. Apollo kept his own counsel, feeling the weight of the shard in his pocket and the ache of something new gnawing at the base of his skull.

He dreamed that night, not of temples or rivers, not even of Torgo, but of fire. In the dream, he walked through a city made of glass, every street lined with mirrors that showed only his own face, aged and splitting, the gold in his veins gleaming through papery skin.

He saw himself smiling, then screaming, the sound shattering the mirrors one by one. When he woke, the dog was curled tight to his side, shivering.

Lyra was already up, watching the horizon. Tigran was gone, not a trace left but a circle in the frost where he'd slept. Nik stoked the fire, his thin hands shaking only a little.

They left the ruins at dawn, walking east as if there was nothing else to do. The market was quieter now, the shoes in the square grayed over with a new layer of frost.

As they crested the last hill before the horizon, Apollo felt the sun break over his back, and the gold in his veins warmed to it, a gentle reminder of something he didn't care to remember.

When Lyra asked if he was all right, he nodded. But he kept one hand in his pocket, fingers wrapped around the amber, holding it tight enough to leave fresh imprints in his palm.

He didn't know where the trail would end. But the next step was always east, into the morning that waited, hungry as ever.

Chapter 27: The City That Forgot Its Name

The city greeted them with a lie.

Apollo could see it in the geometry; nothing in the world ever aligned itself so perfectly unless there was something to hide.

The concentric rings, five, by his count, each a meticulous echo of the last, were drawn so tight around the central tower that it was hard to tell if they meant to keep something in or out.

He said nothing as they approached, just registered the way the symmetry pulled at his stomach, like the memory of a wound gone to scar.

The wind at the gate was stagnant, a taste like boiled bone and dried flowers. Nothing moved, not the air, not the water in the black canals, not even the pale weeds fissuring up through the stone.

The stillness made a sound of its own, a sort of hissing anticipation, and Apollo found himself matching his steps to it, too cautious to break the city's rhythm.

Beside him, Lyra hovered just outside the archway, one hand grazing the hilt of her knife.

Her hair, normally a spill of blond tangles, was wrestled tight by the windless air; it made her face sharper than usual, cheeks drawn, the green of her eyes so bright it looked fraudulently alive.

She watched Apollo, but he didn't bother returning the look.

He could feel the judgment even without seeing it. If she thought this was some test, his test, their test, the city had already won.

Nik and Thorin lagged a dozen paces behind, bickering in the low, mean way of men terrified of silence. Nik's laugh was a battered thing, all cartilage and nothing soft, bouncing off the lintels and slumping dead in the dust.

Thorin's voice, when it surfaced, was less a sound than a refusal to be quiet. They both pretended not to notice how the dog would not cross the threshold, pacing the shadows as if to warn them off, tail rigid as a blade.

They entered anyway.

The avenue was lined with buildings that, at first, seemed untouched by time, shutters straight, doors closed or open in careful ratios, every brick sharp-edged and mortared in unreadable patterns.

On closer inspection, none of the windows had glass. No footprints marred the perfectly swept walkways. The lamps hung in regular intervals, dead and clean. Apollo's tongue felt salt-pricked: 'Real or memory?'

He made a show of confidence, walking down the main arcade with his chin up, but all the time he could sense the city parsing them, slotting each of their movements into some invisible equation.

He put a hand in his jacket pocket, fingers wrapping around the cold, uneven facets of the shard Torgo had given him.

It pulsed with a heat that wasn't heat, a slow beat aligning itself to his own heart. He gripped it tighter. '*Not for you*,' he thought, meaning the city.

Lyra kept pace, eyes never resting on any one thing for more than a heartbeat. She was reading the city, too, or maybe the sky: anything but him.

Ahead, the avenue forked into three perfect roads, each one curved just enough to hide what lay beyond.

They chose the rightmost path, Thorin's idea, since he imagined cities as nothing more than fortresses waiting to be besieged, and walked until the repetition of buildings began to blur.

Every street looked like the last. Every alley echoed the first.

Apollo counted the turns, the intersections, marked the way the sun, thin and unsympathetic above the clouds, cast no shadow on the walls.

'*No birds*,' he realized suddenly. '*No insects, not even a rat*.' The absence made the world feel hollow as a dried gourd.

The first sign of occupation was a single scrap of cloth, a ragged blue strip, snagged on a nail above a lintel. It looked new, impossibly so.

Lyra stopped and ran her tongue over her teeth, then sniffed the air. "Fire," she murmured, and Apollo caught it too, faint and distant, the ghost of smoke gone before it could truly be smelt. The prospect of warmth, of something human, pushed them forward.

They found the source at the heart of the second ring: a square, or what would have been a square if any corners dared to exist.

The fire smoldered in a stone pit, wet branches hissing and steaming, but there was no one nearby. Nik peered into the pit, then circled it, poking at the embers with a stick. "Minutes old," he declared, then grimaced. "Maybe less." No one disagreed.

Lyra scanned the facades, the steps, the layers of dust. "Nothing moved," she said, but the certainty in her voice was absent.

The shadows were tightening; sunset in this city happened in a hurry, the last of the light draining from the sky as if fleeing the stones.

Apollo looked at the buildings, then at his companions, and then at the arc of stars beginning to define themselves overhead. "We need a roof," he said. "And we need it before dark."

Thorin grunted, "Pick one. They're all the same," and gestured with his bandaged arm. The wound no longer wept, but Apollo could tell by the color in Thorin's cheeks that the fever was waiting for an excuse.

They chose a triangular house at the edge of the square, its door standing open as if it had anticipated them.

The inside was dry, the floor swept, the walls plastered in a way that suggested recent repair.

There was no furniture save for a low table and a single, three-legged stool. Nik swept the room twice, checked under the table and behind the door, then shrugged. It was a shelter, at least.

They ate in silence. Lyra leaned against the wall, eyes on the windowless black to the street. The dog lingered in the doorway, whining once before settling at Apollo's knee, muzzle pressed into his boot.

Thorin snored in the corner, the sound thin and defeated. Nik kept his hands busy with the knife, picking at the calluses of his thumb, then whittling a stick down until it parted in two.

Chapter 28: Forgotten Ruin

Apollo pretended not to watch the city outside, but every nerve in him twisted at the suggestion of movement.

The wind had stopped entirely. The flames from their torch guttered upward without the least disturbance: no draft, no movement of air, just the slow consumption of wax and wick.

He waited for the others to doze, then stepped outside. The street was brighter than it should have been, the glow from the central tower, perhaps, or a trick of the stone reflecting starlight.

Apollo walked in a slow spiral, testing the distance to the next ring, counting his own footsteps against the perfect echo returning from the stone.

At the fourth intersection, he stopped. There, nailed to the door of a squat, windowless building, was a single strip of paper.

The language was not the city's; it was written in a hand he recognized, though it had been years since he'd seen it outside of dreams. It read: "The world is made of walls and luck. You are running out of both."

He pulled it free, folded it, and pushed it into the seam of his coat. He thought of Torgo, wondered if the old magician had left a corpse anywhere or if the river had simply devoured him, stone and all.

On his way back, Apollo noticed something new. On the far side of the square, a figure moved. Not toward him, not away, but in a careful semicircle, matching his own slow pace.

The figure was tall, dressed in mourning black with the hood pulled low. It walked with the certainty of someone who had lived in the city for centuries. He could not see a weapon, but the gait spoke of violence with every stride.

Apollo did not challenge or signal; he returned to the house, bolted the door, and tried to forget it.

By the middle of the night, the fever had woken Thorin, and the retching was bad enough that Lyra got up to help.

The stench was more bile than blood, which Apollo counted as a mercy. He dosed the dwarf with willow salt and a measure of the blue powder, which cooled the shakes but left Thorin rambling in three languages and mumbling about cities made entirely of teeth.

Nik drifted to sleep, then woke, then slept again, never more than a quarter inch below the surface of attention. The dog paced the room in slow circles, never once barking, but always listening.

At dawn, none of the food was left, and neither was the fire. When they stepped outside, the city's illusion had changed: now the streets showed evidence of passage, tracks left by shoes that belonged, impossibly, to their own party.

The dog whined, sniffed the air, then cowered behind Apollo's left calf.

They followed the avenue toward the tower, knowing that this was the purpose, even if it felt like a trap.

The streets became wider as they advanced, the houses grander and more complex the closer they drew to the center.

At three points they saw figures in the city, at a window, behind the grillwork of a balcony, hunched on a roofline with their back to the rising sun. None moved. Each watched, and waited.

Apollo's head throbbed with the pressure of it. *'What do you want from me?'* He could hear the answer in the way the wind now whistled through the cracks: nothing. The city wanted nothing, because it already had them.

At the base of the tower was a dry fountain filled with perfectly smooth stones. No statue at the center, just a plaque set in the base. The others stood back, waiting, but Apollo knelt to read it.

The characters shifted as he stared, the meanings arranging and rearranging until he could almost speak the truth of it aloud. But he did not. He only stood, dusted his hands on his coat, and glared up at the empty windows overhead.

Nik said, "You understood that, didn't you?" but Apollo shook his head, too tired to even invent a new lie.

They entered the tower. Inside, the spiral steps went upward forever, but the air did not change, and the walls were lined with a gold veining that seemed to pulse in time with his own blood. At the landing, a great chamber.

No furniture, no books, just a single circle drawn on the stone in charcoal and salt. Lyra would not cross it; she stayed at the door, eyes darting, calculating exits.

Nik broke the silence. "What now?" he asked.

Apollo stepped into the circle. For a moment, he felt nothing. Then he heard the voice, not from across the room, not from the street, but from inside his own teeth, vibrating in the roots and curling down his jaw. The words were nonsense, yet perfectly understood.

He fell to one knee, gripping the shard from Torgo, and squeezed until the edges bit through the skin of his palm.

The city's purpose flooded him, a sense of unfinished business, obligation, an echo of every vow he'd ever made and broken. The memory of the old gods' faces, the field of white flowers, the well of red. A single, impossible command: "Finish."

He stood. The others watched with the kind of cautious respect usually reserved for the dying. He looked at them, each in turn, then lied as best he knew how:

"It's just a ruin," he said. "There's nothing here."

And the city, hearing this, let him go.

They left by the western road. The market was as it had been, the shoes in their place, the frost heavier now. When they stopped to rest, the dog curled at his side, and for a while, Apollo let himself believe.

The world had not run out of walls. Not yet. And luck, well, that was just another way of spelling hunger.

He walked east, always east, the taste of the city's silence still thick on his tongue. And wherever the next morning waited, he would meet it with an empty hand and a heart still stubborn enough to beat.

Chapter 29: Fieldcraft

The ruin had once been a site of worship, or punishment, or both. Apollo saw it first from the notch of the valley: black stones canted at improbable angles, as if the ground beneath had heaved in disgust and the building, too tired to object, had simply leaned into collapse.

The dog whimpered and gnashed its teeth at the wind; even Nik, who could joke his way through a murder, said nothing as the path funneled them toward the entrance.

Lyra walked a few steps ahead, chin tucked, arms folded beneath her coat. Long, pale hair whipped across her eyes, as if she hated the idea of seeing what waited inside.

Thorin trailed behind, dragging his bad leg through the crusted snow, not bothering anymore to hide the pain.

The front door...if it was a door; if this place had ever deserved such distinctions...hung from a single hinge, battered and scored by decades of neglect. Apollo pressed his palm to it and felt the chill, not of weather, but of something that had long ago given up on pretending to be alive.

Beyond, the nave was a cavity of cold, a sunken bowl, its lip lined with pews now half-rotted and scattered like broken ribs.

The air shimmered in places, little ripples of pressure. When he stepped across the threshold, the sensation hooked into his chest and pulled.

'Don't be obvious,' he told himself. 'Just a house for the dead, like any other.'

Nik coughed, then sniffed. "Smells like bleach and old honey in here," he said. "That usual for your people, Lio?"

He shrugged, sidestepping a fragment of bone on the flagstones. "Maybe the priests liked their clean-up."

"Maybe the priests are still here." Lyra's voice came sharp, splitting the hush. Her eyes, ringed in exhaustion-gold, flickered up to the apse.

Apollo followed her gaze. Above the altar, the glass was not broken but warped, so that the last of the day's light bled through and made a trembling, arterial stain across the far wall.

Beneath it, the bowl: a shallow basin, set in a dais of obsidian, thick with a dust so fine it seemed to levitate. Instinct said walk away. Habit said go closer.

"Stay at the door," he muttered, but Nik was already edging sideways, making for the shadowed stair to the right.

Lyra hung back, jaw set, hand on the dagger up her sleeve. Thorin took a seat on the nearest bench, breathing in short, economical bursts.

The closer Apollo got to the bowl, the worse his teeth hurt. Not the sharp pain of a nerve gone to rot, but a buzzing, a resonance that mapped itself onto every old break and scar in his bones.

The rim of the basin was scored with lines, runes, maybe, but not in any script he'd seen in the cities or in Othra's books. A geometry of angles and punctures.

He traced one of the lines, and the dust clinging to the stone flowed away from his touch, exposing something that glittered darkly underneath. Obsidian, then gold, then the impossible blue of aether marble.

He felt the urge to laugh, of course the gods would flavor their shrines with a relic rare enough that the entire world could have burned and left only these crumbs.

Of course it would pull at him with the gravity of a starved animal. He closed his eyes, tried to catalogue the pressure, but the rush of wind cut that off: a new draft spilling down from the ruined rafters, swirling in the nave.

Lyra's voice, near his ear: "What is it?"

He opened his eyes. She'd crossed the room without sound or warning, and her face was inches from his, mouth set in a hard line. "Have you ever seen one before?" she asked, glancing at the bowl, then back at his face.

He shook his head, but something in the lie didn't land. She stepped around him, staring at the basin, then touched her own thumb to the rim.

The line of runes flickered, like watching a bundle of wires catch the memory of a current.

She flinched, yanked her hand back. "It's alive."

Someone else's voice, but his own. "That's the trap, isn't it? Make the promise of power so obvious, no one with any will ever leaves it alone."

They stood there in the dark, the bowl reflecting a faint, wrong light up into their faces. Behind them, Thorin rasped a laugh and said, "Don't break it. Might be the only thing holding this place together."

Nik, from the shadows, hissed: "Something moved upstairs. Bare skin, maybe ten feet away. You want me to flush it?"

Apollo's mouth was bone-dry. He kept his voice steady. "If you see it, don't chase. We'll leave soon."

But the basin had begun to hum, a bass note, too low for any ear but perfectly calibrated for the bones. He pressed his hand full against the marble, and the hum cut through him with a clarity that nearly made him swoon.

For a second, the world went dark at the edges. The vision he'd had in the well outside the city sharpened: the field of white flowers, the well of red, the faces with his own features, all waiting in a circle at the horizon.

In the nave, the dust began to swirl, then coalesce. Not a ghost, not even a memory, but a pattern: a thin, pale figure, eyes star-bright and sexless, skin stretched so tight over bone that it looked like a carved candle at the point of collapse.

The apparition hovered a foot above the altar, hands folded, head inclined as if listening to a music too faint for mortal frequency.

The dog saw it first. It howled, once, then cowered and pissed itself at Lyra's feet.

Nik was halfway across the aisle, knife drawn, but the apparition made no move. It only stared at Apollo, then at the bowl, then at Apollo again. A triangle. A suggestion: Don't make me say it.

He fished the shard from his coat, held it up. The apparition's eyes widened, and for the first and only time Apollo saw a flash of recognition, then gratitude, then something like envy, then nothing at all. The apparition inclined its head, then vanished.

The bowl stopped humming. The air, for a moment, was so thin it felt like standing on a mountaintop.

Apollo dropped to one knee, hand still clutching the rim, and saw that the dust had settled across the inside of the basin, spelling a word he knew from nightmares but not from waking life.

Lyra read it too, eyes darting over the script. "What's it mean?"

He shook his head. "A warning," he said, though he knew it was a command.

Nik made a show of holstering his knife, but his shoulders were bunched, face gone blank. "If it's a trap, why not spring it?"

Thorin stood, grinning his sour, crooked grin. "Everything's trap if you're not the architect."

Apollo looked from the basin to his hands, then to the others. "We keep moving," he said, but found he couldn't let go of the rim just yet.

He waited for the world to pull him apart, for the city to finally notice what he was, for the gods to reach down and finish their joke. Instead, the dog licked his hand, and Lyra, who had never been one for tenderness, offered a grip at his elbow.

He took it, stood, and for just a second the gold in his veins lit the ruin with an afterglow. Then it faded.

They left the basin behind, the bowl's warning scored into memory, and stepped out into the dusk, where the sky was already the color of extinction.

No one spoke until the next ridge, and even then, it was as if language had become obsolete, nothing left to say, only the promise of another eastward morning, always and again.

Chapter 30: Ashmead Pass

The cold had teeth. It chewed their ears and the webs between their fingers as they picked their way along the broken flagstones to Ashmead Pass.

Even the dog, which had grown a husk of gray fur since the city, kept its snout low and refused to whimper. The mountain above was a god's jaw, every cusp and precipice stark in the brittle dawn.

Apollo walked point, not because he was the bravest or the strongest, but because the others trusted his need to keep moving forward, an optimist's compulsion, Lyra had once called it, and meant as an insult.

The carved arch of Ashmead at first looked like little more than two fallen slabs, but as they closed on it Apollo saw the concavity in the keystone: a basin, scorched black with old fire, brimming now with a snowmelt slurry that stank of rotten kelp.

Nik spat into the bowl as they passed, muttering, "Offer your libation, see if the Bastard answers."

But he cast a glance upward all the same, as if the ghost of the old war might drop a stone just for spite.

Lyra, close behind, tested every step, eyes always on the cracks, the switchbacks, the places a body could hunker down and wait with a crossbow or a blessing. She kept a knife palmed, the blade's edge wrapped in a rag to hide its flash.

Thorin, bringing up the rear, made a show of disinterest, but Apollo could hear the way his boots scuffed and paused at every patch of shadow.

The dwarf's arm was healed, Apollo had made sure of that, burning his own reserves to knit flesh and mend bone, but the ordeal had hollowed something else in Thorin, left a new space for hate or hope or both.

At the first switchback, Nik pointed out the kill holes set into the cliff face, a geometry of violence so precise it mocked the randomness of the war.

"Ardent campaign," Nik said, tapping a finger to the blackened rim of one aperture. "They say the first three companies through were all turned to glass. Only the bones stayed brittle. Rest of the Watch didn't even stop to clean up."

Lyra grunted, unimpressed. She'd seen worse, or at least believed she had. The dog circled her boots, then bolted a few steps up the trail, nose working the wind. It stopped at a shallow ditch, tail stiff.

Apollo caught up, crouched, and found the grave: a pit not even chest-deep, ringed with stones, the body inside no more than gristle and a clump of yellow hair, all frosted over. The teeth had been pulled, and the left boot was gone.

"Recent," Apollo said, not expecting anyone to answer. He moved on, pushing the others with the nervous energy of a man who knew that the pass was never truly empty.

The climb steepened. The switchbacks narrowed until Lyra and Nik had to walk single file. The cut in the mountain was not natural, but no engineer had cared to gift it symmetry. Snow sat in uneven shelves where the wind lost its nerve.

On the third shelf, Nik paused and cocked his head. "Hear that?" he whispered. Apollo heard nothing, the wind, a distant thrum of falling rock, the tick of his own heart. Then,

as if conjured by the memory, a faint clicking, not unlike the sound at the well in the basin.

The dog stiffened, then slunk back, ears down.

Lyra dropped to one knee and scanned ahead. Apollo did the same, he found himself behind a fan of broken stone, the grooves scored with something sharp and recent. He peered around the edge.

Half a dozen men, poorly hidden, clustered against the lee of a crumbling bunker. Not Watch, cultists, maybe, but with none of the religious rags or makeshift paint Apollo had learned to fear.

No banners, no insignia, only mismatched coats and a desperation that made even their silence hurt. Two held rifles, but the others clutched iron bars or hatchets.

Apollo ducked, blinking away the pulse in his vision. *'We don't have enough blood or anything for a stand.'*

He felt for the aether inside him, the gold line that had lately begun to itch under his skin the way the old wound in his thigh used to. It was low, always low now, but it was something.

He edged closer to Lyra, spoke so only she could hear. "Never seen them before. Not Watch, not Blackhearts."

She nodded, then signaled with two fingers, hold, wait.

Nik was already sliding back, careful, ready to run. Thorin just set his jaw and looked for a rock heavy enough to turn into a hammer.

They waited. The sun crept up another finger-width, painting the switchback in a color between jaundice and new cheese.

The men ahead shifted, one stamping his feet, another picking his nose with a finger black with frostbite. Apollo wondered if they even wanted to fight, or if this was just where the world had left them, exiled into violence for lack of anything else.

Then the dog, as if resentful of the tension, barked.

Everything happened at once: the men ahead raised their weapons, the bows coughed, and the dog vanished behind a drift. Lyra hurled a knife, pegged the nose-picker through the cheek, and Nik, instead of running, launched himself over the ridge and came down on the nearest bowman with both knees. The arrow went wide, ricocheted off the stone and sizzled the air past Apollo's ear.

He moved without thinking, the way he might move in a memory, down, across, eyes locked on the one with the hatchet.

He caught the swing on his forearm, felt the numbing crack of bone, but with the same motion drove his other hand into the man's throat. There was a soft, wet crunch, and the man went down, hatchet spinning end over end into the snow.

Thorin, true to form, found his rock and lobbed it underhand. It struck one of the last two men square in the shin, dropping him to his knees. The other, holding the remaining bow, fumbled the load and only managed to shoot himself in the foot..

Nik and Lyra finished the job, no theatrics. By the time the echoes stilled, three of the men were dead, one was crawling for the edge, and the last two just lay in the snow, waiting to see if death would bother with them.

Apollo checked his forearm: the bone wasn't broken, just bruised, but the pain was an absolute, something pure in a world of counterfeits.

He bound it with a rag, then scanned the bodies, looking for insignia, messages, anything to pin a reason to this.

He found it on the throatless man, tucked under his shirt: a note in the old tongue, a list of names. Apollo recognized none of them. The date was today. The place: Ashmead Pass.

He passed it to Lyra, who read it, then grunted. "Bounty," she said. "But not for us. Target is... 'the White Physician.'" She looked up, green eyes cutting through the haze. "That mean you?"

He nodded, and for a moment it was like the world had stopped bleeding, just to focus in on that fact. *'Not just a runaway now. Not even a heretic. Something worse.'* He tried to remember when he'd last been anyone else.

They spent the next hour burying the bodies, because Apollo insisted, and because the gods of Ashmead were too old to care about hygiene. Thorin used the dead man's hatchet to break up the frozen ground, and Nik found a flask of something sickly sweet on one of the corpses, which he shared with the others in lieu of a eulogy.

Afterward, Apollo climbed to the top of the old bunker and looked out. The pass zigzagged down into a valley tangled in fog, but he could see, just barely, the next ring of defense works: another killing ground, another set of bunkers, another place where men became stories or stains.

He closed his eyes, and for a moment he let the aether rise; it made a light behind his eyelids, a memory of warmth that felt like the promise of a new muscle in the heart. He wondered if he'd ever have enough to use it again, and what it would cost next time.

The others joined him, their silhouettes jagged against the pale sky. Lyra, arms folded, hair a flag in the wind. Nik, stripping the last useful gear from one of the corpses. Thorin, already starting down the next switchback, because a mountain didn't care if you were tired or missing half a soul.

Apollo thought of the city, the bowl, the word scratched into its heart: Finish. He had no idea what it meant, or whether the world would let him do it. But he found himself, for the first time, wanting to try.

He started down the path, the dog at his heels. The frost bit, but he let it. The hurt was real, and for now, real was enough.