

# The Golden Fool

## #Chapter 31: The Bounty Ledger - Read The Golden Fool Chapter 31: The Bounty Ledger

### *Chapter 31: The Bounty Ledger*

First, there was the stink: a lungful of boiled leather, hot iron, and the damp, mineral sweat of men who had spent half their lives underground and the rest wishing they had.

Apollo had expected fear, maybe, or suspicion at the mouth of the Smokestone Hollow, but what he found instead was commerce, raw and unfiltered, same as the arteries of any old city, only here the blood was banditry and the bones belonged to no one.

By the time they reached the outpost, the sun was already a rumor behind the pass. The path wound through a drape of moss and shale, then spat them into an antechamber domed with black glass.

All the heat from the smithies below bled upward, mixing the taste of basalt with a tang of solder and stinging glue.

Every inch of this place was a palimpsest: old trade tunnel, slave barracks, quarantine ward, and now the favorite resort of men and women who preferred to buy their futures at a discount.

Nik went first, hauling their prisoner, still faintly bleeding from a trip down the ravine, by the collar.

Lyra flanked them, one hand on her bow despite the close quarters. Thorin limped behind, eyes rolling the ceiling for murder holes or hex slits, one hand deep in his battered coat as if he could forge a new weapon by pure force of will.

They had expected guards, and there were guards, but none of the theater: just ex-mercs in quilted coats, shuffling bones or dice, not even bothering to hide their knives.

The real power here was the mathematics of desperation; Apollo could see it in the lean of every shoulder, the way the hungry stared at the healthy, and the healthy at the wounded, measuring, always.

"A welcoming committee," Nik said, too loud, because if you acted like you owned the room, nobody asked who you'd stolen it from. "We've got business with the broker."

A tin whistle shrilled from somewhere unseen, and the crowd parted along a seam of mutual distrust.

A young man in a grease-spattered smock scuttled up and whispered close to Nik, a message, or maybe just a price.

Nik nodded, and the man led them inward, past a slow spiral of torches burning with a blue-green flame. Apollo caught the scent, arsenic, or a cousin to it. Not poison, but certainly a warning.

They wound down three flights, each hotter than the last, until they entered a rotunda braced with iron ribs.

Here, the currency changed: every bench was taken by men in debt and women with vendettas, their eyes dancing like candlelight in a draft.

At the far end, a pit was sunk into the floor, ringed with a grill of blackened steel. Heat rolled from it, carrying upward the low, steady sound of suffering.

Nik tilted the prisoner over the grill, so his feet just grazed the rungs. The man regained consciousness with a prayer, or a joke disguised as one. "Don't drop me," he managed. "It won't be the fire that kills you."

Nik only smiled, bland as unseasoned porridge. "You've got one job left, friend. Tell us who hired you, and maybe we let you keep your ears." He glanced at Apollo, who tried not to look interested.

The man struggled, but the smell of the pit was persuasive. "I never knew names. We drew marks off the wall in the old city. Gold for the first to bring a medic with the hair and the," He blinked, peering at Apollo. "the look. They said he'd be traveling with a woman and a cripple."

Was that what he looked like, Apollo wondered? Only the hair and the look?

Lyra stepped in, her voice as sharp as the knife she always kept behind her belt. "Who runs the wall in this hollow?"

The man fought to focus, sweat crawling down his forehead in pale sheets. "Velcris. Sometimes called the Broker, sometimes just 'the Night.' He doesn't leave the back office. He doesn't have to."

Thorin grunted, a noise that could have meant anything.

Nik let the prisoner down, then dropped him hard. The man landed in a heap and tried to crawl for the shadows, but one of the guards pinned him in place with a boot and a nod that said: You are a favor owed and nothing more.

The page in the spattered smock gestured them onward, not bothering with words. Apollo followed, eyes fixed on the floor to avoid catching the attention of any more desperate men with a hunger for stories, or worse.

He noticed that the deeper they went, the less the place resembled a city or a fort, and the more it felt like a confession: every corridor a wound, every iron door an attempt to stave off decay.

At the terminus, a clerk waited. Not a glamour-boy, not a scarecrow draped in threats, but a stoop-shouldered man in wire-rim glasses, ink stains down to his wrists, hands too clean for a digger or a dealer.

His face was geometric, the bones squared and the skin drawn so tight that nothing could sneak up on it from behind. His eyes were the pale, limpid blue of a man who had seen every angle and found them all, ultimately, boring.

He did not look up as they entered. "State your commodity or purchase inquiry," he said, voice flat as slate.

Lyra spat on the ground, which was not so much a gesture as a punctuation. "We're not selling," she said. "We want to know who's buying."

The Broker did not sigh, but Apollo felt the weight of the almost-sigh. "Clarify transaction," said the Broker, shuffling a sheaf of blood-red notes from one stack to another. "If you have a product, please provide the relevant—"

Nik leaned over the desk, close enough that a less interesting man might have flinched. "We want to see the wall," he said. "All the marks. Especially runs with a blue flag and a premium on medics."

The Broker's face did not move, but the hands paused. He nodded, once, as if confirming a suspicion that had just become mathematically necessary. "The wall is for closers only," he said. "But I suppose you're entitled."

He stood and walked in a way that suggested every muscle in his body had been pre-calibrated to avoid conflict, then ushered them into a side room lined in black velvet and iron.

There, on one massive sheet of hammered copper, were the marks: names, faces, sigils, all arranged in a grid tight as the seating at some cruel opera. Lyra scanned it, eyes darting from row to row.

Apollo looked for his own name, or something like it. He found nothing, then, lower down, a sketch. Not even good art, just a pale face and a washed-out halo of hair, no pupils, jaw too narrow.

The mark beside it read: "To be delivered in condition standard or better. Payment at the clerk's discretion." The bounty below it was not a number but an emblem he hadn't seen in decades, maybe longer: a wheel of gold, circled in blue fire.

Something in his chest ticked over, a bad spark plug, but he kept it off his face.

Nik found the same sigil, two lines down, attached to a stick-figure with the caption "Healer. No bleed. Do not cut." He snorted. "They really want you alive," he said, managing to sound impressed and disgusted in equal measure.

Thorin spat, then asked, "Who sets a bounty like that?"

The Broker shrugged. "Anonymous mark. Usually a private client. Very rare for the premium to be left blank, means the buyer is expecting to stay private, or that the commodity is worth more than the number could ever mean."

Lyra jerked her thumb at the wall. "And where do you fit in?"

The Broker smiled thinly. "I only make sure the debts get paid. It's in everyone's best interest to keep the economy running." He gestured at Apollo. "For what it's worth, if I were you, I'd run to the fifth district. The buyers there are less... organized."

Apollo didn't say thank you. He just stared at the Broker, long enough to see if the man would blink, then let it drop.

Nik took a sheet of paper from the wall and folded it, tucking it into his coat. "Just in case we need the terms," he said. He glanced at Apollo, then away, as if embarrassed for both of them.

The Broker returned to his desk, already shuffling new requests, already forgetting them. "If you leave now, you'll beat the rain," he said, voice almost pleasant.

They left. Nik did not turn back, nor did Lyra. Thorin paused at the door, as if to memorize the Broker's face.

They followed the smoke-and-leather passage back to the upper levels, the air changing from cauldron-hot to merely suffocating. The guards ignored them on the way out, too busy with their own calculus of violence and survival.

At the mouth of the hollow, the dog waited, nose twitching. Apollo stopped and scratched behind its ears. "You're the only one with any sense," he said, softer than he intended.

Lyra led the way east, through a chute of rock and scrub. Apollo kept his eyes on the ground, the echo of the marks on the copper wall still burning behind his eyelids.

At the second switchback, Nik threw the paper at Apollo's chest. "Might as well read your own eulogy," he said.

Apollo let the page unfurl. The sketch this time was sharper, the description chilling in its brevity: "White Physician, also answers to Lio, last seen traveling east. High probability of magic in use. Target known to survive wounds that should kill. Capture alive at all costs."

There was nothing else. No backstory, no allegory. Just the certainty of being hunted.

He folded the page and pocketed it.

Behind him, the dog scraped at something unseen in the dirt, unearthing a second prize, a silver chain, snapped at the clasp, the kind that might once have held a coin or a keepsake.

He didn't want to see what was attached. Not now.

Apollo walked on, the memory of the Broker's thin smile still scraping at the inside of his skull. He wondered if the old gods would even bother at this point, or if they'd just let the market decide.

In the east, the morning waited, silent and gold and uninterrupted.

It would not stay that way for long.

### *Chapter 32: Ghost Orchard*

By the time the trail dropped them into the belly of the valley, the sun was gone, replaced by a blue-black dusk that stretched dusk into infinity.

Apollo couldn't see the sky for the branches, and the air had a flavor, minerally sweet, with the high note of blossom, the undercurrent of rot.

There was no sign of the old city anymore; only trees, packed so tight their limbs interlaced like the fingers of feuding gods.

Rows and rows, as if the valley had once been planted with the logic of a spreadsheet, then left for centuries to go feral.

Nik staggered to a stop, hands on his knees, and eyed the orchard with the look of a man waiting for it to apologize. "This isn't on any map," he said, more to himself than the others.

Lyra was already halfway down the slope, boots skidding through the mulch.

Every tree she passed moved a little, then settled, like a crowd shifting at the edge of a duel. The dog charged ahead, then froze, tail up, hackles combed by static.

Thorin grunted, dragged his sore leg after him. Apollo watched the dwarf's face for signs of the fever breaking through, but Thorin's expression was as obstinate as ever. If he was suffering, it was by choice.

At the floor of the valley, the temperature flipped. It was warmer here, not just by degrees, but in the way of ovens and the underbellies of blankets.

Sweat prickled at Apollo's hairline. He rolled his sleeve, palmed the scar where the aether vein still ached from last week's fight.

The orchard hummed. Not music, but a vibration: the feeling of being inside a throat just before it spoke.

"We make camp here," Lyra announced, as if the idea had been her own all along.

She kicked a space clear at the bottom of a gulch where maybe a hundred trees bent over a single, low well.

The wall around the well was old but not ancient: the stones cobbled with a logic that suggested both ritual and efficiency, the way temples sometimes doubled as granaries.

Nik flopped down, working his cramping legs. "What's the story here?" he asked, not expecting an answer. He busied himself picking seeds from the dog's coat.

Lyra ignored him, her focus on the stone wall, specifically, the places where the mortar had been picked out, then patched again in a different shade of clay.

She rapped the edge with her knuckles. A hollow note. "There are stairs under this," she said.

Thorin shrugged and slumped at the base of the wall, head tipped back, breathing deep. "If you want to sleep underfoot, be my guest. I'm not digging." He gnawed a chunk of jerky, teeth working it to paste.

Apollo barely listened. The orchard was singing, a low resonance that made the cartilage in his ribs want to vibrate out of his skin.

The urge to reach for the energy was an old habit, but tonight it was impossible to resist. The trees bled aether.

Not the brittle, city-refined stuff in syringes or orbs, but the original: the kind that grew in the cracks of the world, tasty and pure enough to strip the old paint off a soul.

He closed his eyes, only for a moment, and let it seep in.

The effect was immediate: the ache in his left leg gone, the floaters in his vision turning crystalline and sharp.

He opened his eyes and the orchard was ten times brighter, not in color, but in dimension. He could see the auras of the trees as pressure gradients, subtle but real, each one looping back into the soil and then up again.

A recycling. An ecosystem of hunger.

He felt Lyra's eyes before he saw them. She watched him from the crown of the well, arms around her knees.

"You're not fooling anyone," she said, her voice not much more than air. "Whatever you're doing, you're doing it too loud."

Apollo shrugged, tried to look mortal. "It's just old magic," he lied. "This place is soaked in it."

"Maybe save some for the morning," she replied, but her expression softened for a second, like she'd let herself believe him. "We're all running on deficit."

They camped in a knot of roots. Nik rigged a windbreak with his coat and a tarpaulin, while Thorin dozed and Lyra whittled a branch into a stake, methodical, the shavings curling around her boots.

The air thickened after sunset, made everything taste of syrup and green wood.

Apollo found sleep impossible, even with Lyra on first watch and the dog stretched across his shins.

The orchard called out, each time aligned with the rhythm of his pulse. You could almost imagine it cared if you lived or died. Or maybe it just wanted you to know it was there.

He waited until the others had gone slack with fatigue, Nik's snore like a file on steel, Thorin's breath a staggered saw, to slip loose and walk the rows.

The orchard didn't feel dangerous; it felt expectant. As if the trees knew what he was, and had been waiting a very long time for something like him to show up.

He picked a fruit at random. The skin was lemon yellow, the size of a child's fist, fuzzed with down.

He pressed his thumb to it, felt the rush of aether sluice up his arm and into the latticework behind his eyes.

He saw, for just a second, a memory not his own: a woman bent over a book, her fingers stained with pollen; a child carving names into the trunks, not with a knife, but with a piece of quartz tied to a cord.

The images didn't mean anything, but the sensation did: the orchard recorded, and it paid in kind.

He put the fruit back, unwilling to eat it. Instead, he pressed his palm to a trunk and let the hum work its way through him, knitting the microfractures in his wrist, bandaging the old ache in his shoulder.

Even the scars faded a little, their edges taking on a new color, almost gold.

When he turned, Lyra was standing at the row's end, hands in her pockets, face blank.

"How long?" she asked.

He tried to dodge the question, but her look made it clear she'd count silence as confession.

"All my life," he said, which was also a lie.

She nodded, then vanished back to camp, her footfalls perfectly even. The scent of apple wood lingered in her wake.

—

Dawn brought fog and the static of frost on every leaf. Apollo returned to camp, the gold still bubbling under his skin.

He felt like a lantern with no wick, brighter inside than out, and always burning a little too fast.

Nik woke first, then Thorin, then the dog, which seemed to regard the orchard with the same wariness one reserved for predators too lazy to chase unless provoked.

Lyra slept the latest, and when she woke, it was abrupt, like she'd chosen the second in which she'd open her eyes and not a heartbeat before.

They ate, then prepared to leave. Nik packed the tarpaulin so tight it could have doubled as a club.

Thorin checked his leg, better, but not whole. Apollo watched Lyra, and she watched him back, just once, as if to say: whatever bargain you made last night, keep it to yourself.



It was Nik who first noticed the difference.

He stared at his left forearm, the scar that had once zigzagged pale against the hair now gone. "Did I have a scar here yesterday?" he asked, voice cracking a little.

Lyra peered over, frowned, and shrugged. "You drink too much. Maybe you dreamed it."

Apollo knew better. He looked to the tree line, and sure enough. The aether there was a loan, not a gift.

As they left the valley, Thorin limped less, but when asked about his old friend from the Watch, the dwarf looked confused, like he'd mislaid the memory in a dream.

Lyra seemed unchanged, except for a tic at the corner of her mouth, and a green to her eyes that was more jungle than grass.

Apollo said nothing. He felt the voids left behind by what the orchard hadn't repaired, the debts it had collected. *'Everything in this world has a price,'* he thought, but it felt less clever than it used to.

They crested the ridge by noon. The orchard behind them looked ordinary again, all the strange geometry erased by the clarity of daylight.

But when he glanced back, Apollo saw faces in the trees, pale, unfinished, like wax masks left too long in the sun.

One looked a little like Torgo. One looked a little like himself, but older, or younger. It was impossible to know the difference.

He kept walking. The next valley would be worse, and the old hunger in his arms, gold now, not blue, reminded him that the real story, the one the orchard had tried to tell, was just starting.

Whatever gods watched over this world, they no longer answered prayer. But they did keep a ledger, and at the bottom of it, Apollo's name was written twice.

### *Chapter 33: Terms Of Service*

Varnwick was as ordinary as a wound, ugly with the business of healing.

They reached its outskirts at the cruel edge of sunrise, boots tacky with road mud and the dog's fur clotted in burrs.

Apollo watched the humped silhouettes of barns and blockhouses inch closer through the mist, all rendered in the same washed-out ochre, as if the world had grown bored of inventing new shades for disappointment.

Lyra broke first, boots quickening as the flatness drew up around them, then she slackened pace, the careful economy of someone not eager to arrive so much as to see what the town would take from them.

Nik trudged with his hands in his pockets, the angle of his chin defiant, while Thorin lagged, shoulders set and mouth bracketed in pale irritation.

The dog did not run ahead, not here; it limped beside Apollo, occasionally glancing up as if to check that the world was still worth the trouble.

Varnwick's main street ran the length of a half-dried canal, everything arranged in lines so straight it stung the eye.

There were no guards at the edge, only a pair of children with matching burn scars, one playing at shooting the other with a crossbow he'd fashioned from a splinter of chair leg.

The buildings were recent, built for holding rather than shelter: mudbrick and tar, roofs weighted against wind by dead stove parts and bundles of stone.

Only the lantern posts offered a nod to beauty, they curled in wrought iron spirals, painted with the old city's badge: three silver fish, one missing its head.

Apollo caught the stink of sulfur, then the subtler reek of boiled mutton somewhere up the channel.

He reached for his coat's collar and straightened it, not for warmth but because the habit of pretense was harder to shed than most.

They cut for the nearest hostel, a blockhouse whose sign, "The Iron Turnip", comically literal, the carving was of a root with rivets hammered through its skin, hung by the mercy of a single rope.

The common room was busy with the sort of men who did not argue with knives, and the proprietress was as gray and cold as the sod outside, her left hand ending bluntly in a stretch of leather thong.

She looked at Lyra, then at the dwarf, then at Apollo, her eyes lingering not on any wound, but on the way he did not bother to hide his limp.

"Room and board," she stated, not a question.

Nik grinned as if he liked her, which was the closest he came to honesty. "Just the room. We'll handle our own food." He passed over a coin he'd soldered back together days ago.

The woman flipped it once, then tucked it into a steel box behind the bar. "Stairs up. You'll share the floor with two other parties: wagoners on contract, and a party of Glassmar runners that lost their pass. Don't expect quiet."

Nothing in her face said "welcome," but Apollo found the lack of curiosity preferable to the cultivated suspicion of the last three towns.

He followed Nik up, the stair creaking under their collective hunger. The room was little more than a shelf with mats, but it was dry, and the walls thick enough to make an argument with the neighbors unlikely.

They dropped packs and, by silent majority, ignored the thin woollen blankets stacked in the corner. The last time they'd trusted a hostel's bedding, Lyra had spent two days digging out mites with the edge of a sewing needle.

Thorin sank to the mat, boots still on. "If I don't get a drink, I'll sleep until the world coughs up the sun," he mumbled. His breathing went raw and even before the words finished.

Apollo sat, legs extended, and took mental inventory: shoes wet but whole, nothing to eat that wasn't dried to the density of horn, dog already curled at his feet. The gold itch under his skin had abated since the basin, but not enough to forget.

Nik did not bother to remove his coat, just lay back and stared up at the soot-stained beams. For a while, nobody said anything.

There was an unspoken hope that quiet would suffice as healing, or at least as penance for the trouble it had cost to reach this far.

Apollo spent the morning counting the town's noises. There were none of the city's bells or the ritual shouting of watchmen. Instead, every few minutes came the thump of something heavy hitting water.

Once, the muffled scream of a pig. By noon, most of the commerce under their window had resolved into the shuffling of ration crates and the scrape of boots on stone dust.

He tested the air: no trace of the cult's haze, nor the perfumed sick of bounty runners. For a moment he let himself believe they had vanished, ghosted, as Nik liked to say. He knew better, but the luxury of wishing cost nothing here.

Lyra went out first, returning with a packet of orange root and a side-eye that said she'd found nothing but upcharged thread and rumor.

Nik took Thorin's coin and spent the afternoon negotiating in the taproom. Apollo watched the dog, which had taken to sleeping with its nose jammed between the

boards; he wondered if the animal could smell trouble before he could, or if it just liked the dark.

By evening, Lyra had patched the holes in Nik's coat, and Nik had managed to return from the common room without new injuries or invitations to duel.

He sat on the mat facing Apollo and offered, as if in apology, a glass of something that looked like spit and tasted like the inside of an old pipe.

"They're asking about us," Nik said, half closing his eyes. "They don't care about the girl, and they think Thorin is dead. But there's noise about a 'ghost-physician' with a price on his head."

Apollo shrugged. "They want what we gave to the Broker, or what's left of it."

Nik's grin was mechanical. "Nobody asks *\*why\** anymore. Just who, and how much." He leaned in. "They described your hair. Said if anyone brings it back attached, there's a bonus."

Lyra snorted, but did not look up from the thread.

Later, as dusk thickened and the hostel took on the dull shine of a temporary cathedral, Apollo slipped out to find supplies. The town's main shop was wedged between a livery and a public house.

The shelves glistened with jars of yellow fat, old preserves, and bottles of folk medicine: "Guaranteed to cure twelve fevers," said one, the label half-rotted.

The man at the counter wore a scarf to hide the ruins of his throat, but his eyes, blue, and uncomfortably patient, said he was not as helpless as he wished to seem.

Apollo bought dried bandage, two lengths of needles, and a cask of dog tallow, then, on impulse, asked for the "cleanest painkiller" available.

The shopkeep reached beneath the counter and brought up a glass vial, the stopper ringed in wax but the contents so clear they seemed to amplify the light. "This one's dear," the man whispered, voice like wind behind a wall. "Last of the batch, but if you need less, you can pay in kind."

Apollo slid over the last of their silver, but the man caught his wrist and held it a second longer than necessary. The touch was clinical, but Apollo recognized the pressure: someone checking for a pulse, or for the current of something better.

"Do you know what's coming?" the man asked, words so soft the air dampened them before they could carry.

Apollo met the stare. "I know what's chasing."

The shopkeep let go, but not without a parting glance at the veins in Apollo's wrist, where even now a trace of the gold shimmered beneath the skin.

Then he wrapped the bundle and handed it over, bowing slightly without lowering his gaze. Apollo took the package and left, the cold outside feeling almost like relief.

Back at the hostel, Lyra and Nik sat by the filthy window, splitting a heel of bread and watching the lanterns ignite across the far shore.

Thorin had not moved, except to turn his face to the wall. The dog's tail thumped as Apollo entered, but only once.

They ate in silence, the new supplies dulling none of the fatigue.

The next morning, a thin layer of rime had iced over every window. Apollo woke to the sound of hissing below, followed by a rhythmic knocking on the stairwell.

He pressed his ear to the mat and listened: the steps were too careful for a bounty runner, too heavy for one of the town's pages.

At the door, Lyra slid a knife from her sleeve and gestured for quiet. The knock came again, insistent now. Nik groaned, rolled to his feet, and opened the door just enough to peer out.

A woman stood on the threshold, shawl wound twice over her chin and mouth. Her eyes were mottled hazel, lid creased by old injury, the left side squinting as if the bone beneath had never set quite right.

She held a folder of parchment in her hands, the top page signed with a seal Apollo couldn't identify.

She glanced at Nik, then at the others, and without warning pushed the folio into his chest. "For the one who calls himself Physician," she said, voice nasal, clear, and unimpressed. "And a warning: if you plan to leave, do it before the road unfreezes."

Nik accepted the package, shut the door, and offered it to Apollo with a little flourish. "Mail call."

The folio was light. Apollo cracked the seal, peeled back the top page. It was a sketch, well-made, the lines of his jaw and brow rendered with an artist's affection for intimate hurt.

Below, a list of known associates, starting with Lira and "one injured dwarvish, possibly deceased." There was a clause at the bottom, inked in red: IF SALVAGEABLE, DELIVER TO MARKET UNINJURED.

"The reward's doubled since last week," Nik said. "I checked."

Apollo folded the folio, creased it, and set it under his pack. "We leave in two days," he said, then hesitated, feeling the weight of something watching. "East."

That night, Apollo dreamed of the well in the city, of a bowl deep enough to hold the whole of the world's memory. He saw hands reaching for him, sometimes Lyra's, sometimes his own, the gold in his veins leaking from his skin and pooling at the bottom where it congealed into something bright and cold. He woke with a start, the dog's head pressed to his throat.

On the last morning, Nik tested the air and declared the freeze had begun to lift. They packed their things. Apollo pulled the folio from his bag, tore out the portrait, and fed it to the coal stove in the corner. The paper smoked, then curled, then split into a blackened ring of ash.

They left Varnwick without looking back, the sun just a pale bruise on the eastern horizon. At the edge of town, Apollo saw a fresh notice nailed to the post: a blank page, stamped only in the bottom corner with three silver fish.

He kept walking, Lyra and Nik flanking him, the dog alert for whatever came next.

*'Not an end,'* Apollo thought, not quite ready to admit it even as the morning lapped at his boots. *'Just a new set of rules.'*

He walked east, always east, certain that—whatever waited—this time, he would not walk alone.

#### *Chapter 34: Campfire Etiquette*

When they broke from the trees, Apollo didn't see the fire first or the people around it, but the river, earthy red in the predusk, grazing its way around the half-circle of tents and lean-tos like a barn cat hoping to be invited in.

The encampment was just tight enough to look temporary but too meticulous to be abandoned soon: wooden stakes in an uneven ring, canvas patched with three colors of resin and whatever rags were cleanest, racks for drying meat, and signaling twine strung from branch to branch in a language only birds could read.

No livestock, no grandstanding. Hunters, then. Or people who wanted to be less noticed than they were.

The man tending the fire had the air of someone who'd known what every part of this land tasted like, smoke, clay, maybe even a little feather.

He was tall, shoulders built out like the crossbars of a gallows, and his hands were busy with a wire triangle and a pair of flat stones he flicked into a rhythm. His hair was short, gray at the temples; his face might have been handsome, but it was worked over with scars and patience.

What caught Apollo was not the face, though, but the way the man sat: as if sitting was something he had been specifically commissioned to do, and anything else would be a violation of contract.

The others at the camp waited their turns to look. Two more, one a woman, deliberate in the way her arms crossed and recrossed, and the third a younger man or teenager, wiry, burned on the backs of the hands, a fidgeter with something that could have been a child's toy or a trap trigger.

All three had the set of people who measured even a gnat's shadow before letting it pass.

"A welcoming committee," Nik said, stage-whispered, as if the cleverness might earn them a discount on whatever came next.

Lyra said nothing. She scanned the perimeter twice, hand flexing on the bow she wore more as jewelry than threat. Thorin just hiked up the last bit of shale slope and planted himself, breathing hard, like he'd rather die here than go another step.

The man at the fire raised one hand, not a greeting, exactly, just an acknowledgment, and waited.

Apollo wiped the back of his wrist over his mouth, hoping to clear the taste of old city from his tongue. He stepped up, catching the man's gaze.

The eyes were dark; not black, but a sort of brown so dense it refused to reflect the flame. "Evening," Apollo managed, pitching the word somewhere between announcement and apology.

The man nodded. He ran his finger over the wire and stone, then set it aside. "You lost?"

It was not a question, but Apollo fabricated an answer anyway. "Making for the glass fields. Need a place to sleep that isn't waterlogged."

The woman shifted her weight, triangular face highlighted in the fire. Her eyes were the washed-out blue of sky hours before a storm. She wore a spear slung across her back, the tip rag-wrapped but crusted in something black.

"You can share the fire," the man said. "If you trade for it. We're short on stories or salt, whichever you think is worth the most."

Nik was about to offer a punchline, but Lyra shut him up with a look.

The third, the wiry one, grinned with too many teeth. "Or maybe you got news from Varnwick," he said. "We heard there was trouble there."

Apollo watched the stranger's hands, nicked, splintered, the nails chewed to pink. "Nothing but the usual. We're not anyone's message runner."

The man at the fire grunted, accepting the deflection. He turned his attention to Thorin, who'd dropped to a crouch and was now poking at his ruined boot with the end of a stick.

The silence stretched, but not the uncomfortable kind: just the slow calculus of strangers testing for softness, or places to wedge a knife.

"I'm Cale," said the man, then motioned at the others: "Renna, and Yiv. Don't worry about the dog. He's seen worse company."

Apollo did not introduce himself. Instead, he let the name settle into the marrow of the moment.

Lyra finally sat, and Nik, sensing the edge had dulled, angled for the leftovers near the fire. The dog inched forward, nose twitching. Apollo followed a step behind, ignoring the throb in his leg.

Someone had made stew, roots, jerky, bitter wild peas. Cale ladled out portions; he did not offer bread or hard tack, but watched like a hawk as each of them took a bowl. His hands, Apollo noticed, were rock steady.

The first round of questions was always tactical: where are you headed, how many days' rations, who's after you, who do you owe.

Cale asked none of this. Instead, he told a story about a drowned city two weeks east, and how the ice there never melted, even in the belly of summer.

Renna listened, but her face never softened. Yiv piped up with a theory about the aquifers underneath, how they forged glass pillars that wormed up through the frost; when he grinned, Apollo could see the red gaps where teeth had been traded for luck or ransom.

Nik responded, as Nik would, by turning every question into a riddle. He bragged about once eating a crow egg that hatched in his stomach, and how he coughed up a



blackbird three springs later. Cale found the joke funny, but only in the way someone finds a familiar disease both tragic and inevitable.

Lyra spent the meal sharpening a knife, her eyes tracking Renna. Those two were predator and predator, equal and opposite.

Apollo watched their conversation unfold in silence, each wordless glance a feint or a mapped strike. He waited for the moment one of them would break form, but neither did.

Thorin, however, fell easily into the role of tired survivor. He asked about the river and the traps set along its banks, about which side of the woods still had edible game, and how the salt lines were holding up against the black rot.

He let Cale lecture, which seemed to please both of them; men who'd lived hard could always recognize each other, and the language of shared misery was as intimate as any tongue.

After a while, the talk shrank down. Yiv went to tinker with his trap thing; Renna cleaned her spear, the rag moving with a violence that told its own story.

Apollo stayed at the fire, sipping the dregs, watching the way Cale adjusted the rock ring around the flame as if he expected someone to steal it the second he turned away.

It occurred to Apollo, not for the first time, that the world ran on this kind of vigilance: the idea that even friends, or the closest thing to them, might one day come back for the thing you valued most.

He waited until the others had drifted off. Cale lingered, staring into the fire with the patience of an unpaid debt.

They sat in the hush, listening to the crack and spit of pine. Apollo's arm ached; he flexed the hand, watching the gold shimmer nearly invisible now beneath the healed skin.

"You're a quiet sort," Cale said without looking up.

Apollo shrugged. "Nothing worth saying."

Cale nodded once, as if this were proof of a philosophy he'd always believed. "The river here takes things," he said.

"Names, memories, sometimes bodies. I've seen it twice, maybe three times. The first, it left the body but took the name. The second, it left the name but took everything from the neck down. Third—" He broke off, then laughed.

Apollo waited. "You keep count?"

Cale's eyes flicked over, black pools in the reflected firelight. "Someone should," he said.

Apollo rolled a pebble under his boot. "What's the tax on passage?"

Cale held up two fingers. "Two questions, or two truths. Ask or answer, but not both."

It was a game, and Apollo respected it. "All right. First: Why are you out here?"

Cale considered him, then answered: "Not safe to be in the cities, not safe to stay outside. Out here's the only place I ever knew how to be." He nodded at Apollo. "Your turn."

Apollo weighed his answer. "I'm running out of time."

Cale accepted this without sarcasm, only the barest flick of eyelid to telegraph agreement. "Second question?"

"Why did you let us in?" Apollo cut to it.

This time, Cale smiled for real; it was thin, but not unkind. "Because you're not the first ones to pass this way. And you won't be the last." He paused, then: "But you're the first I thought might make it past the fields."

Apollo wanted to ask what was waiting in the fields, but the rules of the game said two and done.

He felt the weight of the fire, the river, the night, and his body. Something passed between them, a recognition, old as hunger.

Apollo watched the flames and considered the geography of trust: how easily it burned, how quickly it turned to ash in the wrong hands.

He left for the edge of camp, found a patch of soft ground beside the dog. The animal did not acknowledge him, but when Apollo lay back and matched his breathing to the rise and fall of the distant water, he somehow felt less alone.

He listened as one by one, the others laid down: Nik's snores, Lyra's slow, methodical unpacking of every single pouch and strap.

Thorin's mumble, the incongruity of Renna humming an actual song as she cleaned her weapon. In the end, only the crackle of embers, the grind of river stone, and the slow, careful heartbeat of the man called Cale.

Sleep came late, but when it did, Apollo dreamed of nothing but the hush between two questions, and what it meant to have someone else count your days.

—

He woke before sunrise, but Cale was already at the river, sleeves rolled, hands cupped. He did not call out; Apollo joined him, feeling the air tense and electric, as if the world was about to nod in either approval or regret.

"Did you ever think," Cale said, "the butchers and the saints are just men who made different bargains with the same god?"

Apollo tried to smile. "That's what the old priests said." He crouched, let the water run over his fingers. It was brain-cold, but clean.

Cale stood. When he did, the surface of the river leveled just a little, barely more than a sigh. "It's easier to start over if you never had anything to begin with," he added, then walked back to camp.

Apollo watched him go, feeling the gold in his arms answer the new morning, prickling with a familiar ache. He wondered, as always, if this was the bargain he meant to make, or if he'd been tricked into it by inertia.

He decided, as he always did, to keep walking.

When the dog finally decided to follow, Apollo rewarded it with half a strip of dried fish, then stuffed his hands in his pockets and prepared to head east.

Behind him, the river resumed its shape, the sun not bothering to rise fully but only loaning its light to the world for one more day. The camp faded behind the next curve, but Apollo could still taste the memory of salt, smoke, and unfinished questions on his tongue.

He walked into the dawn, which was never gold, but always just enough.

### *Chapter 35: Terms of Travel*

The morning packed itself in tight, like an ulcer or a secret. Apollo woke to the sound of boots hissing over wet grass, Lyra's silhouette already moving among the shadows, double-checking nothing and everything at once.

No sentimental farewells; Nik and Yiv exchanged a handshake that could have been a threat, or a bribe, or just the minimum pressure required to keep the world from splitting in two.

Cale did not pretend at camaraderie. He shouldered the majority of their combined gear without complaint, as if the burden was a privilege he'd earned.

The party snaked out from beneath the canopy, dragging after them the raw nerves of too many recent betrayals.

The trail was an afterthought, a rut between a sickle of mossed-over boulders and a stand of saplings whose branches bled an improbable blue. The sky overhead was white, dry, and hollow, and the air inside it tasted more of memory than weather.

Nik shuffled next to Yiv, the two of them orbiting in a dance of mutual suspicion.

Apollo caught fragments of their banter: the time Yiv blew a safe and instead vaporized an entire cellar, the week Nik soldered a tripwire so finely he caught only the toes of the mark's left boot, picking it clean with a thief's pride.

"Explosives are an art," Yiv declared, voice shrill with conviction. "You just paint with a bigger brush."

Nik's laughter came brittle and too loud, but the cadence underneath was genuine. In a brief, unguarded glance, the two sized each other up, each recognizing the other's skill set as a mirror with a slightly different fracture.

Apollo watched rather than joined. He walked mid-pack, careful to keep evenly between Lyra's perimeter sweeps and the unyielding choreography of Cale and Thorin at the rear.

Renna haunted the gap behind Lyra, every few minutes glancing back sharply, as if expecting to be followed by someone who had not yet decided whether to attack or apologize. The tension in her movements suggested she was betting on both.

No one asked if this was a good idea. Even if they had, Apollo doubted he would answer. The memory of Torgo and the river was still raw, a throb in the knuckles of his right hand where the gold had started to show itself even in daylight.

He flexed the fingers, feeling the pulse of latent power run up to his elbow and then vanish like a nervous tic, always gone when he tried to catch it. He wondered if that's how it would be, from now on: power always a rumor, never a fact.

They moved through the ridge, sun crawling slow enough that every minute lasted twice as long.

The world grew swampy; dew turned to mist, the ground to a slick, uncertain membrane. At the bottom of a slope, Lyra paused only to nod at an obvious snag in the route, an old rope bridge, its struts draped with what looked like the desiccated pelt of something once-ambitious but now thoroughly dead.

Nik considered the span with the fatalism of a man who had already practiced his own last words. "You suppose that's load-bearing?" he said.

"It's not even self-bearing," Yiv spat, arms folded. "I'd sooner trust fortune cookies for structural advice."

Lyra gave the bridge a cursory test with her sleeve-wrapped hand. "We'll walk the bog," she said, which in the hierarchy of Lyra's language meant the matter was closed.

The alternate path was not a path; it was a trough of peat and standing water, thin ice at the edge, the whole of it humming with the intent to pull you under if you so much as glanced away.

Yiv groaned, but Cale was already moving, boots breaking the ice in a rhythm that turned his progress into a kind of challenge to the world: See if you can stop me. When he reached the deepest part, he stopped. Turned. "It's fine," he called. "Nothing bites unless it can win."

This was not strictly reassuring, but Lyra went after him. Nik and Yiv and even Thorin followed in silence.

Apollo hesitated only a beat, then stepped onto the crust. The cold seeped in immediately, up through the boot and into the marrow. At the halfway point, the bog flexed but did not swallow him.

Still, something shifted beneath his foot, a suggestion, not a certainty, of movement. He did not look down, but focused instead on the line of Cale's back, the way the man moved as if he belonged to every place and none. It was a trick Apollo recognized. Nobody brave ever wore it so convincingly.

Halfway across, something slick brushed Apollo's ankle. He kept moving. The next moment, it happened again, firmer, wrapping a millisecond and then gone.

He heard nothing, but the impression of being measured, tested, perhaps, nearly stopped him. Only the fact that Lyra was now on the far side, watching him with a look of not-quite-pity, kept him in motion.

On the other bank, they caught their breath and wrung out sleeves, unwilling to talk about what, if anything, had accompanied them through the water.

Yiv, whose legs were thin as wire, plopped down and began to tinker with the bindings on his boots.

Nik offered a canister of mash, which Yiv accepted with a grunt. They shared it, and Apollo noticed the way Yiv's eyes lingered on Nik's hands, measuring the scars, cataloguing the precision, and understood that a bargain had been silently struck.

Lyra checked their direction, then swept ahead. Renna shadowed her with a patience that was almost predatory.

The terrain turned rougher, chunks of quartz and frostbitten shrubs thrown over the ridgeline like afterthoughts.

Around noon, they came to a place where the trail vanished entirely, replaced by what the map in Apollo's mind called a "survey station", a ruin of old walls and a ring of blackened stone where fire had once been a luxury, not an indictment.

It was here they stopped, at Cale's silent suggestion. The group fanned out in a semi-circle, each facing outward, as if waiting for the perimeter to announce itself.

They said little as they ate, and less as they prepared for dusk. Here, the cold was not the kind that numbed but the kind that woke every old injury and called it back by name.

Thorin, who had spoken less than twenty words the entire day, broke the silence by pointing at Cale's left hand, the way the knuckles had never quite reset, the pinky angled wrong. "You were army," he said, not as a question.

Cale flexed the hand. "Once."

Thorin nodded, then went back to chewing.

Apollo watched the exchange and felt the old itch return: the certainty that every person in his orbit was hiding a kernel of their original self, some splinter that, if pulled, would unravel the entire project.

He sometimes wondered if this was just how exiles recognized each other; maybe all the restlessness in the world was just fragments trying to migrate home.

That night, Cale took first watch. No one argued to the contrary. The fire was small and mean, but Apollo had the sense that it was not meant to illuminate so much as to remind the world they were, for the moment, still dangerous enough to be left alone. The group curled around the embers.

Nik and Yiv traded stories too quietly to hear, Lyra and Renna hung back to back, each pretending to sleep. Thorin pulled his coat over his head and entered a hibernation only the truly exhausted could manage.

Apollo did not sleep. He sat with his back to the ruins, the pulse in his wrist now a steady glow, the gold visible only if he squinted.

He watched Cale at the edge of firelight, unmoving, gaze fixed outward. There was something in the stillness of the man that made Apollo nervous, the way he seemed to blend into the environment and yet declare, with every breath, that he was nothing of it.

He wondered, for the first time in days, what it would take for someone like that to break. Or, harder still, to admit to being breakable at all.

When the last of the fire became memory, Apollo let himself listen to the night. The wind chafed the station's old stones; far off, something howled, then stopped.

In the silence that followed, he watched Cale, not for signs of betrayal, but for the moment something in the world decided to challenge the thin perimeter they had drawn around themselves.

It never came. The morning, as always, arrived without permission.

Apollo wiped the frost from his sleeve, stood, and looked over the valley below. The sun bled out over a new horizon, throwing shadows thin as wounds down the hillside. When he glanced back at Cale, the man had not moved, had not even blinked.

Behind them, the others roused themselves. Nik whistled softly and began packing up; Yiv ratcheted his toolbox and tested each hinge as if planning to set the entire world into a trap of his own making.

Lyra and Renna avoided even the pretense of civility, but in their mutual silence Apollo recognized something like respect, or at least the hope of someday earning it.

They set off down the ridge, the river a new suggestion in the hollow below. For a moment, Apollo's mind flashed on the priest in the nave, on Torgo's last laugh, on the way the city's illusion had tried to bind him in with nothing but hunger and a geometrical lie.

He reached into his pocket and touched the fragment of amber Torgo left behind. It was cold, but the cold felt like company now. He closed his hand around it and followed the others into the bruised dawn, thinking that, if nothing else, the perimeter would hold, at least for another day.

### *Chapter 36: Fire and Rain*

The rain bent in sideways, even under what was left of the weather station's roof.

Cale and Nik had lashed a tarp over the east corner, anchoring it with stone and the weight of their collective disappointment, but water still found its cunning routes: dripping from beam to knuckle, sinking into the fibers of their sleeves, gathering at the base of Apollo's spine until his skin prickled with the cold.

The fire's smoke tangled with the steam lifting from their bodies, seasoning the air with the flavor of desperation and scorched lichen.

Yiv complained about the draw every fifteen seconds, as if the correct arrangement of sticks and spit would shift the odds back into his favor.



"You're choking it," he accused, stabbing a finger through the fog at Cale, who seemed to rearrange the fuel out of nothing more than muscle memory.

Cale's hands, those immovable, unhurried levers, ignored the heckling and broke the kindling down with a precision that had nothing to do with heat and everything to do with order.

"All fires eat," Cale said at last, not looking up. "This one just chews its food." He laid a log across the embers, slow as a man playing chess with a child.

Nik liked this. He lifted his battered dice cup and shook it, the rattle almost drowned by the patter of rain. "Who's in?" he called. "Wager is whatever you'd hate to lose most."

Renna grinned, which on her face looked close to a threat. "That's how I left my last family," she said, and pulled a beaded charm from her coat pocket, setting it on the stone beside her. "I'll call you, thief."

Thorin huffed. "Don't gamble with men who smile before they're sure," he warned, but the urge to outlast Nik's luck was stronger than caution. He rummaged in the depths of his traveling pants and produced a wedge of silver, dull where the stamp had worn away but still obvious as currency.

He set it beside Renna's trinket, then folded his arms as if someone might try to snatch the winnings before the game even started.

Lyra glanced at the pile, weighed the odds, and pulled a slender vial from inside her boot. The stopper was waxed and the fluid within glowed faintly, a street apothecary special.

She balanced it atop the charm and silver, giving Nik her best dead-eyed stare. "If you palm a roll, I cut off your favorite finger."

Nik made a show of looking hurt. "You can't prove anything in advance. That's the beauty of probability."

"Sure," Yiv said, "but you can't cheat physics," and he dug from his own coat a spool of copper wire, polished down by worry. He set it on the stone, then crossed his arms tightly over his chest, as if exposing the contents had cost him something vital.

Apollo watched. Rain trickled down one side of his face, snaking around his jaw before vanishing into the collar of his shirt. He had nothing worth the stake.

He felt the heat of Torgo's amber against his thigh, but the idea of putting it up for dice was laughable; even Nik would recoil at the sacrilege. So he hung back, content for once to observe, to let the others play at luck.



Nik rolled first, all flourished wrist and theater. "Three-fours," he announced, grinning into the suspicious faces of his audience.

Renna snorted. "Show me." He did: the dice read exactly as promised.

Lyra rolled next. The dice clattered and spun, then settled: "Two fives," she said.

Thorin's turn. He rolled, then grunted, flicking his tongue against his teeth. "Pair of aces. Call." He eyed Nik, who looked wounded and made a protest about the rules, which no one listened to.

When Yiv rolled, the dice came up one and two. He swore in a language Apollo didn't recognize, then laughed. "No luck for a man who bets on rain," he said.

Renna took the cup, rattled it with a flourish, then rolled a perfect six and five. She smiled, a slow-motion event, and slouched back against the column, boots extended. "That's game."

Nik blinked, then shrugged, and gathered up the pile. "We all lose to the house, eventually," he said, but Apollo could see the resentment in his jaw; he hated losing more than rain, more than hunger.

They played two more rounds.

The stakes grew steadily more ridiculous, a lock of Nik's hair, Lyra's prized flint, Thorin's finger-length of solder, which he insisted had sentimental value but no one believed.

Renna lost her charm on the third round but won back twice as much on the fourth, and by the end the only real constant was the relentless, consuming wet.

When the dice began repeating more often than not, Yiv called fraud. "You sanded the edges," he accused. "I can see it."

Nik, wounded, held the dice up to the firelight. "Examine for yourself."

Yiv did, rolling them between his palms, then throwing them on the stone ten, twelve times in a row. The bell curve was too sharp. "You're a liar and a cheat," Yiv pronounced, but without heat; it was, to him, an intellectual crime, not a moral one.

Renna pressed Nik for a confession. "How many sets do you travel with, really?" she asked.

Nik considered, tilting the dice cup in his hand. "Three," he said, then softened: "Four, if you count the old imperial set, but those are weighted in favor of the house."

Cale, who had not played, watched the banter with impartial interest. He sat with his back to the ruined weather station wall, hands palm-up on his knees, like a man waiting for an answer he already knew.

"In the old city," Cale said, "cheaters were rewarded with amnesty if they could explain their method before the morning bell." He let the statement linger, as if daring Nik to invent a better defense.

Nik grinned, eyes bright. "I'd have emptied that vault in a week."

"Not a chance," Cale replied. "They retired the game after a month. Everyone who tried to beat the law ended up working for it instead."

Yiv snorted. "That's how they get you. Let you think you're clever until it's too late to go back."

This was the moment Renna, bored with gambling, suggested stories instead. "We're stuck together until the roads dry," she said, "so let's hear how we all got here. Loser starts." She jabbed a thumb at Yiv.

He rolled his eyes, but launched into a tale, a convoluted mess involving a milk goat, a stolen password, and a noble's daughter whose only distinguishing feature was her ability to drink every hired guard under the table.

The story ran long, punctuated by Yiv's own giggles, and ended with him fleeing the city with nothing but the shirt on his back and the copper wire he'd wagered tonight.

Nik rated the story a "solid eight on the liar's scale," then delivered his own: a tale of seduction gone wrong, gambling debts, and a last-minute escape from a burning brothel.

Lyra, unimpressed, told a brusque version of her first kill, no embellishments, just a sequence of facts, the memory iced over until it hardly qualified as a story at all.

When it was Thorin's turn, he took a moment, then said, "Once spent a winter holed up with a merchant's daughter, both of us too drunk to remember her father was still alive. He caught us, duel at dawn, and I married her for six hours before we convinced a judge to annul."

He punctuated this with a grunt and a sip from his flask. "Never saw her again. Hope she's running the family business."

Renna laughed, actually laughed, and Apollo realized it was the first time he'd heard anything like joy from her. Even Lyra cracked a smile, small and sharp.

When the circle reached him, Apollo hesitated. He thought of Torgo's last words, of the city's veined memory and the cold fire he carried in his hip, and wondered if honesty had a place at all in games like these.

"Not much of a story," he said. "But I once spent five years in a city people called the Spire. Streets were rivers, and the tides changed directions with the seasons. Nobody walked, not even the beggars.

Buildings swayed if you listened at night. I left because one morning every window on my street had been painted over, blue on the inside, red on the out."

Nik stared at him, caught off guard by the detail. "That's the weirdest lie I've ever heard," he said.

Apollo shrugged. "Still beats being chased by a goat."

They all laughed, the sound bouncing off glass and rebar and the ruined skeleton of the roof. Even Cale allowed himself a smile, though it flickered and vanished so quick it might have been a trick of the fire.

The storytelling wound down. They banked the flames and coiled closer to the warmth, each reluctant to admit that, for tonight, there was nothing left to run from.

Apollo watched the faces around the fire, all battered and imperfect, all rendered beautiful by the fact of their survival. Lyra slouched against the tarp, eyes half-closed but tracking every whisper. Nik practiced shuffling the dice with one hand. Renna and Yiv debated the merits of cheating in games where the only real stake was hope.

Cale stared into the embers, as if reading a language only he could understand.

Apollo pressed his hand to the pocket and felt the warmth of the amber, remembering the way Torgo had laughed at the very end: knowing, but kind.

There was a pattern to these evenings, rain, fire, stories, and a sense that the world outside had been measured and found, temporarily, wanting. He let himself relax, just a little, into the rhythm.

The rain kept falling, but for once, it didn't feel like the world was trying to wash them away.

### *Chapter 37: Green in the Thorns*

Every tree in this forest looked exactly the same until it wanted to kill you.

Apollo hadn't expected to see so much green after the basin, but here the air grew denser with each step, all the branches and vines greedily chewing the new sunlight.

Dew clung to every leaf, and the path ahead had dissolved into a mud ribbon that doubled back over itself any time you looked away. The only way to not get lost was to follow Cale, whose sense of direction was less an instinct and more a bribe he'd forced out of the earth itself.

At their heels: Nik, whining about his legs "I ran a fever once that hurt less than this!" and managing, despite the complaints, to keep up with Renna, who trailed behind Lyra with the unblinking focus of a wolf that had recently invested in personal growth.

Thorin limped along in the rear, head down and mouth set, as if by ignoring the pain he could bluff the universe into erasing it.

Apollo's thoughts wandered, as they tended to, but never far from the warm pulse of the amber in his pocket or the memory of Torgo's voice, which, against all rationale, still piped up now and then: "Don't squander it, songbird." As if he'd been left a legacy he could neither explain nor give back.

They climbed a low rise, boots squelching in the moss. The dog, who'd started ignoring them for long stretches at a time, dove ahead, paws and muzzle soaked, then circled back with a wet, expectant glance as if to say, "You're still here? Huh." Apollo envied the animal's inability to dwell.

At the crest, Cale slowed and motioned them forward with a tilt of his staff. "There's the crossing," he said, voice tight, as if he'd staked money on the river still being there.

It was, sort of. The river cut the valley clean in two, doubled in size by last week's rain. The wooden bridge, never designed for heroics, was gone, replaced by four rotten pylons and a tangle of torn cable. The water below was fast and brown, threading around splinters of the old span like it was picking its teeth.

Thorin hawked, spat, and uttered a curse so technical Apollo was certain it could double as a building code violation.

Nik whistled, impressed. "Guess it's the long way," he said, then immediately looked to Cale for the alternate plan.

Cale squinted at the map or perhaps, Apollo suspected, at the inside of his own eyelids and pointed eastward. "There's a game trail. Runs above the bank, comes out near the levy. Wet, but we'll make it if you don't stop for lunch."

Renna grunted, already halfway down the hill, spear balanced across her shoulders. Lyra took a moment to scan both banks, her lips moving as if reading a code written into the leaves.

She caught Apollo's eye, held it, then looked away, focused on the way the light shifted over the water. It was never about trust, it was about reading the odds, and odds didn't care for sentiment.

They made the detour, tracing the edge of the river through a maze of downed trees and nettle, every so often forced to edge sideways along a ledge that had been, until recently, a home for something with better claws.

Nik slipped twice, cursed both times, and got back up with the pride of a man who saw falling as a lifestyle choice. The rest made better time, but not by much.

Half an hour in, Lyra stopped them short with a single hand raised. Apollo nearly ran into her, then pretended he'd meant to catch a leaf in midair.

She pointed to the tree at their left, a silver-barked thing, split and leaning like it had been punched by a giant. Across the trunk: a series of gouges, deep and deliberate, the wood beneath still sticky with sap.

"Wildcat?" Nik wondered, poking the grooves with the end of a forked stick.

Lyra shook her head. "Too high. And too clean," she said, tracing the top score. "These aren't from claws." Her eyes narrowed. "Look at the width."

Apollo did. The marks weren't random, weren't desperate. They mapped out a geometry, like someone had tried to carve out a warning in a language older than words. *'You always find the signs,'* he thought, and wondered what version of him would ever learn to see them in time.

Yiv, who'd spent most of the morning cataloguing every mushroom and lichen as if auditioning for a new career, stepped up and, with an exaggerated nonchalance, plucked a bone amulet from the branch above.

"Found the culprit," he said, examining the bone: it was whittled, knotted with black cord, daubed in something that looked a little too much like blood to be reassuring.

"Cultists?" Nik guessed.

"Or just a local scarecrow," Yiv countered, but his tone lacked conviction.

Apollo said nothing. But he could feel the air tighten, the way it always did before the world tried to teach you humility through violence.

They pressed on, wary now, every cough or snap of twig echoing a little louder against the underbrush.

The rumor of threat became a presence, the sense of being watched growing until even the dog cut its pace and trotted bang in the center of the line.

At a bend in the trail, just as the light dipped and the smell of damp stone overpowered the stink of travel, it happened. A pebble arced through the air and hit Nik square in the ear.

"Who the—" Nik started, but was cut off by the sudden, coordinated snap of branches. Three figures dropped from the canopy above: thin men, faces obscured by strips of painted leather, arms and legs banded in what looked like river mud.

They hit the ground at a dead run, blades out, and closed the distance in less time than it took for Apollo to remember how pain worked.

The first volley went for Cale and Lyra. Cale ducked, tripping his man with a low sweep of the staff, then rose and caught the attacker's jaw with the heel of his palm. There was a sound like ice breaking.

Lyra, at his flank, took the second one on with a flick of her borrowed knife, catching the wrist and twisting until bone popped, then dropping the knife to kick the punk in the knee, snapping the joint backward.

The kid screamed, but not for long; Renna's spear caught him a moment later and rolled him into the mud.

Apollo scanned the scene, looking for the pattern. Third attacker. The last one was on Nik, who'd drawn his own blade but was still tangled in his coat. The two were matched for size but the striker had leverage, and in moments he'd Nik on his back, knife scraping at the chin.

Apollo moved.

He didn't think about it, didn't debate if he was ready or if this counted as self-defense or manslaughter or just a very severe correction.

He stepped forward and grabbed the attacker by the hair, yanking the head back with a force that surprised everyone.

The man tried to twist, but Apollo's free hand was already at his throat. A quick, surgical sweep, like drawing a line through butter, and the attacker went limp. He dropped, gurgled once, then went still.

Nik lay in the dirt, panting. "You could've just hit him," he said, voice shaky with adrenaline.

Apollo let his own hands relax. "You freeze on the next one, I'll save the trouble and do both at once," he said, and regretted it the moment it left his mouth. 'You're not a weapon. You're not even sure what you are.'

There wasn't time to process. The last man, well, boy, up close, was crawling for the edge of the trail, one leg bent at a wrong angle. Lyra kicked the knife from his hand, then stepped off, silent.

The air was full of rot, old rain, and the hot-copper stink of blood, but more than that there was a message: this wasn't the last attack. It was barely even an opening act.

Cale rolled the body of his own attacker, checked the face. "Goblins," he concluded, then spat. "Skinny ones, but organized."

"Never seen them so close to the river," Thorin said, voice hoarse and subdued.

"They're not wild, not like this," Lyra agreed. She looked around, then up. "Something's pushing them," she added, low.

Apollo scrubbed his palms through the moss, trying to clean the death from his hands. The cold sap didn't help, but it gave him something to focus on besides the fresh tremor in his chest.

"We go," Cale said. "Double pace."

And they did, no arguments. The dog ran ahead, tail low, as if guiding them away from a disaster the animal already understood better than any of them.

By dusk, they cleared the worst of it. The trees thinned and the world returned to its usual indifference. No one spoke until Renna, after a safe distance and a makeshift camp, turned to Nik and said, "Next time, try not to lose a swordfight to a man with no shoes."

Nik made a retort about Lyra's haircut and shirtless attackers, but the heart wasn't in it. The dog curled up tight to the fire, and when Lyra sat beside Apollo, neither bothered to pretend that anyone would sleep well tonight.

A horn sounded, once, somewhere in the deeper woods, not a triumph but a query. Apollo barely caught himself shivering.

He waited for the world to settle. He waited for the tremor to go quiet, for the gold in his veins to forget about the day. It never did, not really. Not at all.

*Chapter 38: Salt in the Air*

The forest died in gradual inches, as if it had given up trying.

Apollo noticed the change in the soil first, dark loam thinning to pale grit that crunched under his boots. Roots twisted up through the earth like arthritic fingers, exposed and grasping at nothing. The canopy, once a solid ceiling of green, now fractured into puzzle pieces of blue sky.

"Look," Lyra said, pointing upward where three birds wheeled in lazy circles. "First birds I've seen in days."

Apollo squinted at them, dark silhouettes against harsh sunlight. After the constant twilight of the deeper woods, the unfiltered rays felt like an accusation. He blinked away the sting, aware of the sweat beading at his temples, the way his shirt clung to his back.

The trail grew rockier as they followed Cale's lead, winding between stunted trees and patches of scrubland.

Thorin cursed as he stubbed his toe on an outcropping, but the words lacked their usual venom. Even Nik's complaints had dwindled to occasional sighs. They'd been walking for so long that forward motion had become its own kind of stillness.

Renna stopped suddenly, head tilted back, nostrils flaring. "Salt," she said, the word sharp and certain.

Nik frowned, sniffing the air himself. "Something's burning, isn't it?"

"No," Yiv said, turning to point downhill. "It's the wind. Tastes different."

Apollo breathed deeply, letting the air fill his lungs. There was something there, a tang, a bite, a memory. His pulse quickened, though he couldn't have said why.

They crested the next ridge in silence, each lost in their own exhaustion. Then the world simply... opened.

The ocean stretched before them, vast and pale under the midday sun, a sheet of hammered silver extending to the horizon.

Apollo had forgotten how much space there could be in the world. After days of trees pressing in from all sides, the sudden emptiness felt like standing on the edge of a precipice.

"Well," Cale said, the word barely audible over the distant roar. "There she is."

For a long moment, no one moved. The waves rolled in with mechanical precision, breaking against the shore in rhythmic violence. The sound filled Apollo's head, constant, insistent, a bass note that vibrated in his bones.

*'I've been here before,'*



he thought, though he couldn't remember when or why. The gold in his veins seemed to pulse in response, warming under his skin.

Nik broke the spell, clapping Yiv on the shoulder. "Race you to the bottom," he said, and started down the slope without waiting for an answer.

The path to the shore was treacherous, loose stones that shifted underfoot, patches of sand that gave way without warning. Apollo picked his steps carefully, one hand hovering near his pocket where Torgo's amber shard lay warm against his thigh.

Each time the ocean disappeared behind an outcropping, he felt a strange mixture of relief and disappointment.

The beach itself was little more than a narrow strip of pebbles and sand, littered with driftwood and half-buried shells bleached white by sun and salt.

Thorin immediately began collecting flat stones, testing their weight in his palm before sending them skipping across the water. Most sank on the first bounce, but he persisted with grim determination.

"Bet you can't wade in past your knees," Nik said to Renna, eyes bright with challenge.

She stared at him, then at the water. "Not today," she replied, her usual bravado oddly absent.

Lyra wandered along the tideline, eyes scanning the debris. She stooped to pick up something that caught the light, a piece of glass, worn smooth by sand and waves, a deep bottle-green. Without ceremony, she slipped it into her pocket and continued her patrol.

Apollo stood apart from them all, feet planted at the edge where dry sand gave way to wet. The breeze pulled at his hair, carrying the scent of brine and something older, something he couldn't name. He stared at the horizon, at the place where water met sky in a seam so perfect it might have been drawn with a ruler.

There was a flicker there, a shadow of recognition. This place knew him, even if he didn't know it. The vastness of the ocean seemed to look back, patient and unmoved, as if it had been waiting for him to return. He felt small, but not in the way that mountains or chasms made a man small. This was different, a smallness that came from inside, from memory.

He didn't realize how long he'd been standing there until Cale's voice broke through his thoughts.

"We need to keep moving," Cale called. "Tide's coming in."

Apollo turned back, surprised to find the others already gathering their things. He hadn't heard them, hadn't sensed them moving around him. The gold in his veins had gone cold again, retreating beneath his skin like an animal burrowing for safety.

They left the beach single file, following Cale along a path that hugged the shoreline. A gull appeared from nowhere, white wings slicing through the air as it paced them. It followed for several minutes, an escort or a spy, before suddenly banking away toward the open water, as if something out there had called its name.

Apollo watched it go, feeling a tug in his chest like an invisible thread pulling taut. He resisted the urge to turn back, to stare once more at that perfect horizon. Instead, he fixed his eyes on Lyra's back, on the steady rhythm of her steps, and forced himself forward.

The sound of the water stayed with them long after the shore was gone.

The dog whimpered and pressed itself against Apollo's leg, drawing his attention away from the horizon. He scratched behind its ears, feeling the animal's warmth through his fingertips.

"What's wrong, boy?" he murmured. "You don't like the ocean?"

The animal's only response was to press harder against him, as if trying to push him away from the water's edge. Apollo understood the sentiment. There was something both alluring and threatening about that vast expanse, like staring into an abyss that stared back.

Cale cleared his throat. "We should make camp before dark. There's a sheltered spot up ahead."

Apollo nodded, though he couldn't tear his gaze from the water. The waves continued their relentless assault on the shore, each one erasing the evidence of the last. Something about the rhythm tugged at him, a half-remembered melody played on an instrument he'd forgotten how to name.

*'I know this place,'* he thought again. *'But how?'*

They followed the shoreline north, the group spreading out as the beach widened. Nik and Yiv walked ahead, heads bent in conversation, gesturing occasionally at the cliffs rising to their right. Thorin trudged along with his typical stoicism, pausing only to collect a particularly interesting stone or shell. Renna kept to herself, her spear balanced across her shoulders, eyes constantly scanning the horizon as if expecting trouble to rise from the depths.

Lyra fell into step beside Apollo. "You're quiet," she observed, voice pitched just loud enough to carry over the waves.

"Just tired," he lied.

She studied his face, green eyes narrowed slightly. "You've been staring at the water like it owes you money."

Apollo shrugged, uncomfortable under her scrutiny. "There's just... something familiar about it."

"The ocean?" Lyra raised an eyebrow. "It's the ocean. Big, wet, full of things that want to eat you. What's to recognize?"

He couldn't explain the pull he felt, the way the horizon seemed to beckon. Instead, he changed the subject. "How's your supply of arrows?"

"Low," she admitted. "But I can make more. Plenty of driftwood here."

They walked in silence after that, the conversation exhausted. Apollo was grateful for it. His thoughts felt too jumbled to share, fragments of memory and intuition that refused to coalesce into anything coherent.

By late afternoon, they reached a small cove sheltered by an outcropping of rock. The cliff face curved around it like a protective arm, blocking the worst of the wind. Driftwood had collected in the far corner, bleached and dry, perfect for a fire.

"Here," Cale announced, dropping his pack. "We'll rest. Might even get a decent night's sleep for once."

The group dispersed to their tasks with the efficiency of long practice. Thorin and Yiv gathered wood, Nik scouted the perimeter, and Renna set about cleaning her spear, the blade glinting in the late afternoon sun. Lyra disappeared briefly, returning with a handful of small crabs she'd found in the tidepools.

Apollo helped where he could, but his attention kept drifting back to the water. As the sun began its descent, the ocean changed color, from silver to a deep, burning gold that matched the fire now kindling in their camp. The sight made his chest ache with a longing he couldn't name.

They ate simply: the crabs Lyra had caught, supplemented with the last of their dried provisions. The salt air made everything taste sharper, more immediate. Even Thorin seemed to enjoy the meal, licking his fingers with unusual enthusiasm.

As darkness fell, Apollo found himself sitting apart from the others, back against the cliff wall, watching the stars emerge above the water. Each one blinked into existence with precise certainty, as if following a script written at the beginning of time.

The amber shard in his pocket seemed to grow warmer. He pulled it out, turning it over in his palm. In the firelight, it glowed with an inner life, not just reflecting the flames, but somehow amplifying them, concentrating their essence into something purer.

*'What are you?'* he wondered, not for the first time. *'What am I supposed to do with you?'*

He remembered Torgo's face in those final moments, the old magician's eyes bright with something that might have been madness or clarity or both. "The sea remembers what we forget," Torgo had said, just before pressing the shard into Apollo's hand. At the time, the words had seemed like the ramblings of a dying man. Now, with the ocean stretching before him, they took on a new weight.

The sound of approaching footsteps pulled him from his reverie. Cale settled beside him, legs stretched out toward the fire.

"Good spot," Apollo said, gesturing at their camp.

Cale nodded. "Used it before. Long time ago." He paused, studying Apollo's face. "You recognize it too."

It wasn't a question. Apollo tensed, fingers closing around the shard. "What makes you say that?"

"The way you look at the water." Cale's voice was matter-of-fact. "Like you're trying to remember something important."

Apollo said nothing, unsure how much to reveal. Trust was a luxury he couldn't afford, not with the gold still flowing beneath his skin, not with the bounty on his head.

Cale didn't press. Instead, he pointed toward the horizon. "There used to be an island out there. Just a speck, really. Visible only at certain times of day, when the light hit it just right."

"What happened to it?"

"Same thing that happens to everything eventually." Cale's expression remained neutral. "The sea took it back."

They sat in silence for a while, watching the waves. The rhythm seemed to slow as night deepened, the water darkening to match the sky until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

"Tomorrow we follow the coast," Cale said finally, rising to his feet. "Should reach the glass fields by midday, if the weather holds."

Apollo nodded, though the mention of their destination brought no comfort. The glass fields. Another place he knew without knowing why.

He remained by the cliff wall long after the others had settled for the night, watching the ocean breathe. In and out, in and out, a pulse as steady as his own heartbeat. The amber shard grew warmer in his hand, until it seemed to match the exact temperature of his blood.

*'The sea remembers,'*

Apollo closed his eyes, letting the sound of the waves wash over him. For a moment, just a heartbeat, he thought he heard something else beneath the roar: a voice, calling his true name from across an impossible distance.

When he opened his eyes, there was nothing but darkness and the patient, endless sea.

#### *Chapter 39: The Drowned Mouth*

The sea betrayed nothing as Apollo followed the others along the ragged coastline, but he could feel it watching him, measuring.

Dawn had broken an hour earlier, casting the world in watercolor washes of gold and gray. They hugged the cliff face, the path narrowing with each step until they were walking single file on a strip of sand barely wider than Apollo's shoulders.

To his left, jagged stone rose like a fortress wall; to his right, the tide breathed in and out with mechanical patience.

Cale led the way, steps sure despite the treacherous footing. The man moved with the confidence of someone who had navigated this route before, though Apollo couldn't imagine when or why.

The dog trotted ahead, occasionally pausing to sniff at something in the sand before moving on.

"Watch your step," Lyra called from behind him, her voice almost lost in the rhythmic crash of waves.

Apollo nodded without turning. The gold in his veins had been restless since morning, pulsing beneath his skin like a second heartbeat.

It made concentration difficult. He focused on placing one foot in front of the other, on the feel of Torgo's amber shard warm against his thigh.

Ahead, Cale stopped so abruptly that Nik nearly collided with his back. Apollo looked up, squinting against the glare off the water.

There, half-hidden in the cliff face, was a dark opening, a cave mouth, its entrance partially submerged in the shallow water. It would be easy to miss if you weren't looking for it, or if the tide were any higher.

Cale crouched, studying the rhythm of the waves as they lapped at the opening. His eyes narrowed, calculating. "In and out before it rises," he said.

Renna stepped forward, spear balanced across her shoulders. "You sure about this?"

"No," Cale admitted, "but I'm sure about what's behind us."

They all knew what he meant. The cultists. The bounty hunters. The weight of pursuit that had dogged them since Varnwick.

Yiv peered into the darkness, then back at the tide line. "How long do we have?"

"Hour, maybe less," Cale replied.

Apollo felt the amber grow warmer in his pocket. Something about the cave pulled at him, not just curiosity, but recognition. The sensation of being drawn toward a familiar note in a forgotten song.

*'I've been here before,'* he thought, though he knew it was impossible.

Thorin grunted, adjusting the pack on his shoulders. "Let's get it over with, then."

One by one, they stepped into the water. Apollo winced as the cold seeped through his boots, numbing his toes almost instantly. The sand beneath was soft, yielding with each step. It felt like walking on a memory that refused to hold its shape.

The light changed as they entered the cave, dimming from the harsh clarity of morning to something murkier. Soon, the only illumination came from reflections off the water's surface, rippling patterns of light and shadow that danced across the stone walls. It made the world seem liquid, uncertain.

Apollo breathed deeply, tasting salt and old stone on his tongue. There was something else too, a metallic tang that reminded him of blood, or maybe just the iron in the rock itself. The dog whined softly, pressing against his leg as they moved deeper.

"Keep close," Cale murmured from ahead. "The path narrows."

They proceeded in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. The sound of the sea grew muffled, as if the cave were swallowing it. Apollo could hear his own breathing, too loud in the enclosed space. The amber in his pocket pulsed in time with his heart.

Without warning, the floor dropped away beneath them. Apollo gasped as cold water surged up to his waist, the shock of it stealing his breath for a moment. Ahead, Nik swore colorfully, and behind him, Thorin let out a startled grunt that echoed off the walls.

"Fuck!" Thorin's voice bounced back at them, amplified by stone. "Something touched my leg."

"Just a crab," Renna said, her tone brooking no argument. "Keep moving."

Apollo pressed forward, arms raised to keep his coat from getting soaked. The water was clear enough that he could see the sandy bottom, littered with shells and the occasional darting shadow of something small and quick. The dog had abandoned them, finding a higher ledge to follow along.

The acoustics shifted as they waded deeper. The sound of the sea faded entirely, replaced by the slow drip of water from the ceiling and the distant hiss of waves moving against rock somewhere ahead. Their breathing seemed unnaturally loud, each splash of movement a betrayal of their presence.

Apollo felt it before he saw it, a change in the pressure of the air, a sense of space opening up. The tunnel widened suddenly, and they emerged into a round cavern so perfectly circular it seemed carved by design rather than nature. High above, a shaft of light pierced the darkness, illuminating the center of the chamber like a spotlight on a stage.

And there, on a raised stone pedestal, sat... something.

Apollo's breath caught. The object was narrow and spiraled, no longer than his forearm but intricate in its construction. It didn't look carved so much as grown, as if someone had convinced matter itself to take this precise shape.

The surface caught the light from above and held it, shifting with colors that shouldn't be possible in the dim cave.

Water lapped gently at the base of the pedestal, but the relic itself remained dry. Untouched. Waiting.

*'It's been here a long time,'* Apollo thought, though he couldn't have explained how he knew.

The others spread out around the chamber, their expressions ranging from curiosity to unease. Nik whistled low, the sound echoing off the curved walls. Lyra kept her



distance, one hand resting on her knife as if expecting trouble. Thorin and Yiv examined the walls, while Renna stood guard at the entrance they'd come through.

Only Cale seemed unsurprised. He nodded at Apollo, a gesture that might have been encouragement or resignation.

Apollo stepped forward, drawn to the relic by something deeper than curiosity. As he approached, he felt his aether core stir, faint but insistent, like something long dormant suddenly remembering itself. The sensation was both familiar and foreign, a whisper in a language he'd forgotten he knew.

He reached out but didn't take it right away. Instead, he studied the way the surface shifted with the light, not reflecting it, but somehow transforming it, bending it into patterns that made his eyes ache if he looked too long. The material wasn't stone or metal or glass, but something that seemed to exist at the intersection of all three.

No one else appeared to notice anything unusual. They watched him with varying degrees of patience, unaware of the pulse that had begun to build beneath his skin, the way the gold in his veins reached toward the relic like a plant straining for sunlight.

'*What are you?*' he wondered, fingers hovering just above the surface. The amber shard in his pocket grew almost painfully hot.

Finally, he grasped it.

The moment his skin made contact, the water around the pedestal rippled outward in a perfect circle, though no wave had touched it. The relic felt warm in his hand, almost alive, a weight not just in his palm but in his core, as if he'd swallowed a stone that had settled in the pit of his stomach.

He turned to face the others. Nik and Yiv exchanged uneasy glances. Thorin's brow furrowed, and Lyra's hand tightened on her knife. Even Cale seemed tense, watching Apollo with an intensity that bordered on alarm.

No one spoke. The silence stretched, broken only by the steady drip of water from the ceiling.

Then, somewhere behind them, in the dark of the tunnel they'd navigated, something shifted, slow and deliberate.

Apollo's grip tightened on the relic. The sound came again, closer this time, a wet scraping against stone. Not the scuttle of crabs or the retreat of water, but something larger moving with purpose through the darkness they'd left behind.

'*We stayed too long.*'



The thought struck him with cold certainty. The tide was rising, yes, but that wasn't the only thing hunting them in these waters.

"Move," he said, voice low but carrying in the circular chamber. "Now."

Cale was already wading toward the far wall, where another passage opened like a mouth in the stone. Apollo hadn't noticed it before, the light from above didn't reach that far, but now he could see the faint gleam of water leading deeper into the cliff.

The scraping sound echoed again, accompanied by something that might have been breathing. Heavy. Deliberate. Apollo felt the hairs on his neck prickle as he splashed after Cale, the relic clutched against his chest. The thing felt heavier now, as if it were absorbing weight from the water around them.

Behind him, Nik cursed under his breath. "What the hell was that?"

"Don't look back," Lyra hissed. "Just move."

The dog had already vanished into the new tunnel, its instincts sharper than any of theirs. Apollo envied the animal's clarity, no questions, no hesitation, just the pure logic of survival.

#### *Chapter 40: Low Tide*

The relic pulsed against Apollo's palm like a second heart, hungry and insistent.

"We need to move," Apollo said, his voice tight as he fumbled with his pack. The chamber had grown smaller somehow, the walls pressing in with each ragged breath they took.

He pulled out a length of cloth, faded blue, frayed at the edges, and wrapped the spiral artifact with quick, precise movements. Even through the fabric, he could feel its warmth, its strange vitality.

The sea rushed in behind them, swallowing the tunnel inch by greedy inch.

"That's it?" Nik asked, eyes darting between Apollo's hands and the rising water. "We came all this way for... what exactly?"

"Something that doesn't belong to you," Lyra said, her voice flat. She was already moving toward the exit, bow slung over her shoulder, every muscle coiled for flight.

Apollo secured the wrapped relic in his pack, feeling its weight settle against his spine. *'Not just weight,'* he thought. *'Presence.'* The thing had awareness, he was certain of it now.

"Whatever it is," Thorin grumbled, "it better be worth drowning for."

Cale's face remained impassive, but his eyes tracked Apollo's movements with unsettling focus. "Time to go," he said, not a suggestion but a command.

They filed into the tunnel, the water already at their waists where before it had barely reached their knees.

The tide was turning faster than expected, each wave pushing farther into the passage. Apollo felt the current tug at his legs, insistent fingers trying to pull him back toward the chamber.

The light ahead wavered, distorted by the water's surface. What had been a straight path now twisted like a living thing, shadows bending where no shadows should be. Apollo pushed forward, one hand braced against the slick stone wall.

The water rose to his chest, cold enough to make his lungs seize. Behind him, Thorin let out a string of curses, each one punctuated by a labored breath.

"Drown in a puddle," the dwarf muttered, "after surviving the fucking basin. What a joke."

Cale shot him a sharp look. "Save your breath for swimming," he said, voice barely audible over the rush of water.

The tunnel narrowed, forcing them to press forward in single file. Apollo felt the pack grow heavier, as if the relic were drinking in the seawater, gorging itself. The gold in his veins responded, a low hum that matched the rhythm of the waves.

A surge pushed them forward, then pulled back with twice the force. Nik stumbled, went under for a heart-stopping moment before Renna's hand shot out and yanked him upright. He came up sputtering, eyes wide.

"Keep moving," Lyra urged from ahead, her voice strained. "The mouth is right there."

Apollo squinted against the glare. The exit wavered, a bright smear against the darkness of the tunnel. Another wave hit, this one strong enough to lift him off his feet for a moment. He kicked, fought the current, felt the gold in his blood respond with a surge of its own.

The cave spat them out into blinding sunlight, one by one. Apollo staggered onto wet stone, water streaming from his clothes, lungs burning. The pack felt impossibly heavy, as if he'd stuffed it with lead instead of a single artifact wrapped in cloth.

He blinked against the sudden brightness, eyes watering. The world outside was harsh, overexposed after the dim blue of the cave. Wet stone gleamed around them, the cave

mouth now little more than a dark smudge in the cliff face, nearly invisible unless you knew exactly where to look.

Renna glanced back once, eyes narrowed, hand tight around her spear. Something in her posture, the rigid line of her shoulders, the careful placement of her feet, suggested she expected pursuit. After a long moment, she turned away, but the tension remained in the set of her jaw.

They followed the shoreline in silence, each lost in private exhaustion. The path opened into a long curve of beach bordered by low cliffs, the sand a pale gold that hurt Apollo's eyes. The sea was louder here, more insistent, as if trying to remind them of its power, its patience.

A gull dove close, crying sharply before vanishing over the waves. Apollo watched it go, envying its freedom, its certainty of purpose.

They spread out as they walked. Cale and Thorin ahead, Nik and Yiv trailing behind, voices low as they debated something Apollo couldn't quite hear. Lyra kept pace beside him, her silence a question he wasn't ready to answer.

He adjusted the pack on his shoulder, feeling the relic shift. Through the layers of cloth and leather, he felt its thrum, not constant, but pulsing in perfect rhythm with the surf. In, out. In, out. Like breathing. Like waiting.

*'What are you?'* he wondered, not for the first time. The gold in his veins seemed to answer, a warm tingle that spread from his core to his fingertips.

He said nothing about it to the others. Some discoveries were too personal, too dangerous to share, even with those who'd risked their lives beside him.

They rounded a bend in the coastline, and the inlet vanished from sight. The cliffs rose higher, casting long shadows across the sand. But though the cave was gone from view, Apollo could still hear it, the peculiar echo of water against stone, the hollow rush that had filled that perfect circular chamber.

The sea kept breathing behind them, as if it had not yet finished deciding what to do about what they'd taken.

The relic's weight shifted in Apollo's pack, not like an object settling but like something alive making a decision.

They'd begun the climb inland at midday, leaving the shoreline behind with each upward step.

Apollo shouldered his pack tighter, feeling the wrapped artifact press against his spine as he picked his way through the scrub hills. The sea had become a silver ribbon in the distance, but its pull hadn't diminished.

*'It wants to go back,'* he thought, adjusting the strap again when the weight inside seemed to list toward the coast.