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THE LAST VOYAGE OF POE BLYTHE

Ally Condie

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FOR LAINEY, A STAR

THE LAST
VOYAGE
OF POE
BLYTHE

CALL TELLS ME HE SEES A STAR and that makes me laugh.

“I do.” His voice is serious, his mouth against my ear.

I tip my head up. He’s right. It hangs low on the horizon. “That makes six,” I say.

“Seven,” he says. “That *was* a star we saw the first night on the river.”

“It wasn’t.” We’ve been arguing about this for weeks, ever since we left the Outpost behind and boarded the dredge to go upriver.

He laughs softly before he starts kissing me again.

Up on the deck, it’s easier to hear past the sounds made by our hungry metal ship. But it’s still impossible to completely ignore the constant throb and grate of the dredge as it moves along the river in search of gold, taking in rocks and stones, grinding them out. It tears up the rivers and leaves refuse and silt behind, ruins valleys, adds a smear of smoke to the sky.

“All of this, because the Admiral has a taste for gold,” I say.

“I have a taste for you,” Call tells me. I laugh because it’s such a stupid thing to say, even though it’s true, and I feel him smile.

“It makes no sense,” I say. “What good is all this gold?” We all know that the Admiral wants to help the Outpost thrive. He thinks that getting more gold can help us do that, but I’m not entirely sure why. We’ve mined enough to last us for a while, and there’s not really anyone to trade with anymore. We need so many other things. Cleaner air, more water, better medicine, ways to rehabilitate the land. All gold does is gild the time until we die.

“Who cares?” Call says. “If the Admiral didn’t want it, we’d never get to be out here.”

Call says things like this, but I’ve seen the expression on his face as he looks back at the devastation we leave behind. Churned-up riverbed, life choked to death so we can raise the gold.

Even though it shivers me to think of the ruin we’re causing, I may as well count the stars while I can. Already, in two weeks out on the river, I’ve seen more than most people back at the Outpost will in a lifetime.

“It was a good idea to come here,” Call whispers. *“Admit it.”*

“A good idea,” I say, teasing. “A good idea for us to spend our days in the belly of a noisy old ship loud enough to make us deaf. A good idea to spend our nights up here standing guard and ruining our eyes looking for things in the dark.”

“A *very* good idea,” he says.

Call had overheard some of the machinists in the scrap yard where we work talking about the dredge voyages. “It’s not an ideal posting,” the machinists told Call. “It’s dangerous and you have to leave the Outpost.” To Call, those sounded like promises instead of drawbacks.

“It’s the only way you’re going to see the world, Poe,” he said to me. “The only way you’re going to shake the dust of the Outpost from your feet.”

And we both knew that signing on to the dredge was a way for us to be together, without settling down and having babies and working all day every day in the same places, doing the same things.

And then there’s the biggest secret, the best dream of all.

We’re going to escape.

At the turnaround point, we’re going to leave. Run. Be free.

I have imagined it all. Blue lakes. Forest smell. The sound of something else alive in the woods, that isn’t human and doesn’t care that we are. We might not last long in the wilderness, but who knows. There’s a chance we could survive.

I would rather be torn apart by something than wait for nothing. And it doesn’t do any good to worry about what might happen later.

Instead, I think about now. I like now. A kiss on the top of the dredge under a smeary star sky with Call’s hands touching me.

“Should we invite any of the crew to come with us when we go?” Call asks.

We've had this discussion before, too.

"No," I say. "Just us."

Call sighs in my ear, metal aches and scrapes against stone, the trammel inside the ship turns the rocks and sifts out the gold, water sluices against rock and metal.

And then the bell from the mining deck.

I swear because I know what it means. They need help with the dredge's main motor, the one that powers all the systems on the ship.

"Go on," Call says. "Then you can come back up here."

It's sliding past dusk and straight into night.

"Be careful while I'm gone," I say. "Watch out for the raiders."

"I do a better job watching when you're not here," he says, and even in the dim light I can see the twist of his smile.

"That's true," I say. "I won't come up again." I'm not joking. Perhaps we've been too giddy with freedom, with being outside.

"Poe," Call says. "It's all right. We haven't seen a single raider on this river."

Maybe they're dying off. Everyone knew it would happen eventually.

The Outpost is the only place you can last. The only place with dependable medicine and food and the protection of the Admiral and his militia. You give up some of your freedom for it, but most feel it's an easy trade.

Call touches my hand in the dark as I leave.

. . .

“There,” Naomi says, right as the mining equipment kicks back in, a constant low growl and grind that becomes part of you, like a heartbeat. Powered by solar conduits and battery storage, the main motor runs everything on the dredge through power take-off systems. The mining system is the loudest. It’s cobbled together from the dredge’s original system because we didn’t have the raw materials to replace it. The mining buckets move their belt, the trammel that sorts the gold from the rocks rolls, everything clanks and spins and grinds. Sweat trickles down Naomi’s tanned face. She wipes her hands on a rag and nods to Nik and me. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Nik says. We have to yell to be heard over the sound of the ship. Often we just read one another’s lips. “Sorry we got you down here, kid,” he says to me. In the lights belowdecks his face looks ghoulish but friendly.

“Any stars on the top deck?” Naomi asks.

“We saw one already tonight,” I say. “You should come up.”

Nik laughs. “You don’t mean that. You and Call want to have the deck all to yourselves.”

I roll my eyes at him even though he’s right. But Naomi and Nik both follow me up the stairs, the pull of fresh air strong after having been down on the mining deck. As we climb, the smell of night breezes and even, maybe, of pine forests somewhere nearby, floats down to us. I breathe in. It’s all worth it.

“Call,” I holler, as I come up on the deck, but he’s not

where I left him. I see several shapes moving in the dim lights that rim the base of the deck. Who else is up here? Some of the crew? “Hey,” I say, stepping out onto the deck and then Naomi grabs my arm, hard, stopping me.

The shapes advance, evolve. As they come closer they turn from shadows into people whose faces I don’t recognize.

Raiders.

“We want the gold,” one of them says. “Tell us where it is. Now.”

My mind races. My eyes hunt.

Where is Call?

He didn’t have time to sound the alarm. Did he have time to hide?

“Tell us where it is,” another raider says, “or we’ll kill all of you and take it anyway.”

I look at Naomi and Nik. Their hands are up.

“You can’t kill all of us,” I say. “You need us alive. You don’t know how to run the ship.”

“You two, take us below,” the raider says to Naomi and Nik. “Show us where the gold is or we’ll shoot you.” He gestures in my direction. “Keep her up here.”

The raiders train their guns on me. My mind wants me to stay alive. My heart is sick with worry about Call. But he’s fast. He’s good. He’s probably hiding somewhere, waiting for his turn. Waiting for the instant he can pick them all off.

A moment passes.

And then I hear a terrible sound: the ship’s motor shutting down. They’re stopping us.

I sidle toward the edge of the deck. Are more raiders waiting down there in the water? Did Call escape? Is he standing in the river, silent, hoping I'll look over the edge? Waiting to catch me if I jump?

If he is, we could still get away. We could leave and not look back.

"Go ahead," says the raider guarding me. "Take a look."

I glance over the side. Spots of light on the water—raiders in boats, holding torches. There are at least three dozen of them down there in addition to the ones already on the ship.

How are there so many? They were supposed to be dying out.

Only twenty-three people live on the dredge. We can't handle an armed group this size. And we're too far up the river to call for reinforcements from the Outpost.

They've timed this perfectly.

Where is Call?

I'm frantic to find him.

The raiders herd the other members of the crew up the stairs and out onto the deck. I see Naomi, Nik. The cook, the first mate. The captain. The cartographer. The other machinists and the miners. None of our crew is armed. The raiders must have taken our weapons.

Call is not the only one missing. I don't see the second mate, either.

And then, last up the stairs, two more raiders, each carrying someone. *Good*, I think, *we injured some*, but then they throw the people down on the deck of the dredge and I see

one's the second mate and the other is turned over, facedown, and neither of them moves.

I do. Across the deck I stumble, crashing to my knees next to the facedown man. I put my hand on a dark place on his back and it comes away bloody. Naomi makes a sound like a cry. They might shoot me in the back too but I have to know. I have to know what I already know.

I turn him over. And there he is, his face lit by the cool glow of the deck lights and the fire of the raiders' torches. His eyes are open, alone.

Call.

I put my fingers to his lips. His skin already feels cold to me.

"Get up," says a raider.

I don't.

Call was shot in the back. He didn't have a chance to sound the alarm. He was shot in the back and he was alone. What do his eyes say? Nothing. They say nothing. He's nothing. He's not here anymore.

Am I still here?

Can you be this hollow and not blow away on the wind?

I glance over my shoulder at the other crew members. My friends. Naomi and the captain and all the rest of them, and I think, *I wish you were dead instead of him. You and you and you. Everyone else on this ship. All of you. I'd trade all of you for one of him and it wouldn't pain me one bit.*

Someone else steps into my line of vision. A raider. I hear

the creak of his boots as he crouches down, but I don't lift my gaze from Call's face. His eyes.

"Do you know who we are?" The man's voice is rough as rock, or gold. Not the polished shiny gold that's been refined and purified. The heavier, dirt-burnished kind that we drag up from the river bottom.

"Raiders," I say.

"Drifters," he says.

I couldn't care less what they call themselves. I take Call's rough hand in mine.

My face is wet.

"We're letting you go," the man says. He doesn't raise his voice, but it carries well, and the ship is so silent. "We left food for you on the shore. It's enough to get you back to the Outpost if you walk fast and don't eat much." He leans close, so close I can feel his breath on my cheek and see the glitter of his eyes in the torchlight. "Tell your Admiral that we're done with you taking from us. Tell him this is the last time we leave anyone alive."

I reach into Call's shirt pocket. I look at the buttons, the fabric, instead of at his dead eyes. One of the raider guards grabs my shoulder to haul me back, but not before I've taken out the folding ruler that Call always kept with him.

"What's that?" the raider asks.

I don't answer. "Help me," I say to Nik. "Help me bring him with us." Even though Call's gone, I won't leave his body with the raiders.

“Leave it,” says the rough-voiced raider. “Get on out of here.”

Fury, hot-white and loud as a motor, sounds through me. “Naomi,” I say. “Will you help me?”

She doesn’t move. Her face is sad and sorry. She’s afraid. They’re all afraid. I’m not. The worst has already happened.

As they drag me away, I twist around and see that the raiders are dragging Call, too. His head lolls back. He carries none of his own weight.

He’s heavy, and yet he’s not here at all.

Out on the shore, the dredge is an enormous deep shape against the night sky, and then it’s the sun, exploding.

“They’ve blown it up.” The captain’s voice shakes.

Heat washes over us. A few singed shards of metal come down into the water and glint-glint off the rocks we tore up earlier.

The wind shifts, and I see a whole spread of stars beyond the miry, polluted air. They vanish again behind the smoke from the burning ship.

Call is dead.

The raiders made Call nothing. Call who was everything.

I make them a promise, as their smoke and fire blot out the stars.

I will make you nothing too.

T W O
Y E A R S
L A T E R

CHAPTER 1

“WE TALK ABOUT YOU.”

“I know,” I say to the Admiral. He tells me this as we sit up in a room in the scrap yard’s wooden office building, waiting for the rest of his advisers to arrive. The Admiral’s Quorum—a group of four, three men and one woman—advise and assist him with running the Outpost. I’ve heard snatches of what the Quorum says behind my back, the stories they tell. Some good, some bad. Some true, some false.

They say I live in the Admiral’s pocket.

That I’m actually afraid of the rivers.

They whisper about how I was a machinist when I first went on the dredge two years ago, and then came home with a weaponist’s mind and thirst for blood.

Two days after Call died, while our crew was making the long trek back to the Outpost, I had my first “revelation.” That’s what the Admiral calls it. He tells the Quorum, “God tells her something in her sleep, and then she draws the designs for it when she wakes up.”

My first one was about an armor for the dredge that kills any raiders who try to board. The other revelations have been about how to perfect it.

There are two problems with the Admiral's revelation theory. First, I don't believe in God, so he can't talk to me. Second, I don't think I actually sleep deep enough to dream anymore.

The Admiral and I watch the workers crawling over the dredge in the yard below. The ship came off the river yesterday, and it's been hauled inland to the scrap yard for repairs.

It's the hot-orange, simmering-sunset time of day, bearable only because of the knowledge that there are just a few hours left until the cool of night. The crew must be sweating as they repair the armor on the dredge. I know from working on the scrap yard with Call how it feels to have your clothes wet and dry and wet again over the hours of the day; your hands smudged black with dirt and oil; skin tight across your nose from the sun; eyes scalded and dry from looking closely at shining metal, fitted gears.

That's as much as I'll let myself remember.

There's a flurry of movement in the yard as the workers change positions. The dredge bristles with variations on front- and side-facing gears. Armor. When the ship is moving, its exterior crawls like an animal covered in parasites. The gears are strong enough to snap a bone like a twig, a hunk of iron like a tree branch.

For decades, the two dredges the Outpost owned were nothing but great metal hulks from a long-past time. They sat out at the edge of the city, along with all the other remnants

and machinery too large to bother moving. When this Admiral took power, he began to repair things, to try and figure out a way to make the Outpost thrive instead of just survive. He brought some of the old relics to the machinists' scrap yard for cleaning and repair, including the dredges. The raiders burned one the night Call died. Now there's a single ship left to run the rivers for gold.

"Ah," says the Admiral. "Welcome." The others have arrived. General Dale, Bishop Weaver, General Foster, Sister Haring. They shake hands with the Admiral and nod to me.

My position at these meetings is always strange. I'm not part of the Quorum. I only attend meetings concerning the dredge. And the citizens of the Outpost consider me a peculiarity. Not a person. When we pass in the street, they smile and keep their distance. Which makes sense. I'm aligned with the people in power, and it's best not to disturb them. That's common knowledge in the Outpost. Everyone's got their work to keep them busy, everyone's got to scrape to keep alive. We mind our own business. That's what's kept the Outpost viable all these years, on our own, without another major city or settlement within hundreds of miles.

And I also understand why the Quorum hasn't taken me under their collective wing. I'm not officially a member of their group. I'm much younger than they are. And the Quorum may not have any qualms about the people I kill, but no one wants to be close to a murderer.

There's something off about her. I've heard it whispered. Not just lately. All my life.

“Thank you for meeting us here,” says the Admiral.

“It’s our pleasure,” says Sister Haring. Her neat blond hair is pulled up in a bun. She’s very beautiful. I don’t like her at all. I don’t like any of them, but I like her the least because she smiles at me the most.

“Please,” says the Admiral. “Sit.” The wooden table and chairs in the room are scarred with use. Stray stubs of pencil and bits of paper have been left behind from other meetings. This is how the Admiral likes it. I don’t know where the Quorum usually meets, but whenever we gather here to discuss the dredge, the Admiral wants the room left as it is from when the people who actually work on the yard use it. He likes the workaday, part-of-it-all feeling it gives him.

Bishop Weaver takes his seat on the right hand of the Admiral. When I’m in meetings with the Admiral, he likes me to sit on his left.

The Devil’s hand, people used to call it.

I wonder who sits on his left when I’m not here.

General Dale’s eyes linger on me in his usual calculating way. Sister Haring smiles politely. I don’t care what they think of or about me. My job is to design the armor for the dredge and keep both working. Not to talk to the Quorum, not to bother about what it is *they* do.

“I have good news to report from the most recent voyage.” The Admiral leans forward, rests his elbows on the table. He’s tall and broad-shouldered, with a square-cut sandy beard and piercing blue eyes. His skin is always a little pink, like he’s

been out in the sun working hard. His lips are chapped, the hair on his strong arms bleached by the sun. Years ago, when the time came to choose a new Admiral, the Outpost couldn't resist him. He has big ideas, and he looks like a man of the people. As always, he wears a blue work shirt, brown trousers, scuffed black work boots, a silk tie loosely secured around his collar like an afterthought. A casual gesture to his status.

I'm dressed exactly like him, except for the tie. And I wear my hair long, in braids.

I wonder what Call would say if he could see me now. None of this is what he would have wanted. Except he'd want me alive, and this is the way I've found to do it.

"The *Gilded Lily* performed perfectly," says the Admiral.

I hate the name they've given the ship. I don't think of it as *she*, or *he* for that matter. It's the dredge. It's a piece of metal.

It's not alive.

"We took in twice the gold we expected," the Admiral says. His eyes light up the way they do whenever he talks about gold, and he cannot completely control the emotion in his voice.

It's the same thing that happens when he needs to address the people, but this is raw. Unintended. Caught in glimpses instead of put on for a sermon.

"*Ah*," says Sister Haring, satisfied. Bishop Weaver raises his eyebrows, and General Dale smiles.

General Foster actually presses his palms together in pleasure. "Wonderful," he says.

“It was by far our most successful voyage yet.” The Admiral waits a beat before speaking again. “Even though no raiders were killed.”

The members of the Quorum each flicker with movement at this. An intake of breath, a folding of arms, a recrossing of legs. I feel eyes shift to me.

“No raiders died,” says the Admiral, “because our machine’s reputation is such that not a single one of them tried to board.”

General Dale folds his arms. “*That’s* interesting.” Our eyes meet. There is a challenge in his. As if he thinks my armor isn’t enough threat to keep the raiders away.

As if he’s forgotten all the rust-colored stains on the armor when the dredge has returned from other voyages. All the ways my prickling, moving gears have ground the raiders into pulp when they tried to board.

“We saw raiders along the banks, watching and following,” says the Admiral, “but none dared attempt an attack.”

We saw. That’s what he says. But the truth is that none of us in this room go on the voyages. The Admiral stays behind in his house on the bluff and I sit in my apartment down in the city. He thinks about gold and government and I think about killing and Call.

“It’s time,” the Admiral says. “We’re ready to cull the Serpentine.”

“Good,” says Sister Haring, at the same time that Bishop Weaver says, “At last,” his intonation like a prayer.

The Serpentine River. The biggest river in the area; the one

with the most potential for gold. We've waited because it's going to be the most difficult to dredge. It's long and deep, and goes far into raider territory.

A small smile curls my lips, and I bow my head to hide my pleasure at the Admiral's decision. I hope the raiders find the courage to try and board the ship. So we can cut them down.

"To ensure that everything goes smoothly, Lieutenant Blythe will be on this voyage."

My head jerks up in surprise. He wants *me* to go?

That's not what we agreed, I want to say to him. I designed the armor for the ship in exchange for my life and for the lives of the others on the dredge on my first voyage. *My only voyage.*

We lost the ship, we lost the gold. We knew the Admiral might order our deaths, but my revelation about the armor saved us. It gave me leverage. Something to bargain with.

I look at the Admiral, at his clear eyes and the very straight line of his mouth. I work for him. I live under his protection. And I never, ever underestimate the danger of my situation.

"This is the most important voyage yet," the Admiral says. "I don't want anything to go wrong. I want the killing mechanisms to work."

"They'll work," I say.

"And you'll be there in case they don't," he says, a cool finality in his tone.

If the Admiral tells you to do something, you do it.

Or you die.

You would think that after Call died, I wouldn't care

anymore about dying. But I do. I saw him. I saw his eyes looking up and seeing nothing. I saw how gone he was. I knew he was nowhere else in the world or beyond. He was over.

The Quorum watches.

Why does the Admiral want me to go on this voyage, and not any of the others? Has he decided that he's tiring of me? Is this a trap of some sort?

That might be the case. It might not. Either way, I may as well make the most of the situation. "That's right," I say to the advisers. I hold each of their gazes in turn. Sister Haring is not smiling now. And then I meet the Admiral's eyes. "I'm going on the ship as Captain."

I have to give the Admiral credit. He doesn't even blink. All I see is a slight tightening of his lips that shows I've surprised him.

And that he's angry.

CHAPTER 2

THE ADMIRAL DISMISSES THE QUORUM and tells me to stay behind. The two of us are still seated at the head of the scarred wood table. Without the others, it feels very close. I keep my gaze on his face, on those ice-blue eyes, the freckles and age spots mingling on his skin. He's a force of nature, a magnetic presence wherever he is.

Ever since the Desertion generations ago, when the world drew back from us and we had to learn how to survive on our own, we've been led by Admirals. Some have been better than others. The older people say that the last Admiral almost ran the Outpost into the ground, and that this one has saved us all. "Not afraid to put in an honest day's work, even now," they say when they see him splitting wood out at the lumberyard or hauling goods down Main Street in his wagon. "Gets his hands dirty."

"So you think I'll make you Captain." The Admiral leans back in his chair and crosses his arms behind his head, one of

his casual gestures that says *I'm nothing to be afraid of* and, at the same time, *You have everything to fear*.

"If you want me to go, you will," I say.

"*You work for me.*" He brings his arms down and rests them on the table, drawing him closer. "You do what I ask. That's why you're alive."

I know all of this. There's nothing to say. I stare at the Admiral's hands. They are indeed dirty. Grease under his fingernails, in the lines of his knuckles.

"I wouldn't have thought you'd consider yourself a leader," he says. "You've always preferred to work alone."

"I still do," I say. "But if I have to be on that ship, no one else is going to be in charge."

I want as much control as possible if I have to go back out on the river. And the captain is the one person on board the dredge who gets a private berth. I don't want to have to bunk with anyone. Having my own space is a luxury I've become accustomed to over the past two years. Before then, I lived as most unmarried workers do, in the common quarters near our places of employment. My apartment is still near the scrap yard, but I've got my own bedroom, my own kitchen. Once I'm done with work for the day, I don't have to see or speak with another soul.

"Some of the crew might resent you," the Admiral says. "You're young. And you've been on a single voyage. A *partial* voyage, some might even say. Your excursion didn't complete a full pass of the river. And you came back without any gold."

I don't bother pointing out how much influence I've had on every voyage since. The Admiral knows.

"You do have more invested in the ship than anyone else," he says when I don't fill in the silence.

"Except you."

"Indeed." There's a turquoise ring on his right middle finger. He's worn it so long it looks like it's burrowed into his flesh, though the Admiral is not a heavy man and his fingers are lean. "Don't underestimate how much the raiders hate your ship."

"I won't," I say. I'm glad. I want them to hate it. And fear it.

"Good."

One of the Admiral's guards appears in the doorway, and the Admiral stands up.

"The ship leaves in seven days," he says. "Prepare accordingly. I'll have the manifest sent to you. So you can familiarize yourself with your crew." The Admiral smiles. A flash of very straight teeth. "*Captain Blythe.*"

He leaves me alone in the room.

I feel something I haven't felt often in the two years since Call died. *Interest*. Why aren't the raiders trying to board?

I may not know exactly *why* the Admiral is consumed with pulling more and more gold from the rivers, but I do understand the power of obsession. Mine straightens my back. It keeps me alive.

CHAPTER 3

WE LEAVE TODAY.

From far enough away, jarred along in one of the Admiral's archaic, sluggish wagons, I almost can't see my ship on the river. With mountains behind it and a grassy river plain stretching out in front, the dredge masquerades as something it isn't, a natural part of the landscape. Sunrise and water can make even a dead thing look half alive.

But then we're closer, and I see the dredge for what it is.

I want to crawl all over the outside of the ship, making sure every gear works—touching the armor, polishing it. I've done this before the other voyages, the ones I didn't go on. But the Admiral didn't allow it this time around. He said he didn't want to risk me getting injured.

I don't like it. I wanted more time to check the ship.

I'm the first off the wagon when it slows. The Admiral's guards at the dredge know me; I lift a hand and they step aside.

"Don't let anyone else board until I say." They nod, and I climb on the ship. I'm the first on. And I'll be the last off.

That's what it means to be the Captain.

. . .

On my way down to check on the motor and the mining equipment, I pass the door that leads up to the ship's top deck. It's locked. Now that the dredge is armed, there's no reason to open it. Once the voyage begins, none of us will go above until we're finished. No one has been able to go up and look for stars since Call.

He often had trouble sleeping. Usually it was because he'd had the start of a dream that he didn't get to finish. He dreamed outside of himself, which I always thought was strange. As if he were watching things, rather than experiencing them, which was how it always was for me.

When we were young and living in the orphanage, every few weeks he'd find me at breakfast to tell me about a dream. He did the same in the scrap yard when we were older. And later, on the dredge. He'd tell me, *I saw a boy running, running* or *There was a man standing by a tree late at night holding a lantern* or *My mother was walking in a field and stopped to pick three flowers*.

"And then what?" I'd ask.

"That's when I woke up," Call said. "Finish it for me. Please."

Call liked me to come up with endings for his dreams. When I was younger and we'd had a fight, sometimes I'd refuse. When we were older and I loved him, he asked less, only when he absolutely had to know, and I never turned him down.

We became friends at the orphanage. Neither Call nor I had a story that was especially tragic. We were like the other

children there in that we'd lost both our parents, and we were like the other children in that we didn't know exactly how. There are so many ways to die in the Outpost—working accident, childbirth, lung disease from the pollution that hangs in the sky from cities long ago and far away, any of the myriad illnesses we can't treat with the limited medicine we have. Still, we're told, it's less dangerous than being out in the wild.

I couldn't remember much about my parents—my father had never been around, and my mother died when I was three. Call had more concrete memories than I did. "My mother had sun-black hair, like you," he told me once when we were small.

"Sun isn't black," I said.

"It is after you look at it," he said, "when you shut your eyes. You see black and gold."

"And red," I said.

"Yes." He pointed to my hair. I pulled the ends around to look at them. He was right. In the sun, somehow, there were filaments of gold glinting along my braid.

"You're not supposed to look at the sun," I said.

"Sometimes you don't mean to," he said. "But you do."

I was jealous of Call—that he could remember his mother so well. Later he told me other things about her: that she had a quick temper, but laughed often. It was hard to reconcile that with Call, who was endlessly patient and whose laughter was rare and deep.

Call and I were both good at making things with our hands. And so, when the time came to leave the orphanage

at fifteen, we got sent out to the scrap yard to work our way up, to haul and carry and do piecework for the machinists and learn from them.

The first time I slept after his death, I had the dream about the armor for the dredge. I was watching someone build it. It wasn't long before I realized it was Call. I kept trying to talk to him, but he wouldn't answer. He couldn't hear me. He looked right through me every time. Finally, I stopped trying to talk to him and paid attention to what he was making.

I always knew it wasn't real. I knew that Call didn't come to me in a dream to tell me to build the armor. I knew because it wasn't something Call would have ever wanted me to build in real life.

But I still finished it for him.

"Line up in front of me," I tell the crew assembled on the bank. "Don't worry about order or ranking."

Off to the side, the Admiral stands, watching.

The crew wears dusky-green uniforms like the ones we wore before; the hats are the same, too. Mine has a captain's insignia on it. I've worn my hair in braids to keep it out of my face, but now I wonder if they make the hat seem ill-fitting, make me look ridiculous.

The crew stands at attention, but their bearing as a group isn't perfect because most aren't true militia. It's a jumble of machinists, miners, and others pressed into the Admiral's service for this excursion. Most of the people in the Outpost

don't pay much attention to the dredge voyages. People have so much work to do in their day-to-day lives that they don't spare a thought for the tasks of others. They trust the Admiral, and keeping the Outpost viable is a full-time job for everyone who lives here.

Generations ago, when people came to build the Outpost in this wild land where we now live, the Territory, they had support and supplies and contact with the Union that had sent them. The settlers had been asked to establish the Outpost as a jumping-off point for more explorations and because the Union had heard there might be gold to mine in the Territory. But after a few years, the Union sent word they were no longer going to keep up the Outpost. We were too much work, they said. Too far away from the rest of their provinces and cities. Too hard to protect. Too wild. We hadn't found enough gold to make us worth their time, and they no longer seemed to care about exploring. The Union ran the dredges ashore and stopped visiting or sending supplies. We were on our own. The first Admiral gathered in those who'd settled outside of the Outpost, for their own protection. The raiders are the descendants of those who refused to come.

"Name?" I say to the man in front of me.

"Owen Fales," he says.

"You're one of the miners." I've been over and over the names on the manifest. I know them all.

He nods. "Captain Blythe."

He's older than I am—thirties or forties—but seems soft-spoken. Perhaps he won't mind being led by someone as young as I am.

Down the rows I go. When I get to a young man with dark hair and blue eyes, my heart rises into my throat the way it always does at an unexpected reminder of Call. This man has Call's exact coloring and is handsome, too, but other than that they look nothing alike.

"Brig Tanner," he says.

"First mate," I say back, and he nods.

"Eira Clyde," says the girl next to him. She's very beautiful, with high cheekbones, dark hair. "Cartographer."

I raise my eyebrows at her. She's spoken before I can. She flushes, realizing the mistake, but doesn't break our gaze.

Is she insolent? Or merely inexperienced? I resist the urge to look over at the Admiral.

I'm sure that he'll have someone on board to watch me. To watch all of us. I wonder who it is.

I go through the names and positions. Officer Ophelia Hill, navigator. Officer Laura Seng, medic. Officer Cecil Clair, chaplain. Officer Corwin Revis, chief machinist.

Then a face so young it makes me stop. He must be my age, or perhaps even younger.

"Tam Wallace," he says.

"Ship's cook," I answer.

The excitement on his face reminds me of myself two years ago. He'll have heard about the myriad of miseries waiting for

him on board the dredge—the grating noise and hard work, the boredom, the claustrophobia. He hasn't *felt* them yet. But if he's like Call and I were, he'll love the voyage anyway because it's an adventure. I feel a pang in my heart for who I used to be, for what I've lost.

“How old *are* you?” I ask.

“Sixteen.”

A year younger than me.

“How did you become a ship's cook so young?”

Tam runs a hand through his hair, breaking the protocol of standing at attention when the Captain is reviewing the crew. He catches himself halfway through and drops his hand to the side. “I work at the meal hall where the Admiral dines. He gave me this assignment himself.”

“If he likes your food, why would he waste you on the dredge?” I ask.

“He wants this voyage to succeed,” Tam says. “People work better when they're well fed.”

Young, malleable, talented but not in a way that's threatening to the Admiral, someone conveniently located in the kitchen, where he'll hear all the gossip. . . .

Maybe I've found the Admiral's watchdog.

Near the end, I see the one name on the manifest that I recognized, the one person I've *wanted* to see. My former boss, now my second mate.

“Naomi Moran,” she says. Her hair, dark streaked with gray, is longer than I remembered.

“Second mate,” I say.

“Captain Blythe,” says a guard at my elbow. “The Admiral is ready to address the crew.”

A subtle undercut. I was going to give my own message first; anything I say after his speech will be a letdown. I nod and the guard calls out, “The Admiral will speak to you now.” They all turn in his direction like flowers to the sun.

The Admiral’s wearing a suit coat and vest today. Even in the heat. I know the crew will love this. They’ll see it as a sign of esteem. Perhaps it is. The Admiral looks as pleased as I’ve ever seen him.

“Come here, Captain Blythe,” the Admiral says.

I take my place at his left.

“Captain Blythe designed the armor that protects our ship, our cargo, and our crew so well,” the Admiral says. “I want this crew to accord her all respect in honor of the lives she’s saved. Captain Blythe.”

I stand stiff and awkward while the others salute. Will the Admiral’s blessing help or hurt me on the river? It used to be that the crews were people like Call and me, who wanted to get out of the Outpost for a while. And the Admiral needed people to do the work and who didn’t mind going. It worked out as well as anything could. But now things have changed. I can tell. I smell it in the cool-burned morning air, in the shift of the wind. In the way some of the crew makes sense and some don’t quite seem to fit. The Admiral chose us all.

“This is the last river,” the Admiral says. “The last voyage.

Your mission is important to the Outpost, to all of us. I wish you well, and I know you will succeed.”

He lifts his broad-brimmed hat into the air and the crew cheers, all twenty-three of us. I raise my voice with the rest so I don't draw the Admiral's ire.

I've never liked being around people, but ever since Call, it's been worse.

The Admiral's eyes meet mine and he smiles.

We don't embrace or shake hands but she falls into step right next to me, our shoulders almost touching, as we board the boat.

“We're traveling on a ship of children and fools,” Naomi says, low.

“You're right,” I say. “What does the Admiral think he's playing at?”

“I don't think he's playing.” Naomi's voice sounds rough like everyone's does when they get to her age. Like mine will sound eventually. “I think he has exactly who he wants on this voyage. I just don't know *why*.”

CHAPTER 4

THIS IS THE MOMENT the voyage starts. Not when the Admiral gave a speech and people cheered. *This*. When the motor first turns, the ship moves, the armor whirs into gear.

I have a wave of memory—Call and I standing together on the deck of the other dredge, watching the trees and rivers pass by. It takes time and work to tear up a river the way the dredge does, so you can see almost everything. The ship is not fast.

Naomi and I are on the bridge, the small room at the front of the dredge. Here, we can steer the ship and watch the mining buckets coming up outside, a long loop of them rotating through on a bucket elevator. They're huge, weighing over a thousand pounds each, made of metal strong and durable enough to withstand scraping along the bottom of the river floor and hauling up rocks.

The windows of the bridge gave me trouble when I was designing the armor because they're a spot for a potential breach. One morning I woke up and the world went from

dark to light with the opening of my eyes and I knew: *The ship needs eyelids*. The window armor can be retracted for viewing or extended over the windows for security.

Right now, they're open, and Naomi and I watch the river sliding slowly past beneath us. She gives me a thumbs-up. Everything sounds as it should, loud and sweet and terrible. I smile back. I think about what the Admiral said to me before we left. *Don't underestimate how much the raiders hate your ship*. But what *I* think is that the raiders shouldn't underestimate how much I *love* my ship. Or, to be precise, how much I love what it does.

It's a pale, twisted little thing compared to what I felt for Call. Maybe it's not even love, what I feel. I don't know.

But it's better than nothing.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I open the door to the captain's quarters. *Alone*. At last.

I can work with others when I have to, when I'm designing or refining the ship. I've been doing that for the past two years.

But this is different. I'm *living* with other people again. We're all stuck on board the dredge until the end of the voyage. Back when there were ocean journeys, they couldn't leave their ships because they were surrounded by water. Here, we're feet away from a shore, from land. It's enough to make you crazy, thinking about escape or climbing off and walking

away. That's the strange thing about the dredge. In theory, you could leave. But in practice, it's not allowed.

None of us can leave. Not even the captain.

My quarters aren't much nicer than the rest of the crew's accommodations, except in one critical way—they're private. My space has a bunk, a desk and chair next to it, a tiny dresser. Everything is made of metal and bolted to the wall and floor.

There is a map of the Serpentine River Valley tacked to the wall. After I heave my bag onto my bed, I walk over to examine the map—the greens and blues and browns, the names of the tributaries and their valleys.

A knock at the door. I open it to find my first mate.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Brig says. "But is there anything you'd like me to do? Naomi's at the helm and she says she doesn't need me to relieve her yet. I've been down to the mining deck and everything seems to be going smoothly."

Right. Orders. I need to remember to give them.

"Call a meeting for me," I tell Brig. "During both meal times." We eat in two shifts so that there are always personnel to keep the ship going, and the cafeteria is the only area large enough to hold everyone. Except for the mining deck, I suppose, but it's hard to hear down there.

"Will do, Captain Blythe."

Brig salutes without irony. He's had militia training, I'm sure of it, though he's wearing the same uniform as everyone else. There's something sad and set about his eyes, an almost-gentle, resigned quality, though everything else is sharply

defined—his hair combed with military precision, his broad shoulders straight and his posture upright.

He'd also make an excellent informant for the Admiral.

I close the door.

I go back to my bag and pull out my comb, set it on the desk. I take out some shirts. When I reach back inside the bag, my body goes still as my fingers brush against something unfamiliar. I know the feel of everything I packed and this isn't mine. Paper, soft and worn, folded into a large square.

I pull it out and open it up.

It's a map, a little like the one on my wall. Except this isn't a full map, just a piece of one. At the corners where it's folded, there are small holes. It's old.

But the message written on it is new. Scrawled in dark black ink that has bled into the fog-soft paper.

This is not your river.

Is it a threat? I run my thumb across the words.

Of course it is.

So. There may be someone on board who sympathizes with the raiders.

I fold the map back up and zip it into my bag.

You want to play cat and mouse with me? I think. Good. Let's play.

CHAPTER 5

“SO HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE to get used to the sound?” Tam asks me as I come through the dinner line in the cafeteria. The noise from the mining below is enough to rattle your teeth and shake your brain against your skull.

But Tam seems to be handling it well. He looks cheerful and calm, and he’s not sweating, though the kitchen must be hellish hot.

“Soon,” I say. “Never.”

“Be careful.” Tam puts a dish with a metal cover on my tray. “Don’t burn yourself.”

I take my meal to the table at the front of the room because that’s where the captain on my other voyage always sat. He was an older man with a weary manner, but he was efficient and fair. I’ve never blamed him for what happened. He didn’t kill Call.

That ship was the twin of this one, the layout is the same, but Call was never here. I make sure to remind myself of this

every time I catch myself thinking of him, hoping against hope to see him come around a corner, through a door.

Someone—Tam? his kitchen assistant?—has set the tables with real napkins and flowers in heavy metal cups. The delicate blossoms shake with the constant vibration of the dredge. A petal falls as I set down my tray. I don't sit.

All eyes on me. I was the last to enter the room.

It's time for the first meeting.

"I'll make this short so you can eat," I say. "I know that for those of you who haven't been on board, the dredge can take getting used to, but that will come with time. There are some things you *must* remember. You cannot leave the ship. You may not go outside or up on the deck. If you do anything to compromise our mission, the consequences will be swift and severe."

A few heads nod, but most people remain still. According to the manifest, eleven of the crew have been on a dredge voyage before and the others have not. To work on the ship, they're required to have mining or machinery experience, or to be an expert in another area for which we have need. They also have to be able to swim and shoot. In my opinion, those last two aren't necessary anymore. Not now that we have my armor.

I make eye contact with a couple of men at the back who look greener than the rest. The ship's getting to them. The motion, maybe, making them sick. Or the noise. Or the heat of many bodies in close quarters.

I fold my arms. I'm sweating, but so is everyone else.

"Our job is straightforward. We gather gold and kill any raiders who try to harm us or interfere with our mission."

Someone raises a hand. “I heard that when we have to turn the ship around you might let us out to have a look.”

“The instructions we were all given say explicitly otherwise,” I say.

Disappointment crosses more than one person’s face. Why did they think there was a chance? They all know the Admiral forbids it.

Maybe they think I’m some kind of rogue. Or that I’m weak, and they’ll be able to push me around.

“I’ll call meetings as needed,” I continue. “For now, enjoy your dinner. It will be the one time that your seatmates smell as fresh as they do.”

It’s a poor attempt at humor, but they laugh. I sit down. I’ve done what’s necessary. Stated the rules, demonstrated that I plan to adhere to them, shown that I am not *completely* cold and without camaraderie. You can’t command a ship that way. I don’t know much but I know that. I think I’m relatively safe from mutiny because no one wants to harm the person who designed the ship’s armor and who can best keep it running.

Except maybe the person who left me that note.

I lift the cover off my dish and the smell instantly makes my mouth water. Around me, others are murmuring in surprise.

It’s not stew or any of its incarnations, the usual mish-mash of food put together and seasoned to disguise its age or toughness. It’s separate, distinct, beautiful food—meat with wine-colored sauce, crisp salad greens, crusty-outside-and-steaming-hot-inside bread.

Heads swivel to the serving area but Tam has disappeared.

Naomi leans over to me. “Reminds me of that story about the children and the witch in the wood,” she says. “Why is the Admiral fattening us up?”

I laugh, remembering. “This ship isn’t made of candy.”

“That it isn’t,” she says, and her face goes grim.

Maybe the Admiral is going to eat us. Isn’t that how the other story ended?

“Excuse me,” a man says, standing up. “I beg your pardon. If I could offer a few words as well.”

Chaplain Clair. I remember him from this morning and from the manifest. A prickle of irritation rustles through me. I never said he could speak.

The chaplain is short, smaller than me. And he has a sweaty red face and a twitchy little nose and big patches of wet on the underarms of his uniform. I want to roll my eyes.

“You may speak,” I say. “But keep it quick. We need to eat.”

Right then, there’s a clamor at the door. Heads turn and I see Brig pushing into the cafeteria with two crew members, both men. Brig and the man on the right are trying to restrain the one in the middle, who’s struggling. Has there been a fight? No blood, that I can see. But the man they’re holding has wild in his eyes.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Brig says. “But he was trying to get off the ship. He came onto the bridge and tried to climb through the window.”

“It’s driving me crazy,” the man in the middle says. Jonah

Miller, I remember, from the roll call earlier. “The noise. How *slow* it is. Just let me off and I’ll walk back to the Outpost. We haven’t gone far.”

“We’re not going to stop the whole dredge and risk the crew,” I say. “Stopping makes us vulnerable. Once we’re in motion, we stay in motion.”

He casts his eyes around desperately, trying to think of another way out. “Let me jump off the deck,” he offers, his voice tinged with hope.

“No one goes on the deck,” I say. “And no one jumps.”

“So there’s no way off.” His shoulders slump. “There’s no way out.”

“Of course there is,” I say. “We could put you in one of the dredge buckets going back into the water and out you’ll go into the river. We won’t even have to stop. If you don’t drown or get caught on any machinery, you can swim your way to shore and walk back to the Outpost.”

His eyes go wide. My words have given him a new source of panic.

“If there’s a way off, then there’s also a way for the raiders to get on!”

He’s trying my patience. “If they attempt to get on that way, they won’t make it far,” I say. It’s true that the buckets dragging the river bottom for gold are large enough to hold a person, if the person were small and curled themselves up tight. But I’ve equipped the bucket line with the guillotine—an enormous blade that each bucket passes under as it arrives inside the ship. No one over the age of ten or so could make

themselves so small that they wouldn't have *some* part sticking out—a head, an arm, a leg.

The room is silent.

“You can go out,” I say. Bluffing. “I’ll help you do it myself. But there’s no way back on.”

Jonah’s eyes are still wild. Brig holds on to his arm. I tilt my head. “Get him out of here,” I say. “Send him through the buckets. Off the ship.”

Will Brig do it? I’m interested to find out more about my first mate. It’s against the Admiral’s orders. No one’s supposed to leave the ship. Period.

But then Jonah starts to weep. “I’ll stay,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“Then get back to work.” I nod to the other crew member who’s holding Jonah upright. “You stay with him. Report any other problems immediately.”

Brig meets my gaze as they start toward the door.

I wonder if he would have put the man off the ship.

I wonder if I would have.

Naomi stands up. “Permission to speak requested, Captain.” She says it loud enough for everyone in the cafeteria to hear. Brig and the others pause in the doorway.

“Permission granted.”

“I want to speak on behalf of those who went with you on your first voyage,” Naomi says. “We never had a chance to thank you. For our lives.”

“That’s not necessary,” I say. The bargain I struck with the Admiral—my armor design for the lives of the crew who

lost the other dredge—isn't something I want brought up now. I motion for her to sit down but she doesn't, so I stay standing, too. Crew members are putting down their cutlery, leaning in to listen to Naomi.

"I went on the next voyage, you know," she says. "The first one with your armor."

Why is she telling me this now? In front of everyone?

"The raiders tried to board several times," she says. "We heard them, even with all the noise of the dredge. Screaming. Scratching. Pounding with fists and weapons."

Naomi pauses. "We looked through the bridge window when we absolutely had to to navigate," she says. "We saw a body fall down now and then. But we didn't go outside, of course, until we got back."

Everyone's still, listening to Naomi. All our beautiful food is getting cold. I can smell it. I'm hungry.

"When we got out and looked at the ship," she says, "it looked like it had rusted. There was so much blood. They spent days cleaning and oiling it so it could leave again."

A few of the crew members look at me with a hint of fear in their eyes.

I'm not sure what to say in the silence but right then I hear the door to the kitchen area swing open. We all turn to look at Tam.

He's carrying a cake. A ridiculous, towering white cake. Something so frivolous and rare in any circumstance, it's ludicrous to see here on the dredge. But somehow, he managed it.

Has he heard what we've been saying? Tam's eyes meet

mine over the cake. I'm only a year older than he is, but he's so young. He's who I used to be.

"Did I forget a wedding?" I ask, and I feel the tension in the room give, and some of the crew laughs.

"We're all married to this ship," Tam says. "To the *Lily*."

The crew laughs again, and as Tam brings the cake closer I realize it's the dredge. He's turned it into a confection. A fluffy, ornate cloud.

Tam has spoken lightly, but as he hands me a knife to cut the cake he makes certain to hold my gaze. In his eyes is a warning.

About what?

I shouldn't make the mistake of thinking Tam's like me, the way I used to be. He might be. He might not.

I plunge the knife into the cake, and then lick the cutting edge of the blade, careful not to draw blood.

"Get another knife, Cook," I say. I don't use Tam's name because there's no reason to—crew often refer to one another by our titles—but I still see a flicker of hurt in his eyes. "We might be in the belly of the dredge now, but soon it will be in ours."

The others laugh again and in a few moments I'm slicing into the cake, and Tam hands it around, accepting their compliments and congratulatory slaps on the back. "Save some for the other shift," he tells them.

When the bell clangs for the shift change, everyone stands up to leave. Besides Naomi and me, Chaplain Clair is the last one out. He never did have his chance to speak.

“What do you think he wanted to say?” I ask Naomi.

“I’d imagine it’s something about the Admiral,” she says. “How working for him is a great and noble endeavor.”

I pause at the door. “So we’ve already had our first would-be deserter,” I say. “Do you think there will be more?”

“Not after that,” Naomi says. “And I’ve heard the crew talking about you. They say that the Admiral trusts you. That you’re hard.”

I suppose it could be worse. I gesture for Naomi to go through the door first, but she has more to say.

“You’ve changed.” Her eyes are shrewd.

I press my lips together. Naomi wouldn’t speak to another captain this way. Her tone is respectful but she’s calling on our past, she’s speaking of personal things.

“Thank you, Second Mate,” I say. “If you’ll excuse me. I need to prepare to speak to the next group.”

“Of course,” Naomi says.

Several people have challenged me today. The chaplain put himself forward to speak without an invitation. Tam talked to me as if I were a peer. Brig hesitated when I told him to send the man off the ship. Naomi assumes that she knows me.

I need to put an end to all of it.

CHAPTER 6

I MAKE MY WAY to the small platform down on the mining deck, where I can watch the machines work and the motor run. The two crew members standing up on the platform keeping guard nod to me. “You can go down for a bit,” I say. “I’ll take a turn.”

“Thank you, Captain,” one says.

I take their position at the watch.

This is the most dangerous place on the ship.

Everyone—the would-be deserter, the Admiral himself when I first showed him the plans—worries about someone getting on the dredge through the buckets. It’s the first spot they picture a breach now that the top deck is secure and the windows on the bridge are armored. But the most vulnerable part of the ship isn’t where the gold comes in. It’s where the rocks go out—a rectangular protrusion called the tailings stacker that juts out the back of the ship. It’s high above the river and a constant stream of *tailings*, or *slicken*—rock and debris—cascades out of it as long as the dredge is mining.

I thought for a long time about how to best secure the stacker. I gave it the same outside armor I used on the rest of the ship—gears and turns that move all the time, ready to chew up and spit out.

But after that, I was stuck. The stacker *has* to have an opening, needs to be constantly disposing of the slicken, or we'll sink under all the weight. Finally, I decided to trust in the sheer force of the tailings coming out and in the fact that my armor covers everything but the opening. Those two things, plus the height of the stacker from the river, means that anyone trying to board would likely die. And it wouldn't be a good death, to be cast out with the tailings and buried, still alive, in the refuse of the ship, body crushed under what we don't need, can't use, and drowned in the water besides.

There aren't really *any* good deaths if you try to board my ship.

I think about all the systems working together. The mining gear, the propellers that the ship uses for motion, the armor—the dredge is like a person, with each system combining to make a whole. There are ways to disengage the systems from the main motor, but we rarely have occasion to do that. And everything takes their energy from the solar conduits. It's efficient. My ship runs smooth.

This is not your river.

It's time to look into the matter of the note written on the map. I have another hour before I need to be up at the helm.

First, the logistics room. Maybe I'll find a map there with a piece cut out. Although it seems unlikely I'll be *that* lucky.

And I want to talk to the ship's cartographer, Eira Clyde. The young woman with dark hair.

In the hallway, I run into Brig. Since I'm the captain, most people step aside or flatten themselves against the wall. Not Brig.

"I'd like to talk with you," he says.

"Good," I say. "I need to speak with you as well. Go ahead."

I'm tall, but he's taller, and we both have to duck our heads under the dredge's low ceiling. It makes for awkward eye contact, which I like, because when we're sitting down or fully standing Brig can draw himself up to his full height and look down on me.

"That man who wanted to desert," Brig says. "Would you really have put him off the ship? He thinks so. The crew thinks so."

As is the case every time I've spoken with Brig, I can feel his charisma, his pull. He's handsome, but it's more than that. The timbre of his voice, maybe, and the way he looks you full in the eyes. Most people don't. They end up glancing away. There's a subtle force to Brig that makes me try to take up more space so he can have less.

"Of course," I say.

He nods, as if that's the answer he expected. I get the sense that there's something more he wants to say, but after a beat of our quiet and the ship's noise, I speak instead.

"When Jonah Miller tried to desert," I say, "why did you

bring him to the cafeteria, when you knew I was holding a meeting? Why didn't you lock him down in his room and keep him there until later?"

"I brought him in because I thought you'd want to make an example out of him," Brig says.

"I don't care about examples," I say. "If something bad happens, I want the least amount of people to know about it. I want everyone to keep quiet and do their work. It's loud enough on this ship as it is."

"Captain." It's not quite an acknowledgment. There's a hint of objection in Brig's voice.

"And I want you," I say, "to follow my orders. This ship needs me to run. It does not need you."

Call used to laugh when I'd threaten someone, another worker on the scrap yard, another child on the playground when we were small. "You couldn't hurt anything," he'd say.

"They don't know that," I told him.

"But I do," Call said.

Now, though, I think even Call would believe me when I say it.

"We must have similar concerns about this voyage," Brig says. "It would be helpful if we could discuss them."

"All I need from you," I say, "is to follow my orders."

Brig looks like he might speak again but I turn away, brushing his chest with my shoulder in the tight hallway as I pass by.

There is not nearly enough room on this ship.

. . .

When the time came for Call and me to move out of the orphanage and into the quarters out at the scrap yard, we walked there together, our packs slung over our shoulders. We stopped in our tracks at the same time in front of the huge mural painted on the cinder-block exterior of the dormitory.

The Outpost is full of murals. In some ways I liked them because they lent color to the buildings. But the lack of proportion in the people bothered me. They were all depicted in the same style—the men had impossibly large muscles and broad shoulders, the women had nipped-in waists and enormous eyes. The painted people stared at us as we went inside the dormitory.

“They’re watching us,” he said.

“They’re jealous,” I said. “We can move and they can’t,” and I stuck out my tongue at them, which made Call laugh.

We were still only friends, then, Call and I. It was over the course of the next year, when we walked past each other in the scrap yard all day long and sat together at dinner at night, that things changed. We’d always been close, but our new lives brought us closer. We had the same marks on our hands, same cuts from the metal. We told each other stories of our days, of the frustration we both felt at the work we were doing, how all we ever did was fix things, how we never got to *build* anything. We both felt like time was running out. We felt the urgency of our lives in a new way, that we should at least do something with them.

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And we fell in love. I remember thinking how strange and right it was, that I could know that I wanted a different life and yet also know I wanted this person, same and new, with me.

CHAPTER 7

AS THE CAPTAIN, I'm entitled to go anywhere on the ship at any time, so I open the door of the logistics room without knocking. Eira turns, a pencil tucked behind her ear, another in her hand.

"Captain Blythe," she says. "How can I help you?"

"I need a map." I don't want to tell her about the note. After all, she's just as likely as anyone else to have left it. More so, in fact; she has the easiest access to all the maps.

"Of course," she says. The logistics room is tiny, lined with metal cabinets with long thin drawers. In the middle of the room there's a small, bolted-down table with a chair. "Which one?"

"I want the most detailed map you have for this part of the river."

"I think that map was placed in your quarters at the beginning of the voyage," she says.

"I'd like for you to look again," I say. "I'll help. I promise I'll keep things in order. I don't want to hamper your work."

Eira nods and moves over to one of the cabinets. I go to the cabinet next to her and slide open a drawer, leafing through the maps while keeping an eye on her as well.

The maps feel different depending on their age—soft, brittle, stiff, smooth, all different textures, like the land they depict. My favorites are the topographical maps, with bumps for mountains and slick blue plastic for water. The Union didn't skimp on the maps they sent with the first settlers, and the Outpost has taken great care with them ever since. The Admiral must trust Eira a great deal if he appointed her as the cartographer for this voyage.

"Here's one," Eira says, "but I don't know that it's any better than the one you have already."

I take the map from her and go to the table. She hurries over to sweep away her papers and drafting materials, but before she does, I see what she's been working on.

It's an artistic rendering of the dredge, and it's exquisite.

"You did this?"

She glances over. Her mouth draws tight. "Yes," she says.

"What is it for?"

"I'm afraid that you've caught me working on something simply because it gives me pleasure," she says. "I find the ship fascinating. And challenging, artistically. Your armor is particularly hard to draw."

I think she means that as a compliment. Looking at Eira's picture, I feel a twinge of jealousy. I've never been accused of artistry in my drafts or drawings. My work is accurate. Exact. Utilitarian.

“You’re right,” I say. “This map isn’t quite as good as the one in my cabin. Let’s keep looking.”

We return to the cabinets. Even though the ship grinds on below us, I can hear the smaller sounds we make, the sliding of drawers, the rustle and flick of our fingers through the maps.

I get into a kind of rhythm as I’m going through the papers, and I almost miss the map that I’ve been looking for. I flip right past it and then have to stop and go back. A spot on the map matches up with the back of the note left in my bag. There isn’t a piece cut out of this one but I’m almost certain it’s a print identical to the one someone left in my bag. I recognize the contours and curves of the land replicated here, and the paper feels of a similar age.

I take it over to the table and spread it out, and when I see the whole thing, I realize I’m looking at a map for the Cutwater River, the one I dredged with Call. I didn’t recognize it before, because the note only showed a bit of water and land.

They’ve given me a piece of a map that marks the place, or close to it, where Call died.

I laugh.

Eira looks at me, surprised.

I lift up the map of the Cutwater and, in doing so, I accidentally move her drawing of the ship and reveal another sketch underneath.

It’s a drawing of people looking toward a golden sun. Some kneel. A few shield their eyes. And in front of the sun—almost as if it’s pulling the sun along, bringing it to them—is the

dredge, which also shines like gold. On its deck, among the armor, stands the upright figure of the Admiral.

It's a draft of a mural.

Eira's talent is undeniable in the dredge picture, but this drawing is different. It's highly stylized, like every other piece of Outpost art. Even the dredge, which she drew so beautifully in her other piece, is inflated and bloated, not intricate and accurate, like her other work.

Eira takes the mural draft from me.

"That's a commission I'm working on for the Admiral," she says, her voice perfectly level. She reaches for another paper, and as she pulls it away I see yet another drawing. It's a person, lined in, almost featureless in its conformity as the type of figure shown in murals. But I recognize the stance, the braids.

It's supposed to be me.

Eira's eyes meet mine.

"You're hard to draw," she says.

"Why would you try?"

She puts the drawing of the mural back down on the table next to the sketch of me. "Here's where you'll be," she says, pointing at the crowd. "I've left a spot to add you in once I get the draft right."

"As long as I'm not one of the people kneeling," I say, and she looks at me with a flicker of amusement in her eyes.

"Where will it go?" It seems that the sides of every building in the Outpost are already covered with murals.

“I don’t know,” she says.

It looks like every other mural, I think again, my eyes running over the figures and their stances.

Almost too much so.

Almost like a parody.

“Thank you,” I say to Eira, rolling up the map of the Cutwater River to take with me. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“You’re welcome,” she says. I’m willing to bet that after I leave she’ll go over and note which map I took. She’ll know I lied to her, since the Cutwater River is nowhere near here. I wonder what she’ll think of me then.

I close the door behind me and put the map under my arm. I can’t be sure, but something about the way she drew that mural makes me think that Eira is *not* the Admiral’s watchdog.

So. Does she sympathize with the raiders?

Did *she* leave the note?

CHAPTER 8

A KNOCK ON MY DOOR in the middle of the night. I twist onto my stomach, my woolen blanket tangling up in my legs, and reach for the lantern on the dresser. It glows softly in my hand as I answer the door.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Captain,” Naomi says. “You’re going to want to see this.”

I dress quickly and pull on my boots. My hair is loose and I braid it as I walk, following Naomi down the tight, twisting metal staircase into the depths of the dredge.

The mining crew waits for me. Things have been going well enough during our first week on the ship. We’ve had no incidents aside from the one with the would-be deserter the first night. Some of the workers smile when I meet their eyes.

The news must be good.

“Look, Captain,” one of the men says.

Even in the lamplight, even before the haul has been

through the trammel for sifting, I can make out the dull sheen and color of gold. I've never seen a haul like this. There's so much gold you can spot it among the rocks.

"How long has it been this way?" I ask.

"For the last hour," Naomi says. "We've taken on more in that time than in the rest of the voyage."

"And the quality's good?"

"Very."

The ship's chief miner, Noah Warren, holds out a map in front of me. "We're due to keep to the left soon," he says, and I look where he's pointing. We're nearing what's called a *braid*, when the river splits into several different channels before coming back together again miles later. "But our best guess is, that with the way the gold is deposited in the bed of the river, we're more likely to keep up this kind of success if we go up the channel on the right. We're requesting your permission to divert our course."

Noah has to shout to be heard down here, but something about the situation still feels quiet, intimate. Knowing that it's dark outside. The gold. All of us up in the night on the water. We're far enough down the river that our ability to communicate with the Outpost ended days ago. This call is mine to make.

I run my finger down along the map. I'm sure many are wondering if I'll stay loyal to the path the Admiral set out for us to follow. I wonder if the person who left the note is trying to lure us off course so the raiders can attack. Maybe this much gold is a trap.

“When do we need to decide?” I ask.

“I’d guess we have about two hours before we’ll reach the fork,” Noah says. “Give or take.”

“Let’s see how much more gold comes in over the next hour,” I say. “If it runs out, the point may be moot.”

“Should I wake you again when it’s time?” Naomi asks.

“No,” I say. “I’ll stay up. But have someone take Brig’s place at the helm. I’d like to talk with both of you about what we should do.”

“I will,” Naomi says. “Though I have no opinion to offer, myself. It’s your decision to make.”

That surprises me some.

I climb up to the platform in the mining deck again, dismissing the guards for a moment so I can think. I look out over the back of the dredge through the opening at the end of the stacker, making sure the night lighting is working. That was another dilemma—when it gets dark, do we light up this part of the dredge so that we can see who might be coming on? If so, we also make ourselves impossible to miss. The Admiral and I decided that it was better to keep the ship lit during the voyages. The noise gives us away, anyway. You can’t miss the dredge coming up the river.

Footsteps behind me. Too heavy to be Naomi’s, but not without grace. Someone who could make themselves stealthy, quiet, but who has chosen not to.

Brig comes to stand on my left, so that my line of vision includes both him and the stacker. “Naomi said you wanted to see me.”

“Did she tell you about the gold?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

It’s hard for me to get the words out. It was easier to ask Naomi. “I’ve already talked to Naomi. Do you have an opinion about which part of the river we should take?”

“I’d stay with the course we were given at the beginning of the voyage,” Brig says. “But I’ll answer to the Admiral with you if you decide to deviate.”

The first part of his answer doesn’t surprise me, but the second part does. If this goes wrong, answering to the Admiral is no small thing. Is Brig serious? He looks it. One of the lanterns swings overhead with the motion of the dredge, and his features seem narrowed, then shadowed in the moving light. I don’t know him well, and I know him even less like this.

I look past Brig to the stacker, but I can tell his eyes are fully focused on my face.

“I was glad to be chosen for this voyage for several reasons,” he says. “One of them was because I’d get to see the armor in person. It’s even more impressive than I imagined.”

It’s a compliment. I could thank him.

“Tell the guards to come back up to their post,” I say.

Alone again. I find myself glancing for a moment at the metal plate hanging on the wall. There was one exactly like it on the other ship. The dredges are so old they predate even the Union. Those long-ago crews scrawled down codes on the plate for the bells they used to communicate over the noise of the mining equipment. One short ring means stop the tram-mel. Two short rings means start it back up again. Three

means there's an emergency and to cut the motor and sound the main alarm throughout the ship. Call and I used to wonder about that.

"Shouldn't it be one short for an emergency?" I asked. "If a raider were cutting your throat, you'd want the signal to be quick."

Call shook his head. "You're so bloodthirsty."

It was a joke, then.

I could change the warning system now, if I wanted. I'm the captain.

With the threat of the raiders dispelled, the most likely emergency is that we'll need to stop the dredge because the ship has taken on something that could grind and break the gears, or because someone has fallen into the mining equipment on the inside.

The raiders aren't the only ones who can kill. One person could shove another into the machinery, send them out through the stacker along with the tailings.

Time's up.

The gold's still coming in fast.

Crew's quiet, eyes on me, waiting for my decision.

"We'll keep to the right," I say to Naomi. "Let Brig know."

She nods and heads up the stairs. I stay down with the crew. "May I?" I ask Noah, and he drops a few of the nuggets into my cupped hand. Their lumpy shapes remind me of tiny fossilized hearts, heavy and dead.

CHAPTER 9

GOLD, GOLD, AND MORE GOLD. In three days, we harvest more than any other previous voyage has on its entire run.

“You running out of places to put it?” one of the crew asks Noah as we break for lunch in the ship’s cafeteria.

“We’ll throw *you* overboard if we need more space,” Noah jokes back. The atmosphere is so different from the first day of the voyage that everyone in earshot laughs. No one is offended, no one can imagine wanting to leave, not right now.

“If you run out of space, you can fill my room,” someone else calls out. “I wouldn’t mind sleeping on a pile of gold.”

I have a moment of gladness because they’re all so happy, because they’re smiling, but it doesn’t last.

This isn’t our gold. It’s the Admiral’s.

“Think we’ll sink under the weight?” Tam asks.

It’s true that the motor is working harder—we have a heavy cargo and a long way yet to go. We may have to return early if we reach our storage capacity before we get to the planned turnaround point in the river.

And then what? Will the Admiral send us back out? Or will we have brought back enough for whatever it is he has in mind?

“We’re fine for now,” I say. “Have you been on the mining deck again?”

“Yes,” he says. “They need the help. And you gave me permission to assist.”

“As long as the food doesn’t suffer.”

“It hasn’t,” Tam says.

“That’s true.” I eat every bite of the meals Tam serves. My plate is as clean as if it had been licked by a cat. “But when do you sleep?”

“I don’t,” he says. Then, hastily, “I do. Don’t worry. I’m fine.”

“Remember,” I say, “the Admiral’s not here for you to impress.”

“I’m not trying to impress the Admiral.” Tam looks at me. His hazel eyes have flecks of gold. There’s something there. Is it worth mining deeper to find out what it is?

“It’s interesting,” Tam says. “The more gold we get, the more grim you look.”

He’s right. The wealth, the ease, the success of all this puts something inside of me even more on edge. I feel like the ship has changed form. Now it’s not a sleek wild cat with claws and teeth at the ready, hair standing on end. It’s plump and sated, curled up in the sun, waiting to be gutted.

• • •

When I walk into my quarters after supper one night, I know instantly that someone's been there. Nothing is ransacked but everything is slightly askew. The chair, not quite tucked in under the desk. The edge of my blanket, pulled out a bit from the bunk.

Someone wanted me to know they were here. Wanted to scare me.

Who could it be?

I have the only key to the room.

That's not true, I think to myself. *Clearly, someone else has another.*

Did the Admiral give someone a key so they could keep an eye on me? What else do they have keys to? The mining deck? The bridge? The firearm lockers on each level?

I fold my arms and look around, not touching anything, trying to memorize all the differences. Only when I'm sure I've noticed everything do I walk over to the bureau, which has a drawer ajar.

That's where they've put the note—on top of my folded shirts. It seems personal. I don't like it. This is an even bigger violation than putting something in my bag.

This is not your gold, the note says.

I crumple the paper in my hand.

Enough is enough.

I walk out in the hall to the nearest alarm box and pull the handle down. The ship begins to wail.

CHAPTER 10

I DON'T FLINCH.

It makes sense that I can handle the sound. Call died before the alarm, when the ship stopped. *That's* the sound that I don't think I'd be able to bear. For me, the sound of Call going gone is the sound of the ship going quiet.

The crew knows the protocol. If the alarm sounds, they're to report to their assigned spots in one of the ship's two largest areas—some to the cafeteria, some to the mining deck. Naomi's over the deck and Brig's in charge of the cafeteria. I'm supposed to secure the bridge, leaving Ophelia Hill, the navigator, in charge. Once I've done that, I call to my first and second mates on the ship's communications system.

"All here," Naomi says, yelling to be heard over the noise of the trammel down on the mining deck.

"All here," Brig says.

"Good," I say. "I'll come to the mining deck first."

Some of the crew are wearing pajamas—it was their shift

to sleep. They watch me, eyes wary. Do they trust me? Should they?

“The dredge itself is stable, and you are in no immediate danger,” I say, “but there is a raiders’ sympathizer on this ship.” I hold up the crumpled paper. “This is the second note they’ve left for me. We can’t risk anything on this voyage, particularly with everything going so well.”

The openness I’ve seen on everyone’s faces over the past few days has disappeared. Eyes narrow, faces go blank or angry or worried.

“I’m going to search the ship before they have time to hide anything,” I say. “Everyone stays here until I give the all clear. Watch one another. Naomi, make sure that no one leaves.”

Members of the crew shift their feet. Someone clears his throat. The goodwill we’ve had on the ship sifts out like the slicken and slips overboard.

“You should take someone with you when you search,” Naomi says, leaning close to my ear. “So you have a witness to back up whatever you find.”

She’s right.

Who?

I look out at the crew. They are tired and gray-faced from lack of light. The trammel turns and the gold keeps coming in.

Tam, I think. Everyone likes him. Everyone *trusts* him. He was right about the food—it makes a difference in the morale on the ship. They’ll believe the person who feeds them.

“I’ll take Tam,” I say to Naomi, and she nods.

Up in the cafeteria, Brig has his group standing at the ready. Tam's with them. I repeat the speech that I gave the crew on the mining deck. Brig's expression flickers, and I think I see a hint of anger there. And betrayal. I didn't tell him about the notes.

Because he's one of the suspects. He should know that.

Someone raises a hand, but I shake my head. "I'll answer questions later," I say. "Right now, time is what matters. I don't want to hold you here any longer than necessary. We have a ship to run." I face Brig. "Make sure no one leaves."

Brig lifts his chin in acknowledgment. "Yes, Captain."

"I need you to come with me," I tell Tam. "I want someone to witness the search, and I need my first and second mates to stay where they are for now." I nod to Brig. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Tam's quiet as he follows me down the hall. I know from glancing at my watch that it's nearing dusk outside.

Dusk was the time Call liked best in the Outpost, when we'd finish up work at the scrap yard and have a few moments of our own. It's strange. I almost feel like if I could get up to the deck, I'd see him.

That makes no sense, I tell myself. Call is dead. He's not on the deck. He was never even on this ship. Never on this ship, never on this river.

Tam starts to say something and then stops.

"What?" I ask.

"Are we searching *your* room?"

I don't bother dignifying this with a response. I'm not going to go through my things in front of Tam. Besides, I've already searched my room. And I already know it's not secure.

"Don't touch anything. Just watch me."

"Right," he says. "What are you trying to find?"

"I'll know it when I see it," I say. I hope.

I didn't expect it to bother me to look through people's things. But it does. When you see what people bring, you learn about them.

Naomi has almost nothing besides the standard items issued to everyone on the ship. She has one faded book, a collection of fairy tales, which is unexpected. It seems a bit fanciful for Naomi.

Brig's room is more revealing. There are two packs of well-worn playing cards, some clothes that aren't standard-issue, several photos of him with people I assume are his parents—an older woman and a man whom Brig resembles. He also has a pocketknife. "I'll take this," I say, and I slide it into my pocket. "We're not supposed to have weapons on board. Brig knows that."

"It's just a knife," Tam says.

I raise my eyebrows at him.

"What?" he asks. "I have dozens of them in the kitchen."

"That doesn't make me feel better," I say.

We go on, from room to room.

Eira's belongings are immaculately tidy. She has an outfit to wear for when she gets off the ship, I suppose—a blue skirt,

a white eyelet blouse, a pair of shoes that aren't practical in the least. A mirror, some ribbons. A set of beautiful colored pencils.

"We haven't found anyone keeping a journal," Tam says as we leave Eira's room.

"Not much time for it."

"I make time for it."

"You really *don't* sleep, then," I tell him. "What do you write?" I want to distract Tam. He's been paying close attention. I wouldn't be shocked if he's been keeping a list in his head of what each person has.

"I write about what happens," he says. "Don't you? Aren't you supposed to keep a record? Like a captain's log?"

"No," I say. No one ever told me to, anyway.

I'm starting to feel frustrated. What am I looking for, exactly? I thought I'd know it when I found it, but that hasn't been the case. And clearly whoever it is was smart enough not to hide something in their room. Anything revealing is probably hidden somewhere on the ship. Some secret spot. Perhaps on the mining deck, or in the cafeteria?

Should I have checked those places first?

Or it could be on their person. I'll have to search everyone individually.

I open the door and we go into the next room. Another typical one, shared by four people. Two bunks, two dressers, each with two drawers. No desk.

"This one's my room," Tam says. "I share it with some of the other kitchen crew."

I feel along the bottom of the beds, turn back the blankets. Slide my hand into the pillowcases, shake them upside down.

I open Tam's drawer. I have to pull hard. Whatever's inside is heavy. "What have you got in here?"

The drawer gives way and I stumble back and stare inside.
Gold.

The whole drawer is filled with it. With the new, high-quality nuggets we've been dredging up the last few days.

I look at Tam.

For the first time since I've known him, his expression is panicked. "I didn't put that there," he says. "It's not mine."

A dull pain begins to throb against my right temple in time with my heartbeat.

Gold. Gold. Gold.

What was he hoping to do with it? What does this mean?

"Captain Blythe," he says. "Please, I—"

"Out," I say to Tam. "Now."

He puts his hands up and, facing me, makes his way out of the room. Is he afraid to turn his back to me? Should I be afraid? I wonder if he's hidden a kitchen knife somewhere.

"Walk in front of me," I say. "Don't give me any reason to make this harder than it is. We're going to the cafeteria."

I need backup and Brig is the closest.

"Captain Blythe," Tam says, and I can tell he's fighting to stay calm. "I didn't take the gold. Someone else put it there."

We've come to the stairs. "Turn around," I say. "Walk down facing forward, or you're going to fall. Keep your hands up where I can see them."

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Why would he steal gold? Why would any of the crew? It's heavy and bulky and surely he'd get caught when he tried to get it off the ship.

Is this why he's been so keen to help on the mining deck?

Has Tam been leaving the notes in my room?

A wail goes through the dredge. It's the alarm. Again.

I didn't pull it this time.

Underneath it is another sound, the sound of silence growing. The trammel isn't spinning. The motor isn't running.

The ship is slowing down.

The sound of ending, of something stopped that used to be moving—*that's* the sound that makes me sick.

I hear the *clang, clang, clang* of footsteps running up from the mining deck. Someone reaches the top, almost colliding with Tam before pulling up short.

It's Naomi.

The sight of her makes the dull pain behind my temple turn sharp. First Tam, now Naomi. I *know* I can't trust people. But can't they at least stay where they're supposed to be?

"I told you to stay down—" I say, but she interrupts me.

"Captain," she says, "it's the raiders. They've boarded the ship."