

Prologue

As the shadows began lengthening on their third day since leaving the group, the man and boy were forced to admit they had once again been defeated. The ocean had failed to emerge from the suffocating glut of trees.

“No fire tonight,” the man said. He dropped his sack on a patch of mossy earth and limped to a fallen log. “Too tired.” Settling on the log with a groan, he massaged the swollen tendons around his knee.

“I can do it,” the boy said. “I’ve watched you often enough.”

He was lanky but strong. The man nodded and watched the boy duck beneath a vine, knife extended. Soon he would be a boy no longer.

They had started out from Lostport two weeks back, and had been forced to separate from their party of prospectors when the man had fallen and injured his knee. They had spent the past three days depleting their meager provisions as they hacked through the forest in a desperate bid to find the coast.

“We’ll have to start hunting soon,” the man said gruffly. He unlashed the rope from his tattered sack and reached a hand in, searching for the last of the wayfarers’ bread.

“So we’re giving up?” The boy’s shoulders appeared around a tree as he straightened, two knobbly sticks in hand.

The man grunted, noncommittal.

Turning away emphatically, the boy snagged three more splintered shards of wood from beneath a fallen tree. They were as dry as wood came in these parts. “Make your own fire,” he muttered, tossing the wood to the ground behind him. The shards landed just beyond the man’s reach.

He sighed yet said nothing as the boy crashed through the snarled layers of moss and vines, following that ever-taunting downhill slope.

Before long the boy stopped, his eyes on a sturdy tree slumped perpendicular to the slope. He tested the bark, found it damp but free of moss, and began edging his way along the trunk, knees locked tight to the bark. He had barely left the roots behind when the slope dropped so steeply below him that his jaw clenched in fear. He trained his gaze on the bark and continued forward with slow precision.

When the trunk suddenly split into a web of branches, the boy stopped, as though waking from a daze, and looked down. Below him—far below, yet so close he could jump and reach it—lay a shimmering finger of water. Mountains curved around it on three sides, looming dark and watchful, but the far edge of the inlet curved around a green slope and opened to the sea.

The sea. They had found their way at last.

