

CHAPTER 1 – INTO THE DEPTHS

Wynn

100 years after the Cataclysm

There was only darkness. Wynn blinked, trying to force his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He'd worked the mines long enough to know it was utterly futile. Down in the depths of the earth, darkness is your only constant companion—suffocating for newcomers, familiar for seasoned miners. That, and the ever-present mortal danger, of course. Not to mention the sweat-soaked, grime-covered, reeking men who share the tunnels with you. He closed his steely grey eyes, allowing his chin to fall to his chest while his jet-black hair cascaded over his shoulders. Of course, the grime and dust eventually made everyone's hair colour turn into an indiscriminate black.

The lift finally came to a halt with a loud metallic clunk. The operator slid open the heavy metal doors with an ear-splitting screech. The miners at the front were ushered forward by the operator, giving Wynn some breathing room. He took a deep breath of musty, stale air and put on his helmet. The operator looked at him menacingly, waving a metal rod at him. Another reminder that he was not much more than a prisoner here. Wynn had been here for several years now. He lost count how many, time was difficult to keep track of down here.

"Get out, ye slow bastard! I don't have all day!" he yelled.

"Yeah, yeah. Relax! I'm going, just getting pumped for another day in this beautiful subterranean paradise," Wynn said sarcastically.

The operator looked at him through narrowed eyes. Wynn saw his hand tightening around the rod. Wynn suppressed a grin as he imagined the operator's little brain trying to decide whether to act or not.

Wynn looked at him amicably, trying to defuse the situation, and said: "Just a joke mate. I'm getting out of your way." *Touchy.*

The Shadowvein Mine. Within its shadowy depths, thousands of men toiled day in and day out, mining and hauling coal to fuel Adalor—the Inventor Supreme's empire.

Wynn knew they were not prisoners here in the traditional sense, but most everyone wasn't here by choice. They were free to go, but where to? They earned some coin for their work, but could only spend it in

stores owned by the mine. They were all essentially stuck here. Wynn's own mother and father had made the choice for him. Unable to provide for him, they had sent him to the mines. He hadn't heard from them in years, he didn't even know if they were still alive. It didn't matter either way. They could've made a different choice, but instead they decided to send him here, as far as he was concerned they were as good as dead.

Wynn trudged forward, his leather work boots scraping the rock. The dim glow of his carbide lamp casting eerie shadows on the damp walls. All around him, the shuffling of heavy boots echoed through the cramped tunnels, mingling with the ceaseless coughing and curses of his fellow miners.

After what seemed like walking for miles, he spotted a familiar figure amidst the gloom. It was Reuven, his friend. Insofar as anyone could be called a friend in these forsaken depths. You can't get too attached to people down here. After all, they might not be here tomorrow. Cave-ins and explosions were common. Even worse, the mines played tricks on the mind after a while. The grim and unforgiving conditions down here sometimes drove men to madness. They would go off into the depths, never to be heard from again. In general, everyone kept to themselves down here, better to focus on your own survival – and sanity. Forming attachments down here only ends in pain. Wynn learned that the hard way early on. He could still see the contorted, broken body of a boy who arrived with the same transport as he did. There was a cave-in a few days after they arrived. When he was pulled out of the rubble, he was barely recognisable. Limbs twisted at unnatural angles, bones shattered like brittle twigs beneath the merciless force of collapsing rock. Deep gashes marred his skin, oozing crimson that mixed with the black coal dust. The eyes are what he remembered most vividly, though. White spheres staring in horror at nothing, contrasted heavily against his coal-stained skin. Wynn didn't even know his name, they only exchanged a couple of words on the transport here, but he couldn't quite shake the image.

Reuven's face, illuminated by the flickering light of his own lamp, bore the same weariness and resignation that Wynn had seen often before. He appeared emaciated, his worn-out miner's garb draped loosely over his increasingly skeletal frame. His complexion was drawn taut over his hollow cheeks, his brown eyes deeply set within their sockets. His greasy auburn hair stuck to his skull in matted clumps.

He's looking worse every day. Not a good sign.

"Morning, Reuven!" Wynn exclaimed, trying to sound well-spirited.

Reuven winced visibly as he turned to say: "That it is, Wynn."

“Getting ready for another day of frolicking in the mines? I hear we’re close to breaking through to a new seam, that should net us a nice bit of extra coin this month!”

Wynn grabbed him by the shoulder and together they walked down the shaft, down towards the sound of the sharp clang of pickaxes and dull thudding of rock.

“I don’t know, Wynn. I’m not sure I can keep this up much longer. Doesn’t take a genius to see that I’m not well. I barely eat or sleep any more. Did you hear what happened down in shaft C-17? Someone said they botched a detonation, at least 23 dead beneath the rubble. Can you imagine that? It could happen to us at any moment, and no one would give a shit.”

So much for trying to cheer him up...

“I heard,” Wynn said. “But you can’t let that get to you. I know it’s dangerous down here, every minute could be your last. But thinking about it will only hinder you. We’ve got a job to do, and dwelling on the risks won’t make them disappear. Stay sharp, stay vigilant, and trust in yourself. That’s the best way to keep yourself safe in these tunnels. And sane.”

The temperature rose as they went deeper and deeper down into the mine. Wynn started sweating – and he hadn’t even begun the day’s work yet. He looked over to Reuven and saw that he was already drenched with sweat and out of breath. Reuven hacked and coughed up phlegm and spit it out. Wynn looked at the ground and wrinkled his nose in disgust, noticing that it was speckled with red.

Shit. Another one coming down with the Black Lung.

Wynn knew it wasn’t fatal at this stage, but it didn’t brighten Reuven’s future either. He had seen enough cases in the years down here to know. It’s a miracle that he hadn’t succumbed to it yet, he realised.

“Come on, Reuven, let’s get to it,” Wynn said as they reached the work site. The others of their crew already gathered around the stern looking foreman, Duff. Wynn grabbed a pickaxe and handed it to Reuven. He then picked one out for himself.

“Ah yes, the illusion of ‘choice’,” Wynn muttered. “Do I want the dull one, or the rusty one?”

They all looked equally miserable, Wynn thought. Despite still looking sturdy enough, the handle of the pickaxe was rough and worn. The blade was dull and rounded from years of use. Not a good tool, but that was all they were given. They shuffled along and stopped at the back of the group. The air already stank of old sweat and the pungent sulphurous odour of the rock around them.