



*Bleached Bones
&
The Scent of Fortune*

By Zinn Tidewell

ZINN TIDEWELL

Bleached Bones & The Scent of
Fortune



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First edition

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“All treasures of the sea are born
of death: whale song ended, bones
bleaching, storms unmaking. To claim
them is to claim a grave.”

— Traditional Māori saying

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Introduction

The sea remembers.

Long before men charted it on maps or carved harbors into its shores, the ocean held its own history. Bones settled in the deep, the songs of whales faded, and storms carried secrets onto the sand. To most, these were nothing but curiosities—odd lumps, driftwood, shells. But to those who listened, there was meaning in every tide.

Ambergris, they called it. The hardened breath of whales. A fortune to traders, perfumers, and kings. A curse to those who took it where it did not belong. For the ocean does not give—it only lends, and when men mistake its silence for permission, the depths rise to reclaim their own.

In the year 1964, on the wild coast of Kaikōura, two young men pitched a tent beneath the cliffs, chasing nothing more than fish, fire, and the rough beauty of the southern sea. What they found instead would bind them to the ocean's memory forever: a graveyard of giants, a treasure glistening in the sand, and a shadow waiting just beneath the waves.

This is their story...

1

Shadows of Skeletons

1964, South Island, New Zealand

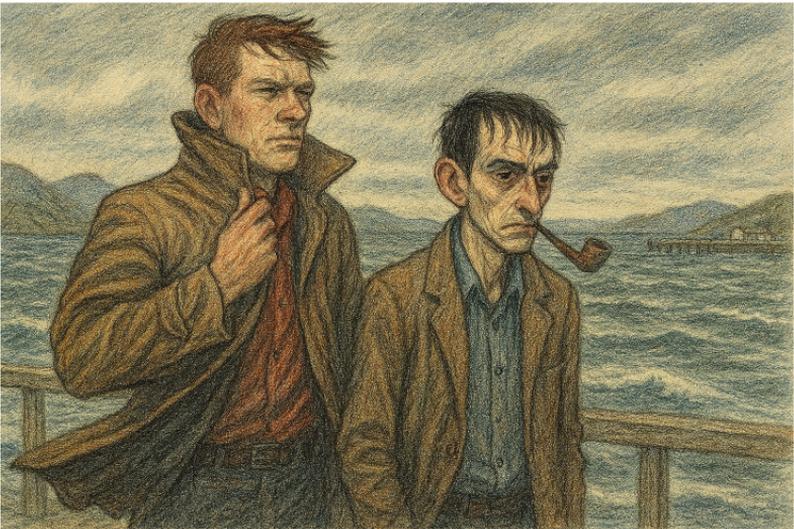
The southerly storm had ripped through Kaikōura with a violence that rattled the mountains. All night it had battered the coastline—wind shrieking down the gullies, waves hammering the shingle beaches until the stones rolled like dice. Lightning cracked above the black shoulders of the Seaward Kaikōura Range, throwing the cliffs into harsh relief before plunging them back into darkness.

By dawn, the gale had spent itself. A pale, bruised sky stretched over the coast, the rain tapering to mist. The sea was still a wild animal, roaring in long, heaving sets that smashed against the shelves and filled the air with salt spray. The aftermath was stranger than the storm itself—an eerie silence between the waves, the land slick and shining, gulls hesitant to return to their perches.

Jack Orrin stood at the edge of the shingle spit, his oilskin jacket

flapping against his lean frame. He pulled his collar up against the lingering wind, eyes squinting out across the restless water. At twenty-two, Jack had the build of a farmhand and the restless spirit of someone who could never stay too long in one place. He'd been drifting down the South Island roads for months, chasing odd jobs and trouble in equal measure.

Behind him trudged his mate Vex Marrow—slighter, wiry, with dark hair slicked to his forehead and a bent pipe clenched between his teeth. Vex was a year older, sharper around the edges, and carried with him an instinct for schemes. He had convinced Jack to leave Christchurch a week ago, to “head where the land meets the teeth of the ocean.” Jack hadn't argued.



They had camped the night before near Goose Bay, their canvas tent rattling and straining in the gale. Neither had slept much.

Now, with the storm gone and the world scrubbed raw, they set off along the coast, boots crunching over the wet stones, curious to see what the sea had given back.

The Kaikōura coast was a cruel stretch of land. The Southern Alps plunged straight into the sea, the cliffs fractured and jagged, the beaches narrow and unforgiving. The waters offshore were deep—submarine canyons that drew migrating whales closer than anywhere else in New Zealand. Jack had grown up hearing tales of them, told by fishermen over pints: whales rolling like black hills in the surf, strange bones washing ashore after rough weather, and Māori warnings of tapu—sacred prohibitions—against disturbing certain coves.

Jack and Vex had laughed at such stories around campfires, calling them old men's yarns. But this morning, in the wake of the storm, the coast felt different. The air itself seemed charged, alive with something older than both of them.

By midmorning, they reached a bluff where the storm had carved new wounds into the land. Whole slabs of cliff had collapsed, sliding down in avalanches of stone and brush. Jack slowed, shading his eyes.

“You see that?” he called.

Vex tilted his head. From the rubble at the base of the cliff, pale arcs jutted outward, massive and unmistakable. They weren't rocks. They curved upward like the ribs of a colossal structure—an ancient cathedral of bone turned on its head. The tide lapped at their bases, dragging seaweed across their smooth white

surfaces.

“Bloody hell,” Vex muttered around his pipe. “That’s no tree trunk.”

They scrambled down the scree, boots sliding over shale until they reached the wet sand. Up close, the scale of it dwarfed them. A jawbone longer than Jack’s body lay half-buried, teeth worn to blunt ridges. Vertebrae stacked like wagon wheels sprawled across the beach. Ribs taller than a man jutted from the ground in half-circles, weathered smooth by time and tide. The storm had stripped back layers of sand and earth, exposing what had been hidden for centuries.

It wasn’t one skeleton. It was dozens. Perhaps more.

They stood in silence, the sea thundering behind them.

“Whale graveyard,” Vex finally said, his voice low. “Christ almighty. Look at it.”

Jack stepped cautiously among the remains. The bones loomed like pale sentinels, silent and immense. Some still held a ghostly sheen, as if polished by centuries of tide. Others crumbled at the edges. The place carried a strange hush, a vacuum of life—no gulls wheeled overhead, no insects hummed. Only the boom of the surf and the whine of the wind through the hollows of the skeletons.

A chill passed through Jack despite his jacket. “Feels... wrong,” he said softly.

“Not wrong,” Vex corrected, crouching to run his hand along the porous surface of a rib. “Just old. Sacred, maybe. Like we weren’t meant to find it.”

Jack swallowed, glancing around. The bones stretched far down the shore, a forest of pale arcs and half-buried skulls. He imagined the whales once alive, massive bodies sliding through the canyons offshore, their deaths piling up here in some ancient, hidden grave.

They wandered deeper into the boneyard, moving with a reverence neither spoke aloud. But soon Jack noticed something that pulled him out of awe. Amid the ribs and vertebrae lay strange lumps—irregular shapes, waxy and dull, scattered like forgotten stones. At first, he thought they were rockfall. But they caught the light differently, and when he bent to touch one, it was lighter than it looked.

“Oi, Vex,” Jack called. “Have a gander at this.”

Vex came over, pipe clenched in his teeth. He picked up the lump, turning it in his hands. It was the size of a fist, rough on the outside, but under the grime it glowed faintly golden. He sniffed, then raised his eyebrows.

“Not stone. Smell that?”

Jack leaned close. A strange odor filled his nose—musky, marine, almost sweet, like low tide mixed with tar and smoke. It was foul and yet oddly rich.

“What is it?” Jack asked.

“Ambergris, maybe,” Vex said after a moment. His grin spread slow and wide. “If it is, mate, we’ve bloody struck gold.”

Jack blinked. He’d heard the word before, whispered in pubs. A substance from whales’ guts, worth fortunes to perfume makers. Whale puke, some called it.

“That stuff actually real?” Jack asked.

“Real enough,” Vex said, weighing the lump in his hand. “Worth more than silver by the pound.”

They looked around. More lumps dotted the ground. Some small as apples, others as big as melons. One massive piece, half-buried near the cliff, was the size of a boulder, cracked to reveal a pale, waxy core streaked with black.

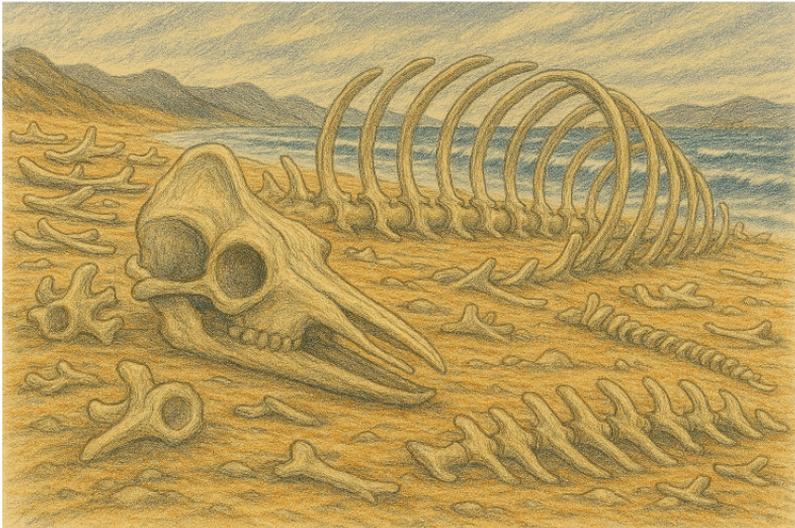
Jack’s heart thudded. The graveyard no longer looked like a tomb. It looked like a treasure field. He crouched, brushing sand from another piece. Its weight was strange in his hand, light for its size but dense with promise.

“Sweet Jesus,” he muttered.

Vex was already moving from bone to bone, scooping up pieces, testing them with his knife. The musky odor thickened in the air. Their fingers grew slick with oily residue. Every new find made Jack’s pulse hammer harder.

For the next hour, they worked feverishly. They piled small chunks into their coats, stacking larger ones in heaps between the ribs. The tide licked closer, swallowing some of the bones, threatening to reclaim what the storm had revealed.

“Don’t breathe a word,” Vex muttered, eyes alight. “Not to the locals, not to the fishers. We keep this quiet, eh?”



Jack nodded, though unease gnawed at him. The skeletons seemed to loom higher, their sockets dark and hollow, watching. He couldn’t shake the sense they were trespassers, stealing from a place that had belonged to giants.

Still, greed burned hotter.

When they finally slumped against a rib to rest, the sun had

climbed higher, throwing sharp light across the pale graveyard. Jack stared at the waves pounding the shore, his chest heaving.

“We can’t carry it all,” he said.

“Then we stash it.” Vex’s tone was brisk, already planning. “Hide it up the bluff. Come back with sacks, maybe even a cart. We’ll get it to Wellington. There’ll be buyers there, sure as sunrise.”

Jack hesitated. “And if someone else finds it?”

“No one comes down here. Not in this weather, not with the tapu. It’s ours.”

Jack looked again at the skeletons, ribs like white arches against the sea. The wind whistled through them, carrying faint, almost human tones. He felt the hair rise on his arms.

But he said nothing.

The rest of the day they spent hauling what they could. Up the bluff, through slick gullies, into hollows of scrub and rockfall. Their arms burned, their backs ached, but they stashed nearly a dozen sizable lumps out of sight. The massive boulder of ambergris they left in place, neither daring to attempt it yet. It loomed among the bones like a heart too big to move.

By dusk they staggered back to camp, pockets bulging with smaller pieces. The canvas tent sagged, damp but intact. Vex lit the fire, and soon the musky, oily lumps sat in a small pile

between them, gleaming faintly in the firelight. The odor clung to their clothes, strong enough to make Jack's eyes water.

He lay back on his bedroll, staring at the canvas roof. His body ached, but his mind churned. He kept seeing the pale ribs rising like cathedral arches, the waxy lumps glowing faintly in the stormlight. He remembered Māori warnings told by fishermen: *places where the whales go to die are not for the living to disturb.*

Beside him, Vex muttered around his pipe, already scheming routes, buyers, fortunes. Jack closed his eyes, but sleep refused to come.

In his half-dream, the graveyard loomed again, bones shining under the moon. Shadows stirred among them, shifting shapes that weren't bone or seaweed. He imagined whales circling offshore, their song rumbling deep in the canyon, vibrating through the earth. And deeper still, something older than whales, older than storms—something that had watched as the bones piled century after century.

Something that had noticed them.

2

Rocks That Aren't Rocks

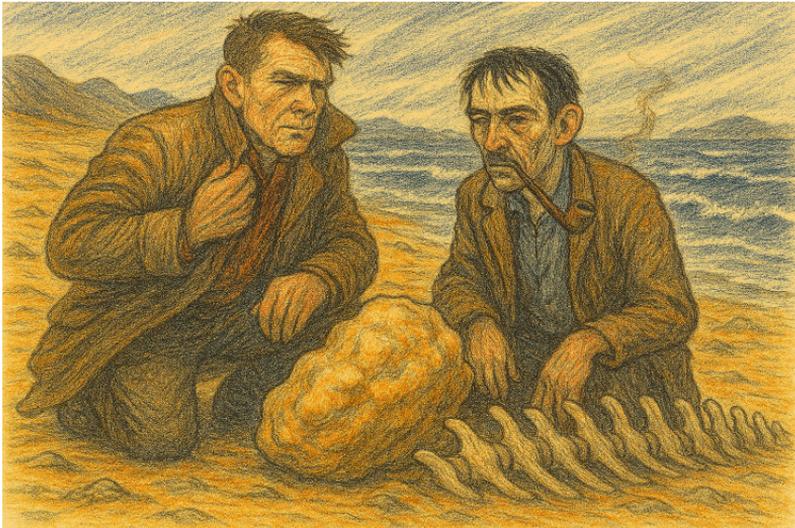
The storm had scrubbed the land clean, leaving Kaikōura glistening under a pale morning sun. Salt still hung heavy in the air, every breath a reminder of the ocean's restless night. Jack and Vex picked their way down the gravel road that led toward town, their boots wet from crossing swollen creeks. Between them, inside an old canvas sack, lay one of the strange, lumpy masses they had pried from the whale boneyard.

The thing was heavy, denser than it looked, and carried a smell that clung to their hands even after rinsing in the surf—musky, earthy, almost sweet in a way that turned Jack's stomach. He kept glancing back toward the cliffs where they had camped, as though the sea itself might chase after them for stealing.

“Bloody hell, mate,” Vex said, shouldering the sack higher. “You feel that weight? Whatever it is, it's not just driftwood or whale scrap. We've stumbled onto something. I can smell it—fortune.”

Jack adjusted his pace, letting the taller man stride ahead. He didn't like the gleam in Vex's eyes, the way his friend's voice had grown tight and hungry since they'd found the hidden graveyard. "Could be worthless," Jack said. "Some kind of hardened fat or tar. Nothing but muck."

Vex shot him a look over his shoulder. "Don't kid yourself. You saw those bones, mate. Place was like a cathedral of whales, hidden from every fisherman and tourist in the South Island. And scattered everywhere were these... rocks that aren't rocks. No one else knows. That's the gold of it."



Jack rubbed his palms against his trousers, trying to get rid of the smell that wouldn't go away. Something about the lumps unsettled him, as though the bones had been keeping them for a reason, guarding them. He hadn't slept well, his dreams

filled with whales turning slowly in dark water, eyes open, as if watching.

Still, they carried the sack into town.

Kaikōura in 1964 was a small place, its main street lined with weathered shops, the scent of fish and diesel drifting from the wharf. Men unloaded crayfish pots from battered boats while gulls screamed above. A milk bar clinked with the laughter of teenagers in sharp suits, their hair slicked back, transistor radios pressed to their ears.

Jack and Vex looked out of place—sunburnt campers with salt-crusted clothes, a sack between them that leaked a faint, strange odor. People wrinkled their noses as they passed.

“Where d’you reckon we start?” Jack asked, shifting uncomfortably.

Vex scanned the storefronts, his jaw set. “We need someone who knows the sea. Not just fishermen—they’ll try to swindle us. Someone with knowledge. Maybe old Thomlinson at the wharf. He’s been in every trade under the sun. If he don’t know, he’ll know who does.”

They found the man sitting on an upturned crate, patching nets with his gnarled hands. His beard was a mess of white, his eyes sharp and blue.

“Mornin’, lads,” Thomlinson said, squinting. “What’s that stink you’re draggin’ around? Dead seal?”

Vex grinned and untied the sack, hauling out the lump. Sunlight caught the surface, revealing a mottled texture of grays and browns, pocked and waxy. “Found this washed up near the cliffs,” Vex lied smoothly. “Any idea what it might be?”

Thomlinson leaned forward, sniffed, then actually recoiled. His eyes widened, darting from the lump to their faces. For a moment he said nothing, then lowered his voice. “Where’d you boys really get that?”

Jack stiffened. “Why?”

“Because,” Thomlinson said slowly, “that there’s ambergris.”

The word hung in the air like a secret.

Jack frowned. “Amber... what?”

“Ambergris,” Thomlinson repeated, almost reverent. “Whale treasure. Comes from the guts of a sperm whale, hardened by the sea. Fishermen used to call it floating gold. Perfume makers in France pay more for it than you could imagine. Worth more than silver, sometimes more than gold by the ounce.”

Vex’s eyes lit up. He crouched, running his hand over the lump as though it had suddenly transformed into solid bullion. “Gold, you say? Worth real money?”

“Real money,” Thomlinson said. “If it’s pure, if it’s good. The right buyers—well, lads, you might be sittin’ on a fortune.”

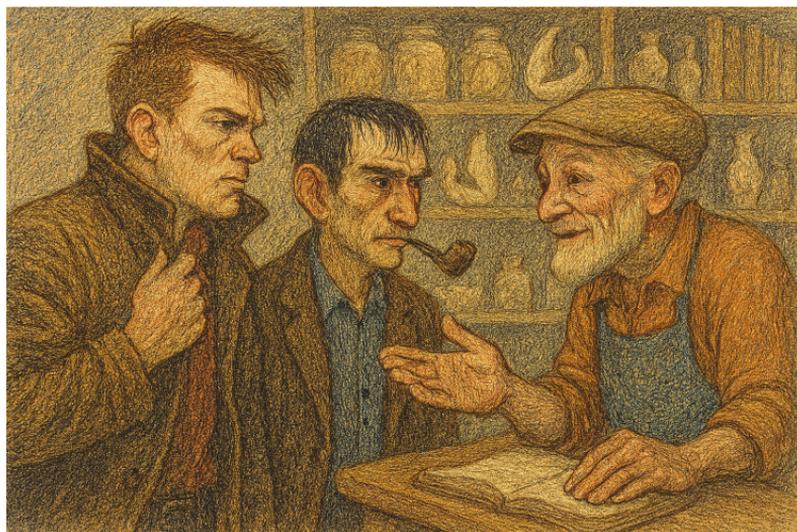
Jack's stomach tightened. The word *fortune* had a dangerous ring when spoken to Vex. He watched his friend's face flush with greedy excitement, his shoulders squaring as though destiny had just tapped him on the back.

"Who buys it?" Jack asked cautiously.

Thomlinson scratched his beard. "Harder to sell these days. Regulations, shipping laws. But there's always someone. Traders in Christchurch, maybe Auckland. Overseas, definitely. The French pay best. Course, you'd have to get it there without losing it to thieves—or customs."

Vex was barely listening. He hefted the lump with both hands, eyes shining. "How much you reckon this one's worth?"

Thomlinson whistled low. "Hard to say without testing. Could be a few hundred pounds sterling. Could be more. But if you've found one of these, there may be others. The sea doesn't drop a treasure chest without scattering a few coins."



Vex shot a triumphant glance at Jack. “See? I told you. We’ve struck it.”

Jack shifted uneasily. The town around them seemed suddenly sharper, filled with eyes that might be listening. He imagined word spreading—two young fools carrying whale gold in a sack. He lowered his voice. “We should keep quiet. No telling who might want it.”

But Vex only grinned wider. “Quiet? Mate, this is our ticket. We’ll be rich. No more sleeping in bloody tents, no more odd jobs for scraps. We can go anywhere.”

Jack studied him. They had shared camps and surf breaks for years, but he had never seen Vex like this—eyes fever-bright, voice edged with hunger. It worried him.

They left Thomlinson with hurried thanks, carrying the sack back up the street. Jack wanted to hide it, to bury it somewhere safe until they understood more. Vex, though, was practically striding, every step fueled by visions of wealth.

At the milk bar they paused for sandwiches. Jack noticed how people stared, wrinkling noses at the faint musk seeping from the sack even though it was tied shut again. He caught whispers—“What’s that smell?” “Smells like the docks.”

He leaned closer to Vex. “We can’t carry this around in town. People notice.”

“Let ’em notice,” Vex said, biting into his sandwich. “Soon enough we’ll be rolling in cash. They’ll envy us.”

Jack shook his head. “You don’t understand. Things like this—treasures—they bring trouble. People lie, steal, even kill for less.”

Vex’s smile was thin. “Then we’ll just have to be tougher than them, eh? You with me or not?”

Jack didn’t answer.

That evening they found a quiet corner of the beach outside town and built a small fire. The sack lay between them like some unholy relic, the smell curling through the smoke.

Jack stared at the flames, trying to voice what weighed on him. “I don’t like it, Vex. That place we found—those bones weren’t

meant for us. It felt... sacred. Like we trespassed.”

“Sacred?” Vex snorted. “It’s a dump, Jack. A graveyard. Nature’s rubbish heap. And in it we found treasure. You saw Thomlinson’s face—this isn’t superstition, it’s fact. We’re sitting on wealth.”

Jack picked at the sand, remembering the dream that had woken him last night: whales circling in silence, their great eyes fixed on him, a low sound rumbling like distant thunder. “We should be careful. Maybe even leave it be.”

Vex leaned forward, his expression hard. “You’d walk away from fortune? From the chance to change everything?”

Jack met his gaze. “Some fortunes come at too high a price.”

For a long moment neither spoke, the fire crackling between them. Then Vex sat back, his jaw tightening. “You’re soft, Jack. Always have been. But don’t think you can stop me. If you won’t take your share, fine. I’ll take mine, and more.”

The words chilled Jack more than the night air. Something had shifted between them.

The next morning they returned to the cliffs, the sack lighter by one lump but their minds heavier with unspoken thoughts. The path back to the hidden boneyard seemed darker now, though the sun shone clear.

Jack followed reluctantly, feeling the pull of the sea and the

bones beneath. He wondered if they were walking into fortune or doom, and whether Vex's hunger would destroy them both before they ever reached the end of it.

3

Scent of Treasure

The storm had passed, leaving the Kaikōura coast bruised and raw. The sea still churned with leftover swells, coughing white water against the rocks, but the air had gone unnervingly still. It was the kind of quiet that came after a storm's rage, heavy and watchful, as if the land itself were holding its breath.

Jack Orrin and Vex Marrow stood at the edge of the boneyard again that morning, gazing at the pale arcs of whale skeletons poking from the sand like the ribs of long-dead giants. The lumps—those strange, rocklike things they had dragged free the day before—still lay where they'd stashed them, their surfaces dull under the weak sunlight.

Jack rubbed the back of his neck. "Feels different today," he muttered.

"Different how?" Vex was already crouching, testing the weight of a smaller lump. He grunted, veins standing out on his forearms as he hefted it. "These things are worth a fortune,

mate. That's all that matters."

Jack shifted his weight, eyes scanning the cliffs that ringed the bay. "I don't know. Yesterday it felt like we'd stumbled into a grave. Today it feels like the grave's watching us."

Vex barked a laugh. "You've been reading too many ghost stories. These are just lumps of whale gold. Ambergris, remember? The bloke in town said perfume-makers will pay through the nose for it. Don't go spooking yourself."

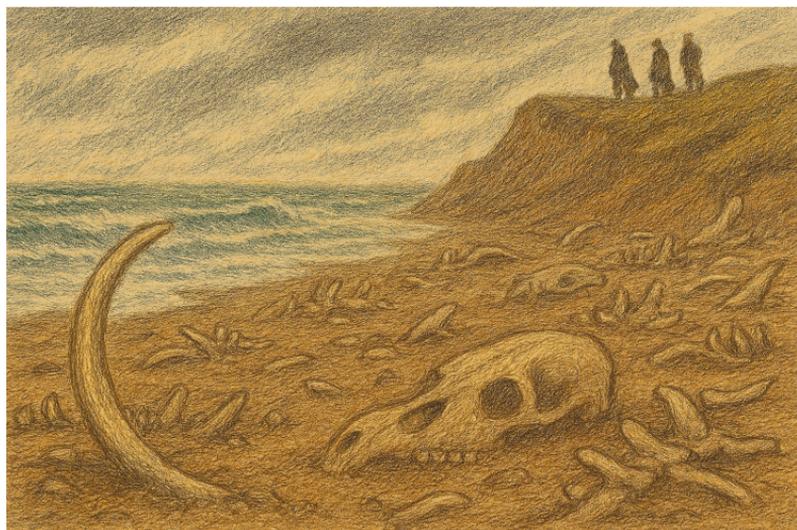
But Jack couldn't shake the feeling. The wind carried a faint tang, musky and sweet at the same time, drifting up from the boneyard. It was unlike any smell he'd ever known, both alluring and unsettling, like rot masked by honey. He imagined it clinging to their skin, their clothes, even their breath.

They worked in silence, prising more chunks from between bones and boulders, wrapping them in old canvas sacks, and carrying them up the bluff. Each piece was heavier than it looked, dense with an odd oily firmness that seemed to resist both grip and balance. By mid-morning, their backs ached and sweat slicked their brows despite the cold.

They buried the sacks in shallow pits under gorse thickets along the ridge, covering the disturbed earth with stones and brush. Vex hummed tunelessly as he tamped down soil with his boot.

Jack wiped his hands on his trousers. "What if someone sees us?"

“Who’s going to see?” Vex said. “This coast’s empty. Closest farm’s ten miles inland. It’s just us, Jack. Always has been.”



But when Jack looked toward the cliffs, he thought he saw movement—a flicker of dark against the pale rock, too quick to be sure. A trick of light, maybe. He said nothing.

The next day they returned to town for supplies—spades, more canvas, salted meat. The moment they walked into the general store, Jack felt it: eyes on them, voices hushed.

“Storm uncovered all sorts,” one fisherman muttered, not quite quietly enough.

“Smelled it myself,” said another. “That sweet stink. Like wealth rotting in the tide.”

Vex grinned, basking in the half-spoken rumors. He elbowed Jack. “See? Word’s already out. But we got the jump.”

Jack frowned. “That’s not good news.”

“It’s great news. Means the stuff’s real. Valuable enough people can smell it.”

They left town quickly, but as they loaded the spades onto the back of their old Morris truck, Jack noticed a boy loitering at the edge of the lot, staring at them with wide, unblinking eyes. The boy darted away when Jack met his gaze.

“Locals,” Vex said dismissively. “Always nosy.”

But Jack’s stomach tightened. Rumors had a way of spreading faster than truth.

By the fourth day of their salvage, Jack’s unease had grown roots. Each time they descended into the boneyard, the smell was stronger, saturating the air until it seemed to seep into their very lungs. Jack swore his dreams had begun to carry it too—sweet, cloying, suffocating.

It was late afternoon when he saw them.

They had just finished burying another sack beneath a scrub-covered ridge when Jack straightened and froze. Up on the higher bluff, silhouetted against the cloud-streaked sky, stood three figures. Too far to see clearly, but close enough that Jack could feel their gaze.

“Vex,” he whispered. “We’re not alone.”

Vex followed his eyes, squinted, then spat. “Just hikers.”

“Hikers don’t stand still like that.”

The figures remained motionless, like carved statues, watching. Then, as the wind picked up and rattled the scrub, they melted back beyond the ridge. Gone.

Jack’s skin prickled. “They know.”

Vex grabbed his arm. “No, they don’t. Stop working yourself up. We keep our mouths shut, keep hauling, and soon enough we’ll have more money than either of us dreamed.”

But as they trudged back toward camp, Jack felt the weight of invisible eyes pressing from all sides.

That night, Jack couldn’t sleep. The smell clung to the canvas sacks piled near their tents, heavy and persistent. He sat by the fire, staring at the glowing coals, listening to the surf thud against the cliffs below.

His thoughts wandered. It wasn’t just the watchers, or the rumors, or even the work. It was the ambergris itself.

He remembered the first time he had touched it—the odd give of its surface, waxy yet solid, cold yet strangely alive. He remembered the dreams since: visions of whales sinking into black water, of great shadows moving beneath the waves, of

something vast and patient rising from the deep.

And always, the smell. Sweet and foul, treasure and decay, fortune and curse.

Vex stirred in his sleep, muttering. Jack glanced at him, then back at the sacks. A thought whispered at the edge of his mind: *It doesn't belong to you.*

He rubbed his temples. Maybe he was going mad.

At dawn, they hauled two more sacks up the bluff. The mist lay thick across the coast, curling around the gorse like smoke. As they crested the ridge, Jack stopped dead.

The watchers were back.

Four of them this time, standing in a line along the far crest. Their shapes blurred by mist, but unmistakable. One lifted an arm slowly, like a warning—or a claim.

Vex cursed under his breath. “Bloody scavengers. They think they can just take what’s ours?”

Jack’s throat was dry. “We should leave it. Walk away.”

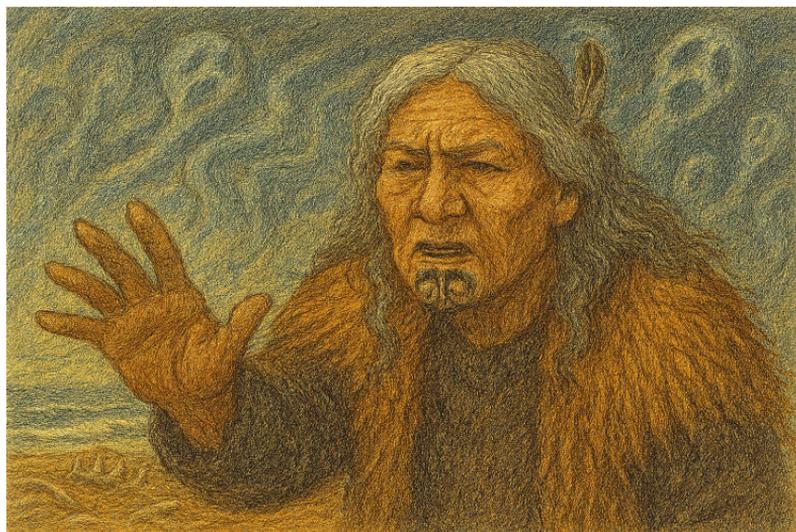
“Walk away?” Vex dropped the sack and whirled on him. “From a fortune? From the kind of money that changes everything? No, Jack. We’ve come too far.”

The watchers didn’t move. The mist thickened, swallowing

them until only the impression of their presence remained.

Jack's skin crawled. The weight of the ambergris in his hands felt heavier than stone, heavier than lead.

When they returned for more supplies, the whispers had grown louder. A fisherman spoke of gulls circling inland, drawn to the scent. A farmer claimed his dogs had gone mad, whining and digging at the earth. An old Māori woman shook her head and muttered, "Kōrero o te moana—it is the sea speaking. You boys ought to listen."



Vex laughed it off. "Superstitions," he said. "Old tales to scare children."

But Jack felt the woman's eyes on him as they left, sharp and

knowing.

Back at camp, Jack knelt by a half-buried sack and pressed his palm against it. The waxy surface gave slightly, like flesh. The smell rose stronger, saturating his senses until his head swam.

He thought of perfume bottles in shop windows, of fortunes changing hands, of wealth beyond imagining. Yet all he felt was dread.

The watchers would come again. He knew it. And when they did, no amount of burying or hiding would keep the treasure safe.

That night, as the fire burned low and the surf thundered against the cliffs, Jack whispered to himself: “Some things are too heavy to carry.”

But Vex was already dreaming of cities, women, and power—dreaming of gold pulled from the sea.

And high on the ridge, unseen in the mist, the watchers waited.

4

Eyes in the Hills

The days after the storm seemed to fold into one another, marked only by the rhythm of digging, hauling, and burying. The smell of ambergris was everywhere now—woven into their clothes, their hair, even their dreams. The boneyard itself had grown stranger, as though each trip back into its hollowed ribs carried them deeper into some hidden story the earth hadn't meant to tell.

Jack Orrin moved slower than before. His body ached, but it was more than weariness that pulled at him. Each sack he filled seemed to weigh not only with substance but with meaning, as if the ambergris carried an invisible burden. He tried to keep his head down, to focus on the work, but his eyes kept drifting to the cliffs.

The watchers were never far now.

At first it had been distant silhouettes, unmoving in the mist. Now, shapes shifted closer—sometimes on the ridge, some-

times half-hidden in the scrub. Always silent. Always still. Jack couldn't shake the sense that they were closing in not out of haste but patience, like hunters circling prey.

Vex Marrow didn't notice—or refused to. His whole focus had turned to plans.

“We'll need crates,” Vex said one evening as he crouched by the fire, sketching in the dirt with a stick. “Sturdy timber ones, like for shipping apples. Rope handles on the sides. Each crate can hold maybe forty, fifty kilos—enough to lift but heavy enough to keep it safe.”

Jack stared into the flames. “Safe from who?”



“From anyone. From everyone. We cart it inland, maybe hire

a truck out of Christchurch. Smuggle it into port. Then—” He grinned, teeth gleaming in the firelight. “Then we’re kings.”

Jack shifted uncomfortably. “You’re moving too fast.”

“Too fast? We’re sitting on a fortune, Jack. Sitting on it like fools while those watchers out there lick their chops. You’ve seen them. We don’t move soon, they’ll move for us.”

Jack’s stomach knotted. “Maybe they already have a claim.”

Vex looked up sharply. “What do you mean?”

“I mean maybe it’s not ours to take. You heard the old woman in town. She said the sea was speaking.”

Vex snorted. “Superstitions. Folktales. You think those silent jokers up there are spirits or something? They’re just men, same as us. Men who want what we found. Well, they can’t have it. We were here first.”

Jack didn’t reply. But deep down he wondered: were they here first? The bones, the stench, the hidden cove—it felt older than either of them, older than all of them.

The next morning, Jack rose early and wandered down the cliff path before Vex stirred. Mist clung low over the boneyard, turning the skeletons into pale ghosts. He picked his way between ribs and vertebrae, the sand damp and cold beneath his boots.

The lumps of ambergris waited where they had left them, dull gray shapes half-buried in the sand. Jack crouched and touched one. The surface gave faintly under his palm, as if holding a pulse.

He closed his eyes and inhaled. The smell flooded his senses—sweet, rancid, intoxicating. He imagined whales sinking into blackness, their bodies collapsing, their lives feeding the depths. He thought of Māori canoes, of chants carried on the surf, of the sea itself taking what it was owed.

The ambergris didn't belong to him. He felt it as surely as he felt the tide tugging the shore.

When he climbed back up, Vex was awake, brewing tea. His face was taut, restless.

“You were gone,” Vex said.

“Just thinking.”

“Thinking won't get us rich. Work will.” He jabbed the stick at his dirt sketch from last night. “We need to head inland tomorrow, get timber, nails, rope. Build crates big enough to hold the haul. Then we cart it out before anyone gets bold enough to make a move.”

Jack sat, wrapping his hands around the hot tin mug. “And if it's not meant to be carted out?”

Vex blinked. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Maybe it belongs to the people here. The Māori. Or maybe it belongs to the sea itself. We’re digging in a graveyard, Vex. Doesn’t that tell you anything?”

For a moment, silence hung heavy between them, broken only by the fire’s crackle. Then Vex’s eyes hardened. “It tells me we were lucky. Storm uncovered it, and we found it. That’s what matters. You’re letting ghost stories get in your head.”

Jack looked at him, at the gleam of greed already setting into his features, and felt the first sharp sting of distance.

That afternoon, they hauled another sack up the bluff. As they reached the ridge, Jack froze.

The watchers were there.

Not three or four now, but seven—scattered along the slope, standing silent among the tussock. Closer than ever before. Jack could make out the dark folds of their coats, the stillness of their arms at their sides. None of them moved.

He gripped Vex’s arm. “They’re closing in.”

Vex stared back boldly. “Let them. They want to frighten us. It won’t work.”

Jack’s mouth went dry. “What if it’s not a threat? What if it’s a warning?”

But Vex shouldered the sack and trudged forward, ignoring

the silent line of figures. Jack followed reluctantly, feeling the watchers' gaze burn into his back. When he glanced over his shoulder, they had not moved an inch.

By nightfall, the fire seemed smaller, the dark around them larger. Jack couldn't shake the image of the silent men standing in the mist. Patient. Waiting.

Vex talked late into the night, pacing by the fire.

"We crate it, we haul it. Christchurch first, then Auckland. From there, we can get it out of the country. You know what Paris perfumers will pay? Or the Americans? Enough to make us vanish into a new life."

Jack lay on his bedroll, staring up at the canvas of the tent. "And if they stop us before we get that far?"

"Then we fight."

Jack rolled onto his side. "We're not fighters, Vex."

"We'll learn." Vex's voice was sharp, full of the kind of certainty that frightened Jack more than doubt.

He closed his eyes, but sleep refused him. All he could see was the curve of the whale bones, the waxy lumps half-buried, and the line of watchers on the ridge.

Vex grew impatient, reckless, pushing Jack to work faster, haul more, dig deeper. He spoke less of their past and more of their

future—a future paved in wealth and power.

Jack, meanwhile, felt the weight deepen. His dreams grew darker, filled with whales sinking, their songs echoing through black water, cut short by silence. He woke sweating, the smell of ambergris thick in his throat.

On the sixth day, as they buried another crate beneath gorse, Jack finally spoke.

“Vex, we can’t keep this up. It’s wrong. We need to stop.”

Vex rounded on him, face flushed. “Stop? We’re halfway to a fortune! What’s gotten into you?”

“Look around you!” Jack gestured at the ridge. Sure enough, the watchers were there—closer now, no more than a hundred yards away. They stood in a line, silent, still, eyes glinting in the late light.



“They’re waiting for us to understand,” Jack said. “The ambergris—it belongs to them. Or to the sea. Not to us.”

Vex’s jaw tightened. “You’ve gone soft. Scared of shadows. These aren’t spirits or gods, Jack. They’re just men. And men can be beaten.”

Jack shook his head. “Not these ones.”

Vex’s eyes burned with anger and something darker. “Then you’re a fool. And if you won’t see this through, I’ll do it myself.”

The fire between them was no longer warmth. It was a spark of something brittle and dangerous.

That night, as Jack lay awake, he heard movement outside the tent. He slipped silently from his bedroll and peered out.

On the ridge, in the pale wash of moonlight, the watchers stood. Not seven this time, but ten. Closer still. Silent. Patient.

Jack's chest tightened. The scent of ambergris clung thick in the air, heavier than ever, as though the sea itself were leaning in.

He whispered to himself, "It doesn't belong to us. It never did."

But Vex, restless in his sleep, murmured words of wealth and conquest, his hands twitching as if already grasping the crates of treasure.

And in that fragile balance—the watchers waiting, the sea breathing, and greed hardening into resolve—the rift between the two friends deepened into something that might never close.

Whispers of Taonga

The Kaikōura coast was never still for long. The weather swung like a pendulum, from silver skies to howling winds, from calm seas to thrashing waves. Jack Orrin felt the rhythm deep in his bones now, as if he were part of it, a thread pulled taut in some larger pattern he couldn't escape.

He and Vex Marrow had returned to town for food and rope. The general store's porch creaked under the weight of men gathering in from the rain. Jack paused on the edge, listening. The smell of salt and kelp hung thick in the air, and with it the whispers.

"They say the sea's grave's been disturbed," one fisherman muttered, voice low but steady. His skin was lined from sun and wind, his eyes sharp.

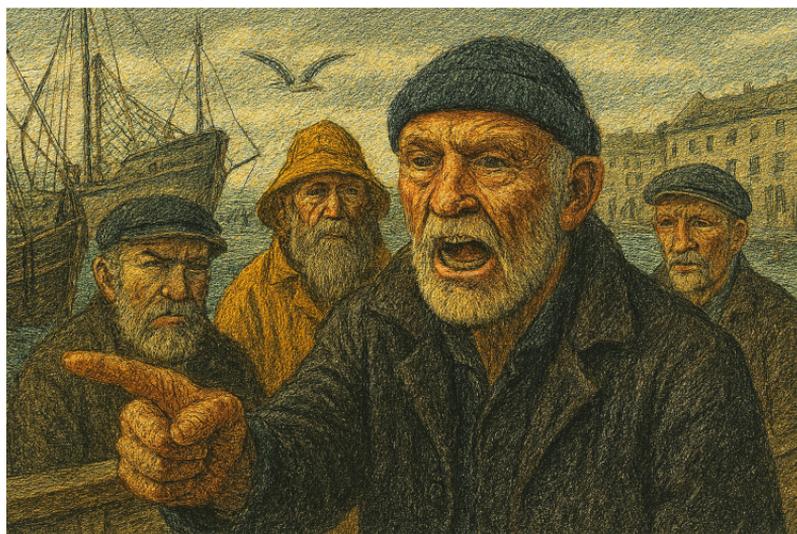
"Disturbed by who?" another asked.

"Doesn't matter who. Matters what. Taonga doesn't sit still when taken. Treasure of the sea—it carries mana, and curse

alike. It belongs to Tangaroa, not to men.”

Jack’s breath caught. He moved closer, unnoticed.

An older fisherman leaned forward, his face carved with years. “The storm opened a wound in the coast. Some fools are digging among the bones. They don’t know what they’ve touched. The whales, they come to that place to die in peace. To take from it is to take from the sea itself.”



A younger voice cut in nervously. “You’ve heard the gulls? They circle inland, not the shore. Dogs won’t go near the bluffs. My uncle says it’s the old ones watching, waiting.”

The men fell silent, the hush deeper than the rain. Then the old fisherman spoke again. “Mark me. Nothing good comes from

stealing Taonga from Tangaroa's grave. The sea takes back what is hers. Always."

Jack felt a chill spread through his chest. Taonga—treasure, yes, but sacred. A word heavy with reverence. The men's voices carried not only warning but certainty, as if the sea itself had whispered in their ears.

He turned and saw Vex at the counter, arguing with the storekeeper over the price of rope. Vex's grin was wide, careless, greedy. He hadn't heard the warnings, or perhaps he wouldn't have cared if he had.

On the ride back, the old Morris truck rattling along the wet coastal road, Jack tried to speak.

"They know, Vex. The fishermen, the old ones. They say we're disturbing the sea's grave. That the ambergris—Taonga—doesn't belong to us."

Vex snorted. "Cursed treasure stories? Old men trying to scare themselves. Jack, look at what we've pulled already. Do you feel cursed? I feel rich. I feel alive."

Jack's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I feel watched. I feel wrong."

"You always were the worrier," Vex said, chuckling. "That's why we balance each other. You fret, I act. And acting is what'll make us kings."

Jack kept his eyes on the slick road ahead, but inside, the rift between them widened another painful notch.

By the time they reached the bluffs again, the storm had begun to rise. The sea thrashed itself into whitecaps, the wind bending the gorse low. Dark clouds rolled in from the south, heavy with rain.

Vex didn't care. He strode into the boneyard, eyes lit with hunger. "Perfect," he shouted above the wind. "The storm will cover our digging. No one will dare follow in this!"

Jack hesitated at the ridge, staring down. The skeletons looked darker now, the bones slick with rain. The lumps of ambergris gleamed faintly, half-uncovered by the wind tearing sand from the graves. The storm wasn't hiding their secret—it was baring it.

He descended reluctantly, rain stinging his face.

They worked for hours, pulling more lumps free, dragging them into crude piles. The sand shifted beneath their boots, sucking and clinging. Lightning flashed far out to sea, illuminating the coast in a pale burst that turned the bones to ghastly white.

Jack wiped his brow, though the rain washed sweat away as quickly as it came. "We should stop. The storm's tearing the place apart."

Vex laughed, wild and sharp. "It's helping us! Look at this!" He kicked at a mound, revealing another massive chunk of

ambergris. It rolled free, slick and shining in the lightning's flare. "The sea wants us to take it!"

Jack flinched. "Or it wants us to see what we're stealing."

But Vex was already bent over, prying it loose, eyes gleaming.

It happened near dusk. The storm had reached its peak, wind howling like a chorus of voices, rain slashing sideways. They were hauling another sack toward the ridge when a sound split the chaos—a low, thunderous crack.

The cliffside trembled. Jack stumbled, dropping his end of the sack. "What was that?"

Before Vex could answer, the rocks below shuddered again. And then, rising from the boiling surf, something vast slammed against the boulders.

An arm. A colossal, glistening arm, lined with suckers the size of plates, lashed onto the rocks with a wet, seismic thud. Stone cracked beneath its weight.

Jack froze, horror gripping his chest. The arm writhed, its skin mottled and slick, veins pulsing beneath. Water cascaded from it, filling the air with the stench of brine and something deeper, darker.

Vex dropped the sack, but not from fear. His eyes burned brighter. "Jack! Do you see it? Do you see how big it is? There's more down there! More ambergris than we ever imagined!"

Jack staggered back. “It’s not treasure—it’s alive! Vex, that’s a squid. A giant!”

Another slam shook the rocks, closer this time, as if the arm was searching, probing. The sea roared louder, waves smashing into the shore as if driven by the creature’s strength.



Jack’s breath came short, his mind spinning. The dreams—the shadows in the deep, the whales sinking, the presence watching—it was real. It had been real all along.

He grabbed Vex’s arm. “We have to leave! Now!”

But Vex shook him off, face lit by stormlight and madness. “Leave? Jack, this proves it! The sea is coughing up its treasure, spitting it out for us. Don’t you see? We’re chosen!”

Jack stared at him, rain coursing down his face, and realized with dread that greed had consumed his friend beyond reason.

The watchers came at last.

Through the sheets of rain, Jack saw them descending the ridge. A line of dark figures, cloaks whipping in the storm, feet sure on the slick ground. There were more now—twelve, maybe fifteen. They moved without haste, without speech, but with absolute purpose.

Jack's heart hammered. "Vex—look!"

Vex turned, eyes narrowing. "About time. Let them come. Let them try."

The watchers reached the edge of the boneyard and stopped, silent, their faces shadowed by hoods. The storm howled around them, lightning flashing, thunder cracking, and still they stood motionless, as if carved from the land itself.

One lifted an arm and pointed—not at Vex, not at Jack, but at the mounds of ambergris strewn among the bones.

Jack's breath hitched. The gesture was clear: *It does not belong to you.*

Vex spat into the sand. "We dug it, we keep it. That's the law I know."

Jack's chest tightened. He stepped forward, rain lashing his face.

“It isn’t ours, Vex. It never was. Can’t you see that? The sea’s grave belongs to the sea—and to them.”

Vex’s lip curled. “You’re weak. Always were. Fine, let them have their warnings. But I won’t walk away.”

He turned back to the watchers, lifting his arms defiantly. “This is ours!”

Another crash shook the coast. The colossal arm slammed onto the rocks again, closer, water exploding upward. The watchers did not flinch. Jack stumbled, his ears ringing.

The air stank of brine, of musk, of rot. The scent of treasure and death combined. Jack gagged, falling to one knee.

Vex only grinned, madness shining in his eyes. “More proof, Jack. More proof we’re meant for this. Even the beasts of the deep bring it to us!”

The watchers began to move forward, slow and steady, their feet leaving no slip in the mud.

Jack scrambled back, heart racing. He knew with chilling certainty that something was about to break—that the weight of the sea, the bones, the treasure, the watchers, the storm, all of it, was converging on this moment.

And still Vex stood tall, defiant, greedy to the last, his hands reaching toward the storm as if to grasp it.

The colossal arm lifted once more, higher than the ridge, water sheeting off it in torrents. Lightning split the sky, illuminating the scene in stark brilliance: the whale bones gleaming white, the ambergris glistening black, the watchers striding closer, Jack cowering in horror...

—and Vex, eyes wild, arms outstretched, welcoming the storm, the sea, and the curse of Taonga.

6

Tentacles and Foam

The storm had not passed. If anything, it grew heavier, pounding the Kaikōura coast with a rage that seemed less like weather and more like will. The sky was black, shredded with silver lightning. The sea reared against the cliffs, foam exploding in bursts taller than men.

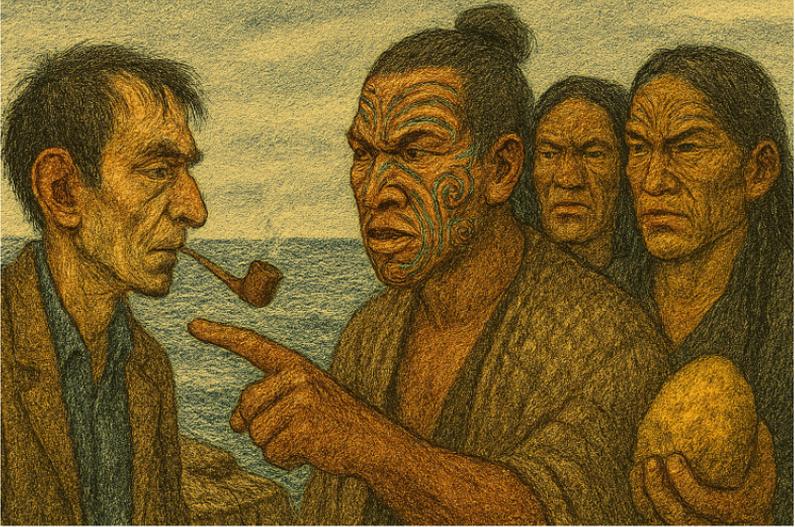
In the skeletal hollow of the boneyard, Jack Orrin and Vex Marrow faced the line of watchers. The dark figures advanced through the surf-spattered mist, their hoods pulled low, their steps measured. The scent of ambergris—musky, sweet, corrupt—hung thick between them all, mingling with the salt spray.

One of the watchers stopped only ten paces away. Rain ran down his cloak. His voice, when it came, was low but iron-hard.

“You’ve trespassed.”

Vex barked a laugh, teeth gleaming in stormlight. “Trespassed?”

We found what the sea left behind. That makes it ours.”



The man shook his head. “This is Taonga. Treasure of Tangaroa. It belongs to the sea, not thieves.”

Jack’s throat was dry. He stepped forward cautiously, lifting his hands. “We didn’t mean to—”

Vex shoved him aside. “Shut up, Jack.” He turned back to the watchers. “You want it? Prove you can take it.”

The storm groaned. Thunder cracked like splitting stone. Behind them, the sea surged unnaturally high, waves swelling with a force that felt alive.

The lead watcher’s gaze didn’t waver. “We are here to take back

what was stolen. Step aside, or the sea will swallow you with it.”

Vex spat into the sand. “Let it try.”

Tension bristled like drawn blades. The watchers advanced a step in unison. Jack’s pulse hammered. He raised his hands higher.

“Wait!” he cried. “No more threats. We can talk—”

But Vex cut him off, his voice sharp with fury. “No more talking! This is ours. Every lump, every sack. You don’t scare me.”

The lead watcher lifted his hand. Others shifted, hands sliding beneath their cloaks—glints of knives and crude clubs caught the lightning.

Jack’s stomach dropped. The storm roared louder, foam whipping across the sand.

And then the ocean itself struck.

From the boiling surf, a colossal arm rose, thicker than a mast, suckers gaping like open mouths. It swung with terrifying speed, slamming down on the rocks where two watchers had stood. The impact shattered stone, sending one man tumbling.

The second watcher screamed once before the arm coiled around him. In a heartbeat, he was gone, dragged into the black foam. His cry cut off beneath the roar of the sea.

Panic tore through the line. Shouts rang out in te reo Māori, raw and furious, swallowed quickly by the wind.

Jack staggered back, heart pounding. Horror twisted in his chest. It wasn't just storm or men anymore—the sea itself had chosen to join the fight.

Vex, though, only laughed, wild and exultant. “Do you see, Jack? Do you see? Even the sea can't decide—it gives to us and takes from them!”

Jack grabbed his sleeve, eyes wide. “It's not giving—it's warning us! Can't you see what this is?”

Vex tore free, face lit with feverish greed. “I see treasure. I see power. And I'll fight both men and sea to claim it.”

The watchers regrouped, rage flashing in their eyes. One strode forward, pointing a dripping blade at Vex. “Your greed has woken Tangaroa's guardian. It will take you first.”

Vex bared his teeth. “Let it come.”

Jack stepped between them, chest heaving. “Stop this! Fighting each other won't matter if the sea swallows us all.”

Vex's hand closed on Jack's shoulder, iron-hard. His voice hissed in Jack's ear, venomous. “You talk too much. You want to give it away, don't you? Sell me out?”

Jack froze. “Vex... I just want us to live.”

“Then shut up and follow me. Or I’ll put you in the ground before they do.”

The words chilled Jack deeper than the rain. He saw it now—Vex wasn’t just blinded by greed. He was lost to it.

The clash came sudden and brutal.

A watcher lunged, blade flashing. Vex swung a length of driftwood like a club, striking with bone-snapping force. The man crumpled into the sand. Another watcher charged Jack, swinging a short club. Jack dodged, stumbling, and the blow glanced off his shoulder. Pain seared through him, but fear drove him on.

The storm swallowed their shouts. Lightning flared, freezing the chaos in stark white flashes—blades raised, bodies crashing, sacks of ambergris torn open, the musky stench bursting stronger with every strike.

Jack tried to call out, to plead, but his voice was lost in the wind. The watchers pressed hard, but Vex fought like a man possessed, swinging wood and rock with savage strength. Blood sprayed across the bones, bright against the pale skeletons.

And then the sea struck again.

The colossal arm surged from the foam, slamming into the sand between them. Men were thrown off their feet like dolls. A spray of brine and stench washed over them. One watcher, too slow to move, was snatched up, his body vanishing into the curling

suckers before he could scream.



The watchers faltered, fear cutting through their rage.

Jack lay sprawled in the sand, heart pounding, eyes wide at the sight of the monstrous limb retreating into the boiling surf. The sea was not random. It was *choosing*.

He staggered to his knees, shouting hoarsely. “Enough! Stop this madness! Don’t you see? None of us can win. This isn’t ours—it never was! Let it go!”

The watchers glared at him, some clutching bleeding wounds, others still steady. Their leader spoke, voice ragged with fury. “You cannot walk away. Not now. The sea demands balance. Blood for blood.”

Jack turned desperately to Vex. “Please, Vex. We can leave it. Let them take it back. We still have our lives.”

But Vex’s eyes burned with fire, rain streaming down his face like tears he didn’t feel. He hefted his makeshift club, teeth bared. “No, Jack. I won’t leave it. Not ever. And if you stand in my way, I’ll spill your blood myself.”

Jack’s chest constricted. The rift between them had snapped into open betrayal.

The watchers surged again, desperation in their movements now. Jack tried to hold one back, but his strength faltered. He stumbled, his hand closing around a broken rib bone jutting from the sand. He swung blindly, striking the man across the temple. The watcher collapsed, blood staining the sand black in the storm’s dim light.

Jack froze, horror washing through him. He had killed.

But there was no time for shock. Vex roared and brought his club down on another, bones crunching beneath the blow. The watchers cried out in rage, their circle closing tighter.

Blood splattered across whale bones, smeared across sacks of ambergris. The storm howled, the sea foamed, and in its chaos Jack could hardly tell friend from foe. Only Vex’s voice rang clear, feral and relentless:

“Fight! Fight, damn you! This treasure is ours!”

Another watcher fell. Another arm surged from the surf, dragging one screaming into the black. Panic spread among the men. Even their fury cracked beneath terror.

Jack stumbled back, chest heaving, tears hot on his rain-slick face. He had wanted to save them all. Now blood stained his hands, and the sea itself had risen to claim the rest.

The battle ebbed in a moment of gasping silence. The watchers regrouped, fewer now, bloodied but not broken. Their leader pointed at Jack and Vex, voice hoarse with storm and rage.

“You carry death with you. Tangaroa will not rest until the grave is sealed again.”

Vex spat blood into the sand. “Then let him choke on it.”

Jack looked between them—his friend, lost to greed and violence, and the watchers, desperate and brutal but bound to something older, larger. And looming over them all, the sea itself, its tentacles rising with slow, patient hunger.

He knew then there was no winning, no treasure worth this cost. Only survival.

But Vex’s shadow loomed beside him, club dripping red, eyes wild with the hunger of a man who would sooner drown than let go.

The watchers tightened their line. The surf reared higher. Lightning split the sky.

And Jack realized the next strike—whether from man or sea—would decide who lived and who was swallowed into the grave of whales forever.

Fortune's True Price

The storm had raged all through the night, but now, as dawn threatened behind the clouds, it no longer felt like weather. It felt like judgment.

The sea boiled at the edge of the whale graveyard, waves curling unnaturally high before collapsing in explosions of white. Spray flew like smoke across the beach of bones. Rain lashed sideways, and lightning illuminated the vast skeletons that rose from the sand like the ruins of some ancient city.

Jack Orrin staggered among them, soaked, bleeding, and half-blind from exhaustion. The watchers still stood their ground—fewer than before, their numbers cut nearly in half—but their eyes were fixed not on him now, nor on Vex. They were staring at the surf with terror too deep for words.

The water was alive.

At first, Jack thought it was just another monstrous wave, a wall

of black green rolling toward shore. But then the crest tore open, and what rose within it was no wave.

A tentacle thicker than a tree trunk coiled up from the sea, its suckers glistening pale in the lightning flash. Another followed. Then another.

The watchers murmured prayers under their breath. One dropped to his knees in the sand, forehead pressed to the bones of a whale. Another gripped his knife tighter, though the tremor in his hand betrayed hopelessness.



Vex Marrow, however, was laughing. His face was streaked with rain and blood, his teeth bared like a predator's. He clutched a half-split sack of ambergris to his chest, the waxy lumps spilling out like rotten fruit. "Do you see it, Jack? Do you see? The sea

rises to defend its gold—and yet here it is in my hands!”

Jack’s stomach twisted. “It’s not ours. It never was.”

Vex shook his head violently, rainwater flying from his hair. “It’s mine. Mine! No man, no wave, no god of the deep will take it from me.”

The ocean heaved again, and the monster revealed itself.

From beneath the foam surged the bulk of a colossal squid, larger than any tale Jack had ever heard whispered in port taverns. Its mantle rose from the water like the hull of a capsized ship, dark and glistening, ridged with scars. Eyes the size of wagon wheels burned with an alien intelligence—cold, ancient, and merciless.

Tentacles unspooled into the air, some lashing onto the rocks with cracks like whips, others probing into the shallows with dreadful patience. Each sucker was a pit of teeth. Each movement carried the inevitability of a tide.

Jack staggered back, heart hammering against his ribs. The creature wasn’t just alive—it was aware. It knew.

The watchers broke, voices rising in panicked shouts. Some fled inland, scrambling over wet bones and into the darkness beyond the ridge. Others stood their ground, slashing at the air with knives as if steel could wound such a thing.

The squid did not hesitate. One vast arm swept across the sand, smashing bone, scattering ambergris, and plucking a watcher

into the sky. The man screamed as he was shaken once, twice, and then hurled into the sea with a splash that swallowed his voice forever.

Another tentacle lashed down on the piles of ambergris, dragging sacks toward the surf. The musky stench thickened, unbearable, as the waxy treasure slid toward the water.

Jack shouted over the storm, his voice cracking. “Vex, let it go!”

But Vex only clutched tighter, staggering backward as the nearest tentacle reached for him.

The watchers rallied with a desperate cry. Three men hurled themselves at the closest arm, knives flashing. They hacked and stabbed at the pale flesh around a massive sucker, their voices fierce in defiance.

The squid’s response was swift and merciless. The tentacle convulsed, flinging two into the bones with bone-shattering force. The third was dragged screaming into the surf, his blade still buried in the sucker’s rim.

The leader of the watchers turned toward Jack, eyes burning. “Run! Run, boy! Before it takes you too!”

But Jack couldn’t move. His gaze was fixed on Vex, who had stumbled into the heart of the boneyard, the sack of ambergris slung across his back. He was half-laughing, half-snarling, a man drunk on greed and fury.

“Come on then!” Vex shouted at the sea, raising his arms to the storm. “You think you can take me? You think you can take what’s mine?”

The squid answered.

A thick tentacle crashed down among the whale bones, scattering ivory splinters across the sand. Vex barely rolled aside in time, clutching his prize even as he scrambled to his feet. His eyes met Jack’s for an instant, and in that flicker Jack saw not madness but triumph.

“He wants it, Jack!” Vex cried. “That means it’s worth everything!”

Jack’s legs finally carried him forward, though every step felt like wading through nightmare. “Vex, listen to me! It’s not worth your life. Drop it! Please!”

Vex shook his head wildly. “I’ve given everything for this. You think I’ll go back to nothing? To scraping by while the sea laughs at me? No, Jack. Not me. Not ever again.”

Another tentacle crashed down, carving a trench in the sand between them. Foam surged, pulling more ambergris toward the surf. Jack shielded his face from the spray, coughing, blinking tears and salt from his eyes.

He reached out, hand trembling. “I’ll help you! We can survive, both of us—but not if you hold on!”

Vex's face twisted. "You always were weak. Always second-guessing, always afraid. That's why this is mine and not yours."

Jack's chest ached. He wanted to scream, to shake Vex, to drag him away—but even as he stepped closer, another arm coiled up from the sea, reaching.

The tentacle struck.

It whipped across the sand, catching Vex full in the chest. He staggered but did not fall—his arms locked around the sack, his fingers clawing into the waxy lumps as if they were his very heart. The suckers closed over him, pulling, dragging.

Jack lunged forward, seizing his friend's arm. "Let go, Vex! Give it up!"

Vex's grip tightened, nails digging into the ambergris. His eyes blazed with defiance, his voice a guttural roar. "Never!"

Jack pulled with all his strength, muscles burning, but it was useless. The tentacle dragged them both toward the surf, the roar of the waves deafening. Foam surged around their knees, then their waists.

Vex's face was a foot from his. Rain and tears streamed together as Jack shouted, "I can't hold you if you don't let go!"

And Vex smiled. A wild, broken smile. "Then don't."

His hand slipped from Jack's arm.

For an instant, Jack thought it was surrender. Relief surged through him—until he realized Vex hadn't let go of the ambergris. He had let go of *him*.

The tentacle yanked, and Vex was torn from Jack's grasp. His body, tangled with the sacks of ambergris, was dragged into the black surf. The sea swallowed him whole, treasure and man together, without hesitation.

Jack stumbled backward onto the bones, gasping, his hands empty, his chest hollow.

The last he saw of Vex was his face vanishing beneath the waves, eyes still blazing with defiance as the abyss claimed him.



The squid surged once more, hauling the sacks of ambergris into

the deeps. Tentacles lashed the sand, scattering the last lumps into the foam. The watchers who had survived fled into the hills, their cries swallowed by the storm.

Jack remained, kneeling among the bones, shaking, staring at the place where his friend had vanished.

The sea quieted. The monster sank, its tentacles sliding beneath the surface one by one. The boiling foam calmed into heavy waves. The storm still raged, but the unnatural fury was gone.

The whale graveyard lay in ruins. Bones splintered. Sand torn apart. Not a scrap of ambergris remained.

Jack was alive. Alone.

And empty.

Hours passed before the storm finally broke. The clouds thinned to gray, the rain slowed to drizzle, and pale dawn light crept over the ruined coast.

Jack sat slumped against a whale rib, his body wracked with exhaustion. His hands were torn and bleeding from gripping bones and sand. His eyes were red, dry from weeping though no tears fell now.

The watchers were gone. Vex was gone. The treasure was gone.

Only Jack remained, with the stench of ambergris still lingering in his nostrils and the echo of Vex's laughter still ringing in his

ears.

He stared out at the horizon, where the waves rolled calm again, as if nothing had ever happened. But he knew. The sea had taken its price.

Some fortunes, he realized, are never meant for men.

When at last Jack rose to his feet, the tide had begun to climb again. The bones of whales loomed around him, silent witnesses to what the sea had claimed.

He turned his back on them. His steps were slow, dragging, but steady. He did not look back.

The path into the hills was long, and his body weak, but he would walk it. He would carry the knowledge with him—the truth of the grave, of the watchers, of the monstrous guardian that rose from the deep.

And of Vex Marrow, his friend, who had chosen greed over life and been claimed by the abyss.

The depths keep their own.

Jack Orrin would survive, but he would never forget.

The Gift of The Sea

The dawn broke clean and pale, as though the night before had never been.

Jack Orrin woke slowly, his body heavy, his breath ragged in the salt air. He half-expected to open his eyes and see only darkness, to feel the pull of cold water and tentacles dragging him down. But instead there was sky—clear, washed in pink and gold, gulls wheeling as if the world had gone on without noticing the storm.

He sat up stiffly, wincing at the ache in his limbs. His hands trembled, flecked with dried blood and sand. He turned, searching.

The beach was bare.

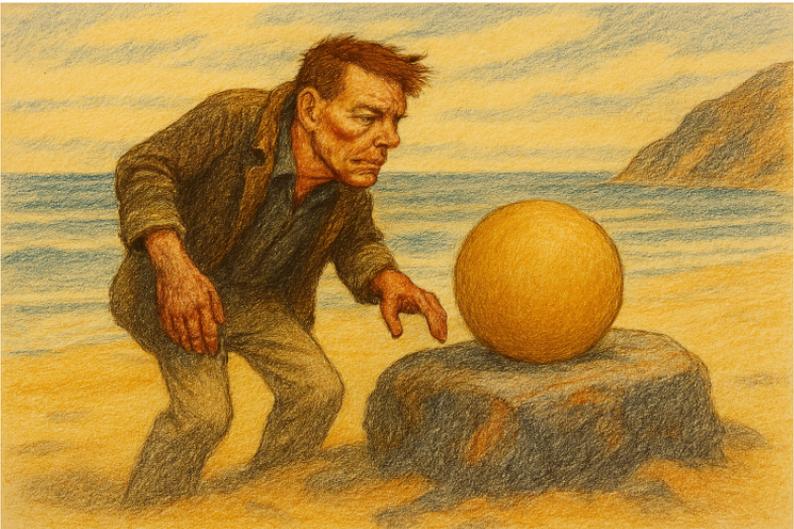
No bones, no broken crates, no lumps of ambergris, no bodies. Not even a trace of Vex. The sand stretched smooth and silver, as though a thousand years of tide had passed in the space of one night.

Jack staggered to his feet, heart thundering. Had he dreamt it all? The watchers, the fight, the storm, the monstrous shadow that had risen to claim the shore—could that have been nothing more than fever and fear?

But the ache in his chest told him otherwise. The silence that pressed against his ears was too complete, too deliberate. It was not the silence of emptiness, but of something erased.

He stumbled toward the tidepools, their glassy surfaces reflecting the sky. As he climbed the rocks, a shape caught his eye.

There, perched atop a black stone slick with kelp, sat a single lump of ambergris. Not rough or jagged like the others they had found, but perfectly round, gleaming faintly in the morning light. It looked less like treasure and more like an offering.



Jack froze.

He knew it instantly for what it was: a gift. Not from chance, not from storm, not from the bones of whales. From the sea itself.

He approached slowly, each step reluctant, as if the ground might open and swallow him. He reached out, his fingers brushing the lump's waxy surface. It was warm from the rising sun, smooth and flawless. Lifting it, he felt its weight—heavier than it looked, yet balanced, whole.

It was beautiful.

And terrible.

Jack clutched it to his chest, staring out at the horizon where the water gleamed like glass. "Why?" he whispered, though no one answered.

The sea shifted, rolling lazily against the rocks. Gulls cried overhead. Somewhere, deep below, he thought he heard a rumble—not menacing, not violent. Almost like breath.

He did not linger on the beach. Some instinct told him it was not wise. The sea had given, and might just as easily take back. Jack wrapped the ambergris in his jacket and hiked inland, his steps unsteady but purposeful. He did not look back at the water.

By the time he reached the road, the sun was high and bright. He walked until a farmer in a lorry picked him up, eyeing the weary stranger with suspicion. Jack said little, only that he had

lost his gear in the storm. The farmer shrugged and drove him to town.

Jack's limbs ached, his face was hollow, but he carried the lump of ambergris like a relic.

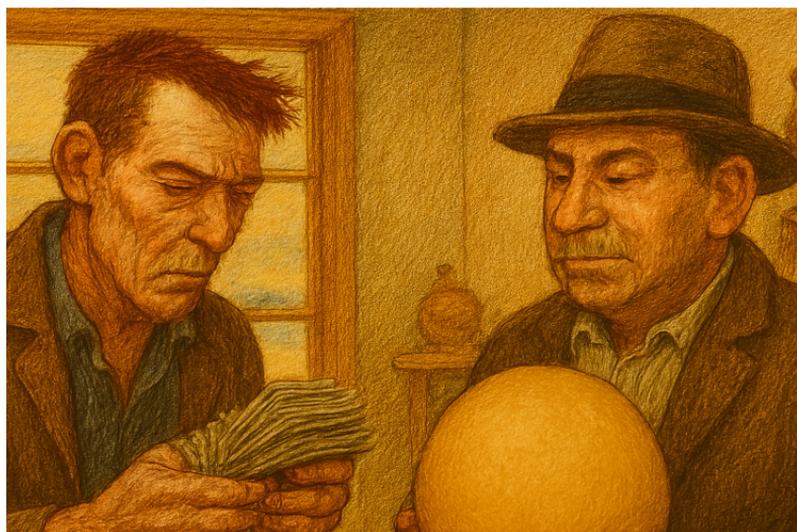
It took weeks to sell. He was cautious, remembering Vex, remembering the watchers, remembering the men who whispered in bars about fortunes best left alone. But eventually, in Christchurch, he found a buyer—a perfume trader who weighed the piece with reverence.

“Pure,” the man muttered, running his hands over the surface. “Uncut. Round as if polished.”

Jack said nothing.

The trader named a sum, and Jack nodded, though he barely heard the words. Enough to buy a house. Enough to live quiet for the rest of his days. Enough to never have to mend nets or haul crates or drink himself sick on cheap whiskey just to sleep.

The man paid in cash. Jack walked away with a weight lighter than the treasure but heavier than any burden he had ever known.



Years passed. Jack moved south, bought a small cottage near Bluff, overlooking the sea. He lived simply, fishing when he pleased, mending his own clothes, reading by lamplight. He grew old quietly, the round lump of ambergris long gone to be dissolved into perfumes for people who would never know his name.

Yet he never forgot.

On still nights, when the tide crept close and the moon laid its silver path across the water, he would wake in sweat, hearing Vex's voice calling from the deep. He would walk outside, leaning on his stick, and stare at the black horizon until dawn.

He had the money, the comfort, the peace others might envy. But peace never truly came. Not inside. The memory lived with him: the watchers' eyes, the storm's fury, the colossal arm slamming

onto the rocks, the abyss swallowing his friend whole.

And always, the question: Why had the sea spared him?

Why leave him with this one perfect piece, when all else had been claimed?

One evening, long into his grey years, Jack sat on the bluff as a storm gathered. The air was heavy with rain, the horizon bruised with clouds. Lightning forked far out at sea.

He closed his eyes and whispered, as he had done countless times before: "I know. I remember."

The wind picked up, whipping his hair, carrying the brine of the waves. For a moment, Jack swore he felt the ground beneath him tremble—not with thunder, but with something vast and alive beneath the water.

He opened his eyes. The sea was dark, restless, its surface breaking with foam. For a heartbeat, he thought he saw it again: the curve of something massive, the flicker of a tentacle sliding back into the abyss.

But then the rain began, and the horizon vanished.

Jack stood, leaning on his stick, and turned toward home. He had no treasure now, no fortune but the modest life the sea had bought him. Yet he knew what others could never know: that the ocean remembers, and that it gives only once.

The lump of ambergris had been both gift and warning, a reminder that no man could ever truly own what lay in the depths.

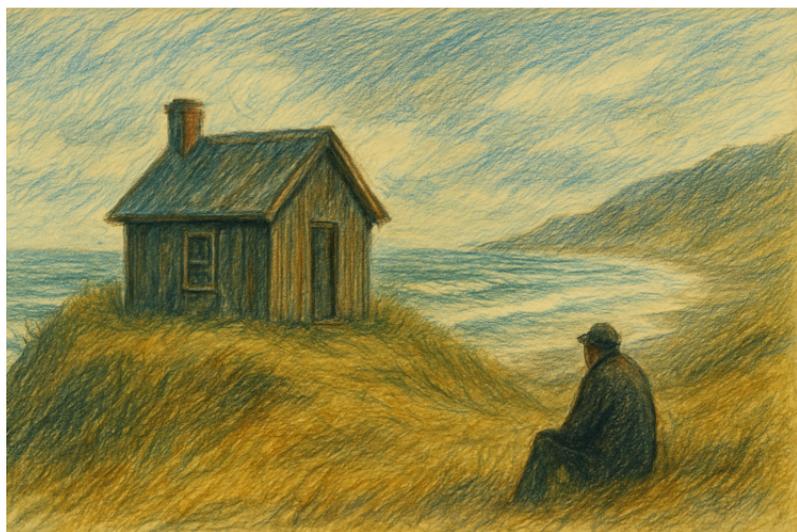
Jack lived, yes. Lived well enough. But comfort never washed away the salt that lingered on his tongue.

The sea had spared him—but it had never let him go.

Epilogue: The Weight of Silence

The years that followed drifted like kelp across a tide—sometimes caught, sometimes carried, never entirely free.

Jack Orrin had sold the perfect round lump of ambergris. With it, he bought a cottage overlooking the southern coast, a modest place with a stove that ticked all night and windows that groaned in the wind. From the outside, he lived simply, comfortably. He fished when he pleased, mended his boots, grew old among quiet people who knew him as the quiet man on the bluff.



Yet no one who watched him would mistake him for content.

The past never left him. It seeped through his dreams like brine through cloth. He would wake gasping, heart hammering, certain that the surf outside his window hid something vast, waiting.

Sometimes he would walk to the shoreline and stand there until dawn, staring into the foam, half-hoping, half-dreading that he might see it again—the ripple of arms, the gleam of eyes that belonged to the deep.

And always, beneath the silence, was the memory of Vex.

Vex's laughter, his scheming hunger, his refusal to let go even as the abyss swallowed him. The sea had taken him, and with him all their fortune. All but the one round gift Jack had carried

away.

Jack lived with it like a splinter in the soul.

He told himself, often, that the sea had shown mercy. That it had given him one piece so he might live, not starve, not suffer the way so many men did. He told himself that perhaps the ocean pitied him, that perhaps it had spared him as witness.

But mercy never quite fit the shape of it.

The lump of ambergris had been beautiful, flawless, and heavy with meaning. He had sold it quickly, yes, but never lightly. Even as he handed it to the trader, his fingers lingered, reluctant. As though he knew it was not his to give, not his to profit from.

That money bought him warmth, shelter, and freedom from toil. But it also bought him silence, distance, and the isolation of a man who carried a story too heavy to share.

For years, Jack spoke nothing of it. Not in town, not at the pub, not even when old friends tried to draw him out. The words sat in his chest like stones. To tell them was to invite disbelief, laughter, dismissal. Worse—it felt like betrayal. A betrayal of Vex, of the dead whales, of the watchers who had warned him, and of the ocean itself.

But silence, too, was a kind of weight.

It was almost twenty years later when he first broke.

He had grown older by then, his hair streaked with iron, his back bent from years of solitary living. One winter evening, after a storm that rattled the windows and churned the sea into froth, he met a young fisherman at the wharf—Rangi, a Māori boy no older than twenty. The lad was curious, bright-eyed, full of questions about the sea.

Jack, weary but warmed by the boy's eagerness, walked with him along the docks. Rangi spoke of traditions, of how his grandfather had taught him that the ocean was alive, watching, listening. That one must never take what was not given.

Something broke loose inside Jack at those words.

He found himself speaking before he could stop, voice low, words halting. He told the boy of the graveyard, of the lumps they had found, of the watchers in the hills. He told him of Vex, greedy and bright-eyed, and of the storm that rose like judgment. He told him of the tentacle that slammed down, of the abyss that opened, of the fortune dragged screaming into the dark.

Rangi listened in silence, eyes wide. When Jack's voice finally faltered, the boy asked only one thing:

“And why do you still live, uncle?”

Jack could not answer.

The boy touched his arm gently, as if steadying him. “Because you remember. That is your burden. And your gift.”

From that night forward, Jack understood that silence alone was not enough. The story had to live, even if only in whispers.

Over the years, he told it again—but sparingly.

Once to a woman he loved for a brief span, when she pressed him in the middle of the night about the scars on his body. She wept when he finished, not because she believed, but because she saw how it hollowed him.

Once to an old whaler in a tavern, who nodded grimly and muttered, “Aye, the sea has guardians. I seen shapes too.” Then the man fell silent, unwilling to add more.

Once to a priest, who urged him to think of it not as curse, but as covenant. Jack left the church unsettled, unsure if he believed in either.

But mostly, he kept it close, telling only those who he sensed could hold it. Children of fishermen who needed warnings. Old men who already suspected. Never the greedy, never the careless.

Each time he told it, he felt both lighter and heavier. Lighter, because the burden was not his alone. Heavier, because each retelling made it real again.

The sea never let him forget.

Sometimes, walking the bluff, he would spot a shape out beyond the breakers—too large to be fish, too steady to be mere swell.

A shadow that sank when he blinked.

Other times, he would dream of Vex, still clutching the ambergris, still laughing as the waves rose. In the dream, Jack always reached for him, always failed. He woke with his hands clawing the sheets, his throat raw.

And on rare nights, when the tide was especially high and the wind stilled, he swore he heard something like breath beneath the water. Long, slow, inhuman. As though the sea itself were inhaling.

He never stepped too close to the tide then.

In his later years, Jack grew quieter still. His hair went white, his steps slow, but his eyes never lost their watchfulness. Children in town sometimes whispered that the old man could see things in the sea others could not. Some laughed, some avoided him.

But there were those who listened.

Now and again, a young fisherman would sit with him on the bluff. They would ask why he stared at the horizon so often. Jack would tell them the story—not always in full, not always in detail, but enough. Enough to make them wary of taking too much. Enough to remind them that the ocean's silence was never consent.

He never spoke of the final gift—the round lump of ambergris he had sold. That part was his alone, the proof that the story was not only tale but truth. To speak of it would be to cheapen

it, to invite the same greed that had doomed Vex.

Instead, he carried it quietly, a hidden scar.

One autumn evening, when the sky was aflame with red and the waves rolled calm and endless, Jack sat with Rangi again—no longer a boy, but a man grey at the temples. They had not spoken in years, but the bond lingered.

Jack told the story once more, from beginning to end. He spoke slowly, every word deliberate. When he finished, the light was gone, and the sea was dark.

Rangi said nothing, only placed a hand on Jack's shoulder and nodded.



Jack looked out over the water one last time, his chest tight with both fear and peace. He thought of the gift, the fortune that had bought him a life, and the curse that had haunted that life. He thought of Vex, of the watchers, of the abyss.

“The sea keeps its own,” Jack whispered. “But sometimes it lets one live—to remember.”

And with that, he let silence take the rest.

Jack Orrin died not long after, in his sleep, in the cottage by the bluff. They buried him overlooking the sea.

Some said he died with a smile.

Those who had heard his story, the few chosen, carried it forward—not as warning of fortune, but as reminder of respect. For the sea remembers, and the sea decides.