

The Golden Fool

#Chapter 1: Sentence of the Sun - Read The Golden Fool Chapter 1: Sentence of the Sun

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The gods were already arguing by the time Apollo arrived. The marble benches of the amphitheater were set high above the world, close enough to catch the sharp ozone of the upper atmosphere, it rang with their voices, a chorus of accusation and derision.

Above, the sky rippled in impossible colors, aurora dancing to the discordant rhythm of their quarreling.

It was Dionysus who first noticed his approach. "Look who deigns to join us," he called, lips purple from wine and something darker. "The Sun returns to court!"

There was laughter, some genuine, some brittle. Apollo almost smiled. He had always admired Dionysus' ability to make the unbearable things festive.

'Inspiring as always.'

Hera's voice was cold as a glacier as it cut through the commotion. "Let us proceed, then. We all have better things to do with eternity."

Zeus sat at the head of the circle, radiating a storm's worth of disapproval. His beard flickered with blue sparks. His fingers drummed a thunderous rhythm on the arm of his throne. "Phoebus," he intoned, "you stand accused of hubris beyond even your usual boundlessness, and of interfering... once again, in matters sacred to my office."

The gray in his gaze gathered, cold and roiling, promising downpour.

'I really messed up this time, they definitely won't allow me to get away with it..'

Apollo inclined his head, neither low enough for true humility nor high enough to court outright lightning. The old habits. "I ask only to see the charges unclouded by rhetoric, Father."

Aphrodite, perched a few steps down and smirked. "He means, name the crime, not the punishment." She plucked a feather from her fan of doves, watched it spiral down onto the clouds below.

Hera drew herself upright, the silver of her eyes reflecting the empty aether. "You took the prophecy meant for the Sibyl. You gave it to the mortals without a filter or sign."

Unforgivable." She finished her sentence as though slamming a door. "You made them believe they could change the future."

'I made them believe they had a chance to live!'

Every immortal in the circle turned to watch Apollo. The weight of their attention, each gaze weighted with ancient memory and fresh grievance, was heavier than any mortal crown.

Apollo had prepared words, a carefully lacquered defense. But standing in the cold glare of Olympus, he found that the language had curdled in his mouth. "The prophecy was not theirs to keep," he said finally, voice crackling like a sunspot, "but neither was it yours to hoard. I gave them hope in a night that would have swallowed them whole."

"A night which you orchestrated!" Hera's nails left crescents in the marble as she spoke. "You set the stars against one another. You let the mortals believe they could sway the cosmos and when the sky bled, you claimed surprise!"

Hephaestus snorted, a low dump-bellied sound. "If mortals could sway the cosmos with hope alone, Olympus would've fallen long ago."

'Hephaestus is right.'

"Silence, forge-whelp," Ares growled, and the amphitheater's columns quivered with the violence implied in his tone.

Zeus raised a single finger. The arguments collapsed in a hush so complete Apollo could hear the pulse behind his own temples.

"There is precedent," Zeus said, with the fatal patience of an avalanche. "We have punished gods for less."

'So I will be punished, at last.'

"No one remembers their names," murmured Aphrodite, as if it mattered.

He could see how this was to go. The pattern of their logic, the iron rails of their tradition. The history of Olympus had always been a ledger of wounds and reciprocations.

Still, Apollo would not make it too easy for them. "Is it hubris to believe mortals are equal to our attention?" he asked, but this time the old arrogance was thinned, threadbare. "If so, you are all more guilty than I."

The gods considered. There were echoes of old friendships in some of their faces, but no rescue. Dionysus, instead of speaking, only sipped what remained in his goblet, watching Apollo over the rim with sly, unfathomable eyes.

"Hear your sentence," thundered Zeus, each word anvil-weight. "Stripped of divinity, cast below the clouds, for ten circuits of the sun. You will walk among those you so trust. When your penance is complete, we shall see if the world, or you, has changed."

'Ten circuits of the sun!?!'

The amphitheater dissolved. The sky unstitched itself at the seams.

Apollo felt the pull at the base of his skull, an undertow of mortality so sharp it made the world tilt. For a moment, he hovered at the seam of worlds, Olympian above, and what waited below.

Then he fell, drawn down through ragged aurora, through updrafts that howled with every name he had ever been called. Each band of sky scraped him raw, until there was nothing left but the husk of a man, limbs flailing, hair stripped of its gold, eyes scorched to a more common amber.

The landing was not gentle.

He woke in the mud, throat full of every possible thing, ears thrumming with the memory of thunder.

'Could have just put me here.'

It was cold. Not the crisp, invigorating cold of Olympus, but the damp, bone-sapping chill that crept into the marrow and made the skin crawl. Apollo blinked mud from his eyelashes and tried to sit up. His head hammered with each beat of his lessened heart.

He was in a ditch, half-flooded with recent rain, the banks tufted with sickly grass and shattered glass. The world smelled of rotting leaves and tar. Above, the sky was a sullen bruise.

A crow sat watching him from the lip of the gutter, head cocked, as if it had never before seen a god so thoroughly ruined. Apollo bared his teeth at it, feral and toothless, but the bird only hopped closer, curious. Perhaps it recognized him, the way animals sometimes did, even through the thinnest bone mask of humanity.

"Go on, then," he croaked, "take a piece."

He tried to stand and nearly vomited. Everything was hurting, joints, skin, pride. If not for the slick catching of his knees, he might have been satisfied to remain where he was

forever, decaying at the bottom of this unremarkable ditch, another failed thing in a world that clearly had no shortage.

But the wind was sharp and unforgiving, and the crow, joined now by two others, began to look at him with something like calculation. He hauled himself upright, or close enough to count, and surveyed his surroundings.

The horizon was a palisade of crumbling tenements, their windows stitched shut with crooked planks and draped in the faded flags of laundry and surrender.

Farther off, the city, or town. Whatever it was supposed to be, proper shivered in the blue chill, its towers rising like broken bones from the fog. He recognized it, after a fashion. Mortals always built their homes the same way, concentric rings of desperation, hope, and eventual decay.

Apollo knew he should have been afraid, but mostly he was cold and hungry. It was very hard to mourn one's lost omnipotence while shivering in wet trousers.

Chapter 2: Divine Descent

Apollo's first breath in the mortal world tasted of blood and pine sap.

He lay half-curved at the rotten foot of a felled tree, skin stung raw by brambles and the relentless drizzle that passed, in this green nowhere, for rain.

The ground was not unlike the underworld's banks, it was clinging, rank, alive with unseen movement, but Apollo had never in memory known a chill to worm so deep into his bones.

'Is this how far I've fallen?'

He tried to rise, but his arms buckled beneath a body suddenly heavier and more susceptible to pain than any he'd carried before.

Each cold-soaked fiber screamed against the motion. Something he suspected was a rib, shifted inside him like an accusation.

He waited for the divine warmth to rise, to cauterize the wound, to burn away the damp. Nothing came. Only the indifferent patter of rain through tapestry-green leaves and the shrill complaint of a jay somewhere overhead.

It was not until this moment that Apollo understood, truly, the completeness of his exile.

'I really have fallen too far now.'

As he forced open his eyes, the world revealed itself in shades of moss and wet bark, with the blue-tinged mist of early morning caught in the latticed arms of ancient trees. The canopy above was thick, the sky only a rumor.

The insects here were more persistent than the furies, gnawing at the exposed skin of his ankles and neck. Beyond the groan of his own breath, Apollo could hear the distant rush of a river and, further still, the bell-like clang of metal.

'The water is close.'

He crawled, each movement a negotiation between pride and agony, until he reached the edge of a shallow depression where cloven footprints pooled with rainwater. Deer, perhaps, or something more spectral.

This forest had the old magic; he could feel that much, a low throb in the marrow, brightening slightly with proximity. Even in disgrace, the world's wonder was not closed to him.

He followed the trail, crawling at first, then staggering upright, his legs carrying him with the fragile stateliness of a ruined monarch.

Apollo's hair, that former golden inheritance, now clung to his brow like the wilted remnants of a laurel.

His hands, accustomed to the weightless perfection of instruments and lyres, were mud-caked, the knuckles already raw.

When he pressed one to his side, warm wetness greeted him. He looked, half-expecting to find the ichor of Olympus glistening honey-bright. Instead, he found only mortal blood, red, mundane as spat wine.

He grieved for it, briefly, in the way a man might grieve for a vanished season. Then the clang of metal sounded again, closer this time and hurried, a rhythm of industry or violence, he could not tell.

'Someone else is here.'

The bracken thinned ahead, and beyond it, the forest floor rose toward a palisade of sharpened logs that ringed a clearing. There, laboring in the mud with axes and crude forge-tools, were mortals.

Apollo hesitated, sudden and unprepared for the magnitude of their ugliness. Not their faces, which were closed and grim as all human faces must be, but their movements, so ugly with purpose, so lacking in grace or music.

They made no song in their labor. Each motion seemed a violence enacted upon the world. Wood struck, metal burned, earth gouged and tamped.

The smallest of them, a boy with more scab than skin, worked the bellows with such desperate regularity that Apollo's own lungs ached in sympathy.

'Should I?'

He hesitated at the fringe, learning his new self by the hush with which the trees permitted him passage.

The aura that once preceded him had diminished to a mere suggestion, a memory in the air of something brighter. None felt his presence. None recoiled in awe or terror. It suited him poorly.

A shouted command drew attention to a rough-hewn hut near the palisade's gate. The boy left his post and sprinted over, vanishing inside.

Apollo watched from his shadowed shelter as a woman emerged a moment later, a bulk of linen and furs, wild hair loose down her back, iron necklace filigreed in the runic style of the northern tribes, dragging the boy by his ear while berating him in a language that skirted the edge of his understanding.

The indignity of mortal squabbling, once a source of Olympian mockery, now stilled Apollo. He felt not the urge to smite, instruct, or seduce, his preferred modes of intervention, but only a thin trickle of envy.

How wondrous to possess a quarrel so clean in its boundaries, to live within walls that needed defending instead of loved ones that required avenging. Even their suffering had contour and purpose.

'Humans, they were always like this—'

A branch snapped from behind. Apollo whirled, slipping in the mud, and met the eyes of another, this one neither beast nor peasant child, but a man grown, broad of shoulder and sharp of gaze.

He wore the piecemeal armor of a survivor with battered cuirass, once-white tunic stained with the same rust that colored his close-cropped beard.

In his left hand, a spear with the look of something passed down through generations. In his right, a length of cord twisted for binding or, if needed, strangling.

They considered one another, Apollo and the man, in the hush that followed. The man's lips tightened, his eyes flicked with the quick tallying of threat, and Apollo realized he must cut a pitiful figure, muddy, bleeding, half-drowned in a god's shame.

Still, the recognition was not all one-sided. Something in the set of Apollo's jaw, the old arrogance unbowed by suffering, gave the man pause.

"Stranger," the man said, in the local patois but with a crispness that bespoke education. "You move poorly for a hunter. Are you lost?"

Apollo gathered the remnants of his dignity and straightened, wincing as his ribs protested. He tried to summon the old music to his voice, but what came was flat and human, frayed by pain.

"Lost, yes. Or exiled—does it matter?" He had meant to sound flippant, but the words carried a gravity that surprised them both.

The man grunted, lowering his spear a fraction. "Not here it doesn't. The forest swallows the proud and the humble with equal appetite." He stepped closer, eyes narrowed, assessing the wounds, the posture, the expensive ruin of Apollo's former divinity.

Chapter 3: The Fire Accepts No Gods

They stood close enough now for Apollo to notice the old sword scar running diagonal across the man's brow, and the yellowing whorls of tattoos at his throat.

The man's aura was that of someone forever standing at the edge of firelight, unsure if the world within or without was the more dangerous.

"Come," said the man, as if deciding. "If you mean harm, you'll do it wet and shivering beside our fire, not skulking in the brush. What's your name?"

'My name?'

Apollo flinched, for in the celestial tongue names had weight, names bound things, unmade them, or sealed fate in iron. Yet here, among mortals, a name was just a password, a price of passage.

"Apollo," he said, the syllables a foreignness on his tongue he could not quite swallow.

The man's face betrayed only the faintest tic of surprise, then reset into blankness. "Folk around here favor simple names. I'll call you Lio for now."

He gestured with the cord. Apollo realized with a small, sick amusement that the offer had never really been to accompany, only to submit or die.

He walked, and the man walked beside him; not the way heroes march into legend, but the hesitant dance of two animals unsure which is predator and which is prey.

The palisade loomed taller as they approached, its gate a crude affair of crossed timbers and scavenged chain.

Three men guarded it, each in varying states of drunken alertness, their eyes skimming over Apollo and finding greater threat in the mud on his boots than the man himself.

'I assume my current looks differ from my usual demeanor.'

The man with the spear nodded to the guards, muttered something lost to Apollo's ringing ears, and steered him through the gates with a grip that seemed almost an afterthought.

Inside the palisade, the air changed. It was thicker with humanity, with the sour of smoke and sweat, the sweetness of browning onions, the iron note of slaughter.

A handful of huts pressed together like guilty conspirators.

At their margins, children. Some were naked, but all of them were loud, they gambled with colored stones.

A fanged dog, scarred and balding, sidled up and licked at Apollo's leg with such abject hope that for a moment he almost missed the monsters of Olympus.

They came to a fire, broad and blue as a festival bonfire, ringed with stones and ringed again with men. Women, too, and old ones so shriveled they looked birthed from the wood itself.

All conversation turned at their approach, all eyes, bright and pitiless, swept over Apollo and found nothing sufficient.

He knew this attention, remembered it from countless banquets and massed armies, but here it stung in a new way, as if he had not earned it and never would.

The man with the spear thrust Apollo before the fire. A silence of expectation fell.

Not for the first time, Apollo considered the long list of things he'd done to get here. The arrogance, the misjudgments, the final offense that had sent him tumbling from that marble threshold and into the rawness of the world.

'I deserve this. However—'

But unlike the gods, he found no glory in recitation. Instead, he shivered, and the marshy earth squelched beneath his foot, and the people gathered, cresting with skepticism, as if waiting for a punchline.

'—I will push through this as well.'

The man with the spear adjusted his grip and raised his voice. "He was in the brush. His name's Lio. Might be a spotted wolf, or just a lost fool. Either way, he's cold as a stone and leaking bad."

The villagers regarded the bleeding newcomer with unconcealed suspicion, as if by mere proximity he might infect the fire with misfortune.

A woman detached herself from the ring. She had gray plaits, slate eyes, a face scored deeper than the ruined fortifications behind her.

She moved like someone long past the vanity of youth, but who knew precisely the reach of her strength.

'Is she perhaps a shaman or a priest of some sort?'

Her gaze sliced Apollo from face to gut and back up, pausing at the ribs as if she could see the break's canker from outside.

She approached, spat into her palm, and reached for his shoulder, turning him with a force at odds with her age.

"Strip," she commanded. "If you're lying about the wound, it'll be clear soon."

'Lie about a wound? Why would I do such—'

The pain interrupted him before he could finish the prideful thought.

He faltered, stung by the indignity, but the cold had already begun peeling him layer by layer. With clumsy reluctance, Apollo shed the sodden tunic.

Underneath, his torso was marbled with bruises, one purpling deeper than the others, rimmed by dried blood. The crowd made a sound. A communal exhale, neither quite pity nor disgust.

'I must look pitiful.'

The woman's fingers found their way to the wound, probing with a brisk intimacy that left no room for modesty. Apollo winced but did not draw away. She nodded once, mouth thin as thread.

"Not dead yet," she pronounced. "Could be lung." She licked her thumb and pressed it against the deepest part of the bruise, gauging the yield, the way one tests bread for readiness. Blood welled, sluggishly, and she grunted approval.

"You'll want the white root tea and the fox drake's bitter," she said to no one in particular. "Heat some cloth. This one's lucky, pain keeps him here."

'Pain...?'

The man with the spear surrendered Apollo into her custody with visible relief. For a moment, he lingered, then knelt to the fire, hands splayed as if in prayer or benediction.

His eyes, when they glanced up, were hollowed of threat but not of wariness.

The woman, satisfied with her diagnosis, guided Apollo to a stump beside the fire.

He lowered himself carefully; every nerve seemed to report back to Olympus of the humiliation.

'I have to endure.'

A child darted forward. He was freckled, hollow-cheeked, one front tooth missing, and presented him with a rag that might once have been linen.

'For me?'

Apollo took it, feeling the sting of trivial kindness as harshly as the stab of cold.

The villagers circled, a slow centrifugal dance. Some returned to their stews, their dice, the carving of bones.

Others, sensing spectacle, lingered to see if he would cry out during the cleaning of the wound.