

The Golden Fool

#Chapter 41: The Pull - Read The Golden Fool Chapter 41: The Pull

Chapter 41: The Pull

The hills rose like worn knuckles from the earth, covered in stunted brush and pale grasses that whispered with each gust of wind.

Heat shimmered above the ground, distorting the horizon where sky met distant water. Apollo wiped sweat from his brow, feeling the gold in his veins pulse in time with something beyond his own heartbeat.

"We should head northwest," Thorin said, pointing toward a ridge that curved away from the sea. "Better cover, less exposed."

Renna snorted, planting her spear in the dirt. "Northwest is nothing but broken ground for three days. East ridge has water."

"East takes us too close to the trader roads," Thorin countered, his voice gaining an edge.

Apollo watched them, noting the unusual sharpness in Thorin's tone, the rigid set of Renna's shoulders. The argument felt different from their usual tactical disagreements, more visceral, somehow.

Renna stepped closer to Thorin, her eyes narrowed to slits. "You think I don't know the terrain? I've crossed these hills a dozen times while you were still hiding in your forge."

Thorin's face darkened. "And I suppose those crossings taught you everything? Like how to lose a hunting party in Varnwick?"

"That was different," Renna hissed, knuckles whitening around her spear.

"Different how? Because it wasn't your neck on the line?"

Apollo glanced at his pack, where the relic lay wrapped in blue cloth. The weight shifted again, subtly, as if it were listening.

Nik and Yiv stood to the side, exchanging uncomfortable glances. Cale watched the argument with detached interest, fingers drumming against his thigh in a pattern that matched the distant rhythm of waves they could no longer hear.

"Enough." Lyra's voice cut through the tension like a blade. "You sound like children fighting over the last sweet roll. We go north, then east once we're past the scrublands. And if either of you wastes another breath on this, I'll personally ensure you walk the rest of the way gagged."

Her words landed in perfect, awful silence. Thorin opened his mouth, then closed it. Renna looked away, jaw clenched. No one spoke for several heartbeats.

Apollo felt the weight in his pack settle, as if satisfied.

They continued walking, the group spread out in a loose formation. Apollo kept his eyes on the ground ahead, watching for loose stones and hidden depressions. The sun beat down from directly overhead, casting almost no shadows, a disorienting effect that made distances hard to judge.

By mid-afternoon, they'd stopped three times to check their bearings. Each time, despite their stated intentions to move inland, Apollo noticed they ended up angling back toward the coast. No one mentioned it. No one seemed to realize they were doing it.

When he paused at the crest of a small rise, looking back at their path, he could see the subtle curve in their route, a gradual arc bending inexorably toward the sea.

'It's pulling us back,' he thought, the realization cold in his stomach despite the heat. He glanced at the others, wondering if they felt it too, but their faces betrayed nothing beyond ordinary fatigue.

"We're losing light," Cale announced as the sky began to deepen toward evening. "Need to find a place to camp."

They descended into a shallow dell between two rises, a natural depression that offered some protection from the wind.

The ground was sandy but firm, dotted with tough grasses and the occasional flowering weed. Apollo dropped his pack with a relief that was almost physical, feeling the separation between his body and the relic like the breaking of a tether.

As they set up camp, Cale paused in the middle of arranging stones for a fire. He tilted his head, frowning slightly.

"You hear that?" he asked.

Apollo listened. There was only the rustle of grass, the soft clink of Thorin's cooking gear, the distant cry of a bird circling overhead.

"Hear what?" Nik asked, looking up from where he was unpacking his bedroll.

"Water," Cale said. "Running water. Like a stream."

Lyra straightened, scanning the dell. "There's no stream here."

"I know that," Cale snapped, then seemed surprised by his own irritation. "Sorry. I just... I could have sworn I heard it."

Apollo inhaled deeply, testing the air. Beneath the dry scent of dust and wild sage, he caught something else, a faint but unmistakable brininess, like seawater carried on a distant breeze. He glanced at his pack, where the relic lay undisturbed.

They ate a simple meal as darkness fell, the conversation sparse and practical. Plans for tomorrow's route, inventory of supplies, a brief debate about whether the strange birds they'd seen earlier were edible.

No one mentioned the sea, though it remained visible from their camp, a darker line against the deepening horizon.

Apollo volunteered for first watch. He sat with his back against a boulder, watching as the others settled into their bedrolls.

One by one, they drifted into sleep, Nik first, then Yiv, then Thorin with his usual snoring. Renna curled on her side, one hand still wrapped around the shaft of her spear. Cale lay on his back, arms crossed over his chest as if even in sleep he couldn't quite let go of his vigilance.

Only Lyra remained awake for a time, her green eyes reflecting the dying embers of the fire. She studied Apollo across the camp, her expression unreadable. Finally, she too closed her eyes, her breathing slowing to the even rhythm of sleep.

Apollo waited until he was certain they were all unconscious before turning his attention to his pack. He didn't touch it, didn't even move closer. He simply watched the shape of it against the ground, the way the cloth bulged around the wrapped relic.

The night deepened. Stars wheeled overhead, cold and distant. Apollo felt the gold in his veins grow warmer as the hours passed, a slow heat that spread from his core to his fingertips. The relic seemed to respond, its presence in his awareness growing sharper, more defined.

He watched as his companions began to twitch in their sleep. Nik's hands clenched and unclenched. Thorin muttered something unintelligible, his face contorting. Renna turned her head sharply, as if avoiding a blow. Even Cale, usually so still, shifted restlessly, his breath catching in his throat.

'They're dreaming,' Apollo thought. 'All of them. At once.'

As if in response to his observation, the pack moved. Not much, just a slight shift against the ground, as if the relic inside had adjusted its position. Apollo stared, heart hammering in his chest.

He wanted to reach for it, to check that the wrappings were secure, but something held him back, an instinct deeper than curiosity.

The night stretched on. Apollo found himself listening not to the sounds of the camp but to the spaces between them, the silence that seemed to pulse with its own rhythm, the absence that felt more substantial than presence.

Just before dawn, when the eastern sky had begun to lighten from black to deep blue, he heard it. A splash, distant but distinct, echoing from somewhere in the hills. A sound that had no business being there, so far from any body of water large enough to make it.

Apollo kept his eyes shut until morning, telling himself the sound had been in his head, even as the scent of salt clung to the air.

Chapter 42: The Current

Apollo woke to a world drowned in milk.

The fog had invaded during the night, a silent tide that transformed the dell into a bowl of churning white. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, but the murkiness remained, thick enough that the treeline, barely thirty paces away, appeared doubled, the second image a ghostly echo floating above the first.

"What in all hells," Nik muttered nearby, voice muffled by the dense air.

Apollo sat up, joints protesting after the cold night. The relic pulsed in his pack, its presence more intrusive than before.

He hadn't touched it since wrapping it in the cave, but somehow it felt heavier this morning, as if it had been feeding on the fog.

'It's growing stronger,' he thought, rolling his shoulders to ease the phantom weight already settling between his shoulder blades.

Cale moved through the haze like a shadow, gathering his gear with mechanical efficiency. "We need to move," he said, voice low but carrying in the strange acoustics of the fog. "This could last all day."

They broke camp quickly, no one wanting to linger in the smothering whiteness. Apollo shouldered his pack, wincing as the relic settled against his spine, definitely heavier than yesterday, though no one else seemed to notice the difference.

The gold in his veins thrummed in response, a warm current that spread up his arms and into his chest.

Lyra appeared at his side, her face half-obscured by the mist. "You look like you've seen a ghost," she said.

Apollo managed a tight smile. "Just didn't sleep well."

She studied him a moment longer, then nodded toward the eastern ridge. "Cale says we should make the valley by nightfall if we push hard."

"East," Apollo repeated, the word feeling wrong in his mouth. The relic pulsed once, hard enough that he had to suppress a flinch.

They set out in single file, Cale leading, then Renna with her spear held ready, as if expecting the fog itself to attack. Apollo fell into place behind Lyra, watching the confident set of her shoulders, the precise way she placed each foot.

Nik, Yiv, and Thorin brought up the rear, their forms growing less distinct with each step, until they were little more than smudges in the white.

The dog stayed close to Apollo's heels, its fur damp with condensation. Every few minutes, it would stop and look back the way they'd come, ears pricked, before hurrying to catch up.

They climbed steadily for hours, the terrain growing rockier as they ascended.

Cale navigated with the surety of someone who had memorized every contour of the land, though the fog reduced visibility to less than ten paces in any direction.

"Ridge is familiar," Cale said during a brief rest. "Same one we mapped yesterday. Should take us inland toward the glass fields."

Apollo nodded, though doubt gnawed at him. Something about the rocks felt wrong, not just unfamiliar, but impossibly so, as if they'd wandered onto a different mountain altogether. The relic hummed against his back, a constant reminder of its presence.

Renna stopped suddenly, pointing to a formation just visible through the mist. "That boulder," she said, voice sharp with confusion. "The split one. We passed it hours ago."

Apollo squinted at the shape, a massive stone cleaved nearly in two, as if struck by lightning. It did look familiar, though he couldn't remember seeing it earlier that day.

Cale frowned, stepping closer to examine the rock. "That's not possible. We've been climbing steadily east."

"I know what I saw," Renna insisted. "We circled back somehow."

Nik shrugged, unconcerned. "Fog plays tricks. Everything looks the same in this soup."

"No," Thorin said, running a hand over his beard. "She's right. I remember that crack, looks like a dwarf's axe did the splitting."

They gathered around the boulder, each examining it as if it might reveal some explanation for their disorientation.

Apollo hung back, feeling the relic's weight shift in his pack, a subtle adjustment that seemed to pull him westward. In the back of his mind, a sound grew louder, not quite a voice, but a rushing, like water moving fast over stone.

'It's leading us,' he realized, the certainty cold in his stomach. *'Has been since we took it.'*

The group pressed on, mood souring as the fog refused to lift. Thorin fell into step beside Apollo, his usual stoicism replaced by an uncharacteristic chattiness.

"Reminds me of a smuggler I knew in the eastern ports," the dwarf began, voice gruff but animated. "Fellow named Durnik, had a face like a landslide and hands quick enough to steal your shadow. He ran goods through the Whistling Narrows when the Watch had it blockaded."

Apollo nodded, only half-listening as the rushing in his ears grew louder. The relic pulsed, urging him to turn, to go west instead of east.

"Clever bastard," Thorin continued, "had a system with colored lanterns, green for clear passage, red for patrol boats. One night, fog thick as this rolled in, and Durnik couldn't see the signals. Had to navigate by memory alone."

The dwarf paused, took a breath, then began again: "Reminds me of a smuggler I knew in the eastern ports. Fellow named Durnik, had a face like a landslide and hands quick enough to steal your shadow. He ran goods through the Whistling Narrows when the Watch had it blockaded."

Apollo blinked, glancing sideways at Thorin. The dwarf's expression hadn't changed, his eyes fixed ahead as if he hadn't just repeated himself word for word.

"You already told us that part," Lyra called from ahead, turning to look back at them.

Thorin scowled. "No, I didn't. I just started the story."

"You did," Apollo said quietly. "About Durnik and the colored lanterns."

"And the fog," Lyra added.

Thorin's frown deepened. "I know my own stories," he insisted. "I hadn't gotten to the lanterns yet."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the group. Even Nik, usually quick with a joke, seemed unsettled.

They continued walking, each lost in private thoughts. The fog swirled around them, sometimes thinning enough to reveal a patch of sky, other times thickening until Apollo could barely see Lyra's back a few paces ahead.

Every time they paused to check their direction, the rushing in Apollo's ears intensified. His body seemed to know where to go without conscious thought, an internal compass that kept trying to swing west no matter how firmly he set his feet eastward. The gold in his veins responded to the pull, warming under his skin.

By midday, the fog had begun to thin, revealing glimpses of the landscape around them. The rocks were different, sharper, darker than the formations they'd passed earlier. No one mentioned it, but Apollo saw the confusion in their eyes as they surveyed terrain that should have been familiar but wasn't.

"We need to adjust course," Cale announced after consulting what might have been a map or just his own memory. "Too far north. Need to head southeast to hit the valley."

Apollo felt the relic pulse in protest, the rushing in his ears becoming almost deafening. His hand rose of its own accord, pointing west before he could stop himself.

"That way," he said, then immediately regretted it.

Cale looked at him, eyes narrowing. "That's back toward the coast."

"I know," Apollo said, lowering his hand. "Just thought I saw a clearer path."

Cale studied him a moment longer, then turned away. "Southeast," he repeated, more firmly this time.

They walked for hours more, the fog retreating in patches only to surge back without warning. The terrain grew increasingly unfamiliar, rock formations none of them recognized, paths that seemed to double back on themselves despite their careful navigation.

The rushing in Apollo's ears never ceased. It ebbed and flowed with the fog, growing louder whenever they turned away from the west, quieter when they inadvertently moved toward it.

The relic's weight seemed to increase with each step in the "wrong" direction, until Apollo's shoulders ached with the burden.

Late in the afternoon, they began climbing a steep ridge, the last major ascent before the valley, according to Cale.

The fog had finally retreated, leaving the air clear but strange, too bright, somehow, as if the light were being filtered through glass instead of cloud.

Apollo felt the relic's pulse quicken as they neared the summit. The rushing in his ears had become a roar, drowning out even Nik's complaints about the steepness of the climb. His blood sang with gold, every vein alight with a power he hadn't felt since before the basin.

They crested the ridge together, a ragged line of exhausted travelers emerging onto a broad, flat expanse of stone. For a moment, no one spoke. No one could.

Below them, stretching to the horizon, was the ocean.

The same ocean they had left behind two days ago. The same impossible blue, the same glittering surface catching the late afternoon sun. The same distant line where water met sky.

"That can't be right," Nik said, voice hollow with disbelief.

Lyra turned in a slow circle, as if expecting to see different terrain behind them. "We've been heading east," she insisted. "Inland. Away from the coast."

Cale said nothing, his face gone slack with shock. Renna cursed, low and vicious, while Thorin and Yiv stared open-mouthed at the impossible vista.

Only Apollo wasn't surprised. The relic had led them here, had been leading them all along, bending their path little by little, turning them around in the fog without their knowledge. The rushing in his ears quieted to a gentle murmur, almost like satisfaction.

"How?" Lyra demanded, turning to Apollo with accusation in her eyes. "How is this possible?"

Before he could answer, the wind shifted, carrying the sound of waves breaking against the shore far below. The relic's pull eased, the weight in his pack settling into something almost comfortable, as if it had accomplished what it set out to do.

Apollo said nothing. His knuckles were white on his pack straps, fingers clenched so tight he could feel the tendons straining. The gold in his veins cooled, retreating beneath his skin like a tide going out.

"We're going the wrong way," Lyra said, but the sea below them glittered like it had been waiting.

Chapter 43: Against the Tide

The ocean seemed to laugh at them, a vast blue joke at their expense.

"We're turning east," Lyra announced, her voice cutting through the stunned silence on the ridge.

She didn't look at the others, just pointed at a narrow path that wound away from the shore, her finger steady as a compass needle. "No more circling back. No more getting pulled off course."

Apollo felt the relic shift in his pack, a subtle weight adjustment like a child turning away in protest.

The gold in his veins cooled instantly, a chill that spread from his core to his fingertips. His mouth went dry.

No one argued. Not Cale, who stood with his arms crossed and eyes fixed on the distant horizon.

Not Renna, whose knuckles had gone white around her spear. Not even Nik, who for once seemed to have run out of clever remarks. There was something like relief in their collective silence, the comfort of having someone else make the hard choice.

Thorin shouldered his pack with a grunt. "About time," he muttered, but Apollo caught the uncertainty in his eyes.

They set off single file, Lyra leading with the determined stride of someone who refused to be fooled twice. The path narrowed as it climbed away from the ocean, winding between boulders streaked with lichen.

Apollo walked third in line, behind Cale, feeling the relic grow heavier with each step inland. His body felt wrong somehow, as if he were walking uphill when the ground was clearly sloping down.

'Stop fighting me,' he thought, though he wasn't sure if he was addressing the relic or himself.

An hour into their march, the fog returned. It rolled in from nowhere, thicker than the day before, swallowing the path ahead in billowing white. Within minutes, Apollo could barely see Cale's back two paces ahead.

"Keep close!" Lyra called, her voice muffled by the dense air.

They pressed on, but the fog seemed to have substance now, pushing against them like a living thing. Apollo's boots dragged through it as if wading through shallow water. His lungs felt tight, each breath a little less satisfying than the last.

The first rockslide came without warning. A rumble, then a cascade of stones tumbled across the path just ahead of Lyra. She jumped back, colliding with Cale, who steadied her with one hand.

"Path's blocked," she announced, voice tight with frustration. "We'll have to go around."

They detoured up a steeper incline, the fog so thick now that Apollo had to keep one hand on Cale's pack to avoid losing him.

The relic pulsed against his spine, its rhythm increasing until it felt like a second heartbeat, sometimes matching his own, sometimes racing ahead, as if eager for something just out of reach.

When they regained the main path, they found it blocked again, this time by a massive trunk that hadn't been there minutes before.

The wood was old, gray with age, but the break looked fresh, the splintered end still oozing sap.

"That's not right," Thorin said, running his hand over the jagged wood. "No storm last night. No wind strong enough to take down a tree this size."

Renna pushed past him, examined the fallen trunk. "No axe marks either," she noted, then looked back the way they'd come. "Almost like it fell just to stop us."

Apollo said nothing, but he felt the relic's satisfaction like a warm current under his skin.

They climbed over the trunk and continued, the fog thinning slightly as they descended into a shallow valley. For a brief, hopeful moment, the path ahead seemed clear, then the argument started.

"We're drifting south," Cale insisted, holding out a small brass compass. The needle swung lazily, never quite settling. "Need to correct course."

Renna snatched the compass from his hand. "That can't be right. The sun's there." She pointed to a pale smudge barely visible through the fog. "If that's east, we're heading northeast, not south."

"The sun doesn't lie," Cale countered. "The compass does. Something's interfering with it."

"Or someone," Renna shot back, glaring at Apollo before turning her attention back to Cale. "You're the one who's supposed to know these hills. How did we end up back at the ocean yesterday?"

Cale's expression darkened. "I told you, the fog..."

"The fog doesn't change the shape of the land," Renna snapped. "We walked for two days. Two days! And ended up exactly where we started."

Apollo watched them argue, feeling the relic's pulse quicken with each heated word. The gold in his veins responded, a warm tide rising from his core to his throat. He swallowed hard, tasting metal.

'You're enjoying this,' he thought, the realization cold in his stomach. The relic didn't answer, but its weight shifted again, pressing against a spot between his shoulder blades that sent a pleasant shiver down his spine.

Thorin had stopped a few paces ahead, staring at the ground with a frown that carved deep lines around his mouth. "We're walking crooked," he announced, interrupting Renna and Cale's increasingly bitter exchange.

"What?" Lyra asked, turning back.

"Look at our tracks." Thorin pointed to the muddy ground behind them. "We think we're walking straight, but we're curving. Always west. Always back toward the damn ocean."

They all looked. Sure enough, their footprints formed a subtle arc, bending gradually toward the coast they couldn't see but could still somehow sense, like a lodestone feeling for north.

The dog, which had been ranging ahead, suddenly trotted past them, heading back the way they'd come. Its tail was up, ears pricked forward with purpose.

"Hey!" Nik called. "Wrong way, mutt!"

The dog paused, looked back at them, then continued westward, disappearing into the fog.

Lyra whistled sharply. The dog whined but didn't return. She whistled again, more insistent this time. After a long moment, the animal reappeared, head low and tail tucked, the picture of canine reluctance.

"Even the dog knows which way to go," Nik said, then withered under Lyra's glare.

"We keep east," she said, voice flat. "Whatever's pulling us back, we fight it."

Apollo nodded along with the others, but the moment he turned to face east again, his stomach lurched. A wave of nausea hit him so suddenly he had to press a hand to his mouth. The relic pulsed hard against his back, its rhythm now frantic, almost panicked.

'It doesn't want to go this way,' he realized, swallowing bile. His skin prickled with gooseflesh, every hair standing on end as Lyra set their new course.

They walked for hours, fighting the fog and their own disorientation. The path grew more difficult, muddy in places, overgrown in others, as if rarely used.

Apollo's nausea came and went in waves, worst when they were heading directly east, easing slightly when the path forced them to turn north or south.

When he experimentally turned to look back west, the relief was immediate. The sickness vanished, replaced by a warm comfort that spread from the relic through his entire body.

The gold in his veins sang, a harmony with the artifact's pulse that felt so right it was almost painful to turn away again.

At noon, they reached a fork in the path. The eastern route descended into a shallow depression filled with standing water, a flood that hadn't been there the day before, though it hadn't rained.

The western path climbed gently, dry and inviting, dappled with sunlight where the fog had begun to thin.

Lyra didn't hesitate. "East," she said, already stepping into the water.

The others followed, splashing into the flood with varying degrees of reluctance. The water was shockingly cold, immediately numbing Apollo's feet through his boots. It rose to their ankles, then mid-calf as the path dipped lower.

Thorin cursed steadily under his breath, a rhythmic litany that matched their splashing steps. Nik tried to lighten the mood with a joke about mermaids that fell flat.

Yiv remained silent, his face set in lines of grim determination.

Apollo trudged behind them, each step a battle against both the water and the relic's insistent pull. The gold in his veins had gone cold, retreating beneath his skin as if hiding from the eastern path.

He felt hollow, diminished somehow, and worst of all, he missed the warmth. Missed the connection he'd felt when they were moving with the relic's desires instead of against them.

They slogged through the flooded path for nearly an hour before the ground began to rise again, the water receding. As they climbed out, soaked and shivering, a gust of wind hit them, warm, salt-laden, carrying the unmistakable smell of kelp and open water.

Lyra's shoulders stiffened, but she said nothing, just kept walking. The others exchanged glances but followed in silence.

By evening, they had climbed high enough to look back the way they'd come. The fog had thinned considerably, revealing rolling hills and patches of scrubland.

There was no sign of the ocean, not even a glimmer on the horizon. They had made progress, it seemed, real distance this time.

They made camp on a high slope sheltered by a cluster of wind-bent trees. No one mentioned the smell of salt that still lingered in the air, or the way the wind seemed to carry whispers just below the threshold of hearing. They ate in silence, too exhausted for stories or complaints.

As darkness fell, Apollo spread his bedroll at the edge of camp, away from the others. He lay down, feeling the relic settle against his side, its pulse now slow and steady, patient, almost. Waiting.

The fog continued to thin as night deepened, stars emerging one by one in the black sky. Apollo stared up at them, trying to focus on their cold, distant light instead of the growing sound that filled his head.

It started as a whisper, then grew steadily louder, the unmistakable rhythm of waves breaking against a shore. In, out. In, out. A perfect, endless pulse that matched the relic's beat against his ribs.

He covered his ears, but the sound was inside him, not outside. The surf pounded in his skull like it was part of him now, like the ocean had found a way to flow through his veins alongside the gold.

Apollo lay staring at the dark, the surf pounding in his skull like it was inside him.

Chapter 44: The Relic's Voice

The fog burned away with dawn, leaving the world unnervingly ordinary. Apollo's head pounded with every heartbeat, a testament to the sleepless night that left his eyes bloodshot and his golden hair damp with sweat.

He adjusted his pack for the twentieth time, the relic's weight shifting against his spine like a restless animal seeking comfort.

Ahead, the trail cut through scrubland toward the eastern ridge, their compromise after yesterday's circular wandering.

No one had mentioned the impossible ocean that had appeared when they should have been miles inland. No one had the words for it.

Lyra led the way, shoulders set with determination. Cale followed two paces behind, face unreadable as stone.

The others strung out in a ragged line, each wrapped in private exhaustion. Even the dog kept its distance, trotting alongside rather than ranging ahead as usual.

The silence pressed against Apollo's ears, broken only by the crunch of boots on gravel and Thorin's occasional grunt as his injured leg protested the pace.

The gold in Apollo's veins had gone quiet, dormant beneath his skin, as if sulking after yesterday's rebellion.

'At least we're moving in the right direction,' Apollo thought, though he couldn't shake the feeling that the relic was simply biding its time.

The first sound was so faint he dismissed it as imagination, a whisper from his pack, barely louder than the rustle of cloth against cloth. Apollo tensed, then forced himself to relax. Just the artifact settling, nothing more.

Ten paces later, it came again, louder, unmistakable. A mutter, words indistinct but clearly words.

"Did you hear that?" Nik asked, glancing back at Apollo.

Before he could answer, it spoke, a harsh, mocking voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

"Oh, golden boy's finally quiet," it sneered, the sound emanating from Apollo's pack but somehow filling the air around them. "Afraid to speak without a script? Afraid they'll see you for what you are?"

The group froze. Thorin spun around, face contorted in shocked anger. Lyra's hand went to her knife.

"What in all hells—" Renna began.

The voice cut her off. "A hammer without a head," it declared, addressing Thorin. "Loud, heavy, useless."

Thorin's face flushed crimson. He stormed toward Apollo, hand outstretched. "Give me that damned thing!"

Apollo stepped back, one arm raised defensively, but the voice continued, turning its attention to Nik.

"Do you do anything but grin and stumble? Gods love a fool, pity you're no god."

Nik's laugh came out strangled. "Well... it's not wrong?" he said, but the false bravado couldn't hide the hurt that flashed across his face.

The relic wasn't finished. It pivoted to Lyra, voice dripping with contempt. "Marching east like you invented the compass. A leader who can't even lead her own shadow."

Lyra's eyes narrowed to slits. "We should toss it in the next river we find," she said, her calm tone belied by the white-knuckled grip on her knife.

"Sharp spear, dull wit," the voice continued, addressing Renna. "Always poking, never piercing."

Renna cursed, a string of profanity that would have made a sailor blush. Her fingers tightened around her spear until Apollo thought the wood might crack.

"Man of the land, lost on his own soil," the voice mocked, turning finally to Cale. "That's almost poetic. Almost."

Cale said nothing, his expression unchanged, but something flickered in his eyes, a recognition that disturbed Apollo more than any visible reaction would have.

Thorin lunged forward, stamping his boot directly onto Apollo's pack where it lay on the ground. There was a dull thud, but no crunch of breaking metal. Thorin yelped, hopping back on one foot.

"Bruised my damn heel," he muttered, glaring at the pack as if it had bitten him.

"I told you," Lyra said, voice tight with controlled fury. "First river we find, it goes in. Whatever this thing is, it's not worth the trouble."

Apollo remained silent, watching the relic's effect on the group. There was something methodical about the insults, something probing. Each barb had found its mark with surgical precision, targeting the exact vulnerability that would provoke the strongest reaction.

'It's mapping us,' he realized, the thought sending a chill down his spine despite the morning warmth. *'Stripping us down to our bones to see what we're made of.'*

"It's testing us," Cale said quietly, not meeting anyone's eyes. The words seemed to hang in the air, an uncomfortable truth no one wanted to acknowledge.

Nik forced another laugh. "Well, if that's a test, I think we all failed." He tried to smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Apollo knelt beside his pack, feeling the relic's weight shift as he lifted it. The others stepped back, as if afraid it might lash out again.

He said nothing, made no defense against the mockery directed at him. Instead, he listened, not just to the words, but to the patterns beneath them, the deliberate architecture of provocation.

This wasn't random malice. It was an assessment.

And that frightened him far more than any insult could.

As if sensing his understanding, the relic suddenly erupted in laughter, not a single voice now, but a chorus of overlapping cackles, each with its own distinct timbre. The sound echoed far wider than its small shape should allow, rolling across the scrubland like thunder.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped.

The silence that followed felt thicker than the fog had been, pressing against Apollo's ears until he could hear his own pulse. No one moved. No one spoke.

Finally, Lyra turned away. "Keep moving," she ordered, voice clipped. "We still have ground to cover before nightfall."

They resumed their march, feet moving faster than before, each pretending not to hear the echo of laughter that still hung in the air. But Apollo couldn't stop listening for it, couldn't shake the certainty that whatever game the relic was playing had only just begun.

The gold in his veins stirred, warming beneath his skin, responding not to his will, but to something older, something that recognized the voice in the artifact and knew its purpose.

Whatever it was testing them for, Apollo feared they would learn the answer all too soon.

The relic's silence felt worse than its mockery. Apollo pressed forward, boots grinding against the loose stone of the trail, hyperaware of the weight against his back. Every few steps, he found himself tensing, waiting for another outburst, another round of surgical insults designed to strip them bare.

But the artifact remained quiet, its presence a warm pressure between his shoulder blades that seemed almost... satisfied.

'Like it got what it wanted,' he thought, then immediately wished he hadn't. The gold in his veins pulsed once in response, as if agreeing.

Ahead, Lyra maintained her punishing pace, her spine rigid with barely contained fury. She hadn't looked back since the relic's performance, hadn't acknowledged any of them except to bark directions when the trail forked.

Apollo could see the tension in her shoulders, the way her hand kept drifting toward her knife.

Nik trudged along behind her, his usual stream of commentary reduced to occasional muttered curses. The relic's words had found their mark, Apollo could see it in the slump of the man's shoulders, the way he kept glancing at the others as if expecting more judgment.

'Do you do anything but grin and stumble?' The voice echoed in Apollo's memory, and he winced. It wasn't just cruel—it was precisely cruel, cutting straight to the heart of Nik's carefully constructed facade.

Thorin limped along in the middle of their ragged column, favoring his bruised heel and shooting dark looks at Apollo's pack. The dwarf's face had settled into its usual scowl, but Apollo caught the way his fingers kept flexing, as if he wanted to try smashing the relic again.

'A hammer without a head.' Apollo shook his head. The insults weren't random, they were surgical, each one crafted to expose the exact wound that would hurt most.

Renna brought up the rear, her spear held at the ready as if expecting an attack from behind.

She'd been unusually quiet since the relic's assessment, her usual aggressive confidence replaced by something harder to read. Apollo could feel her eyes on his back, studying him with an intensity that made his skin prickle.

The morning wore on, heat building as the sun climbed higher. Apollo's shirt stuck to his back with sweat, the fabric chafing where the pack straps rubbed.

The gold beneath his skin seemed to respond to the warmth, stirring lazily through his veins like honey in hot water.

They crested a low rise, and the landscape opened before them, rolling hills covered in scrub grass and stunted trees, stretching toward a distant line of mountains. No sign of

water anywhere, let alone an ocean. Apollo felt a flutter of relief, quickly followed by unease. The relic had been quiet for too long.

"Water break," Lyra called, her voice hoarse from the dry air.

They clustered in the shade of a weathered boulder, passing around a shared waterskin.

Chapter 45: The Wrong Road

Morning came with all the warmth of a gravedigger's handshake. Apollo shifted the pack on his shoulders, feeling the relic's familiar weight press against his spine.

No one had spoken since they'd broken camp. The silence hung between them like a sixth companion, unwanted but persistent.

Even Nik, whose mouth usually ran faster than his feet, kept his gaze fixed on the path ahead, lips pressed into an uncharacteristic line.

Yesterday's verbal assault had left wounds deeper than any of them cared to admit.

Apollo concentrated on his breathing, on the steady rhythm of boot against earth, trying to feel for the relic's pulse beneath it all. There was a pattern there, something like a heartbeat, but older, more deliberate. It reminded him of waves against a shore, of time itself wearing away at resistance.

'It's waiting,' he thought, adjusting the straps of his pack again. *'Biding its time until we're ready to listen.'*

The path narrowed as they climbed, winding between scrub and stone. Apollo frowned as they passed a twisted tree, its trunk bent almost double, branches reaching toward the ground instead of the sky. Something about it tugged at his memory.

Thorin noticed it too. The dwarf slowed, thick brows drawing together as he studied the deformed trunk. "We've seen this before," he muttered, voice rough from disuse.

"Don't be ridiculous," Lyra said, not bothering to look back. "Keep moving."

But twenty minutes later, they rounded a bend and found themselves facing a stone arch, weathered and ancient, spanning the path like a gateway to nowhere. Apollo felt his stomach tighten. They had definitely passed under this same arch earlier that morning.

Renna swore under her breath, a colorful string of profanity that would have impressed a seasoned sailor.

"I said keep moving," Lyra snapped, green eyes flashing as she rounded on Renna. "We don't have time for this."

"Time for what?" Renna shot back. "Walking in circles? Because that's exactly what we're doing."

Thorin spat into the dust. "Been saying it since yesterday. Something's leading us around by the nose." His gaze fixed meaningfully on Apollo's pack.

The silence that followed was broken by a sound Apollo had been dreading, a low, mocking chuckle emanating from his pack, audible to all of them.

"Left foot, right foot, straight to nowhere," the relic's voice sang out, dripping with contempt. "Gods, you're slow."

Apollo felt rather than saw the others stiffen. The gold in his veins pulsed once, warm and insistent.

Lyra squared her shoulders, deliberately ignoring the voice. "We go east," she declared, pointing toward a gap in the hills. "That way."

The relic laughed, a sound like stones grinding together. "Sure, east. Straight into the marsh. Again."

Thorin's face darkened to a dangerous shade of red. "Silence!" he barked, one meaty fist clenching at his side. "I've had enough of your noise."

"Silence is your only talent, ox," the relic replied smoothly. "Use it."

Apollo watched the exchange with growing unease. There was something calculated about the relic's provocations, something purposeful. Each taunt seemed designed not just to anger, but to push them toward specific reactions.

They pressed on, the mood souring further with each step. Apollo began to notice something strange. When Renna cursed at the relic and stomped ahead, the path before her suddenly twisted, forcing them to double back.

When Thorin slowed in stubborn resistance to the artifact's goading, the landscape itself seemed to shift, familiar landmarks reappearing where they shouldn't be.

And then it happened. The relic's voice cut through the tense silence: "Watch the rock, wood-brain. Wouldn't want to trip and spill what little brains you have left."

Cale, who had been silent all morning, glanced down at a jutting stone in his path. For once, instead of ignoring the taunt, he stepped carefully around it.

The path ahead cleared. Just like that, twenty paces of straight, unobstructed trail where moments before there had been only tangled brush and loose scree. Apollo blinked, certain he was imagining things, but no, the others continued forward, not noticing the sudden change.

'It's testing responses,' Apollo realized, the thought hitting him like a physical blow. *'When we fight it, we go in circles. When we follow...'*

He kept the observation to himself, watching as the pattern repeated throughout the day. Defiance led to confusion, to paths that doubled back on themselves. Compliance, even reluctant, unconscious compliance, brought clarity, progress.

By midafternoon, tempers had frayed to breaking point. They stopped in the shade of a solitary tree that Apollo was certain they'd rested under twice already. Lyra paced, her movements sharp with frustration.

"We need to ignore it completely," she said finally, addressing the group but pointedly not looking at Apollo or his pack. "It wants control. Don't give it what it wants."

Thorin grunted, pulling a whetstone from his pocket and running it along the edge of his axe with unnecessary force. "Better idea," he growled. "Smash it to dust and bury it. Problem solved."

"What if..." Nik began, then faltered as all eyes turned to him. He licked his lips nervously. "What if it's... right? What if it knows where we're going?"

The suggestion hung in the air like smoke. Renna's face darkened, but she remained silent, fingers drumming against the shaft of her spear.

Apollo said nothing. His mind was racing, cataloging every interaction, every reaction, every subtle shift in their path. The relic's taunts weren't random, they were a language, a code, a map written in mockery and insult.

By the time they made camp that evening, Apollo was certain. Following the relic's guidance, however unpleasant its delivery, was the only way forward. The question was whether he dared say so, whether he could convince the others without fracturing what little trust remained between them.

He laid out his bedroll at the edge of the fire's light, far enough from the others to avoid conversation. The relic hummed faintly in his pack, not mocking now but almost smug, like a cat that had cornered its prey and was simply waiting for surrender.

Apollo stared into the flames, listening to the silence broken only by the occasional crack of burning wood. No one spoke. No one needed to. The decision that loomed before them was clear enough without words.

The gold in his veins thrummed softly, warm and insistent, as if reminding him of a truth he'd always known but tried to forget: sometimes the only way forward was to follow the very thing you feared most.

In the darkness of the tent that night, Apollo stared at the ceiling canvas, unable to sleep. He unfolded Torgo's amber from the cloth he kept it wrapped in and held it up between his fingers.

The piece caught what little moonlight filtered through, glowing with inner warmth that seemed to match the sluggish gold in his veins.

'You want me to follow it, don't you?' he thought, turning the amber shard. *'That's why you gave this to me. You knew.'*

He rewrapped the amber and tucked it away, careful not to wake the others. Their breathing came in different rhythms, Nik's light snores, Thorin's rumbling exhales, Lyra's barely audible breaths. Each sound marked another person who would resist what Apollo now knew they must do.

Morning came too quickly. Apollo rose before the others, collecting firewood in the gray predawn. When he returned, Cale was already up, crouched by the dead embers of last night's fire.

"You look like you've made a decision," Cale said quietly, not looking up as he arranged kindling.

Apollo hesitated. "Not sure it's mine to make."

Cale's hands paused, then resumed their methodical work. "Some decisions make themselves. We just have to recognize them."

The others woke one by one, moving through their morning routines in silence. The relic remained quiet in Apollo's pack, its presence felt only as a steady weight and occasional warmth against his spine. The gold in his veins hummed faintly, like a distant conversation he couldn't quite hear.

Lyra approached as he was securing his bedroll. "We're going east," she said, voice low but firm. "No matter what that thing says." Her green eyes met his, challenging, searching.

Apollo nodded once, not trusting himself to speak. The lie sat heavy in his chest.

They set out as the sun crested the eastern hills. Lyra led, as always, setting their course with stubborn determination. The path wound between scrubby bushes and outcroppings of pale rock, climbing steadily toward a ridge that seemed to retreat with each step they took toward it.

An hour in, the relic stirred.

"Wrong way, little mice," it whispered, the sound emanating from Apollo's pack but somehow surrounding them all. "Unless you enjoy walking in circles."

Lyra's back stiffened, but she didn't slow or turn. "Ignore it," she called back.

Apollo watched the landscape ahead blur and shift, subtly at first, then more dramatically. What had appeared to be a clear path suddenly twisted, brambles springing up where none had been before. The ridge they'd been aiming for seemed to slide sideways, reorienting itself northwest instead of east.

Nik stumbled, blinking rapidly. "Is anyone else seeing this?" he muttered.

"Keep moving," Lyra insisted, pushing through a tangle of branches that hadn't been there moments before. The path ahead twisted impossibly, folding back on itself like a snake eating its own tail.

Apollo felt the relic pulse against his back, its satisfaction radiating through his pack. The gold in his veins responded, warming under his skin.

"This is madness," Thorin growled, hacking at a thornbush with his short blade. "We walked this way not five minutes ago, and it was clear!"

The land itself seemed to be reshaping around them.

Chapter 46: The Crooked Path

The landscape warped before Apollo's eyes like a painting left in the rain. Trees that had stood firm moments ago now bent at impossible angles, the path beneath his feet twisting into spirals that led nowhere and everywhere at once.

The very air felt wrong, thicker in his lungs, almost reluctant to be breathed.

Ahead, Lyra charged forward with the determination of someone refusing to acknowledge reality.

Her blonde hair flashed beneath her hood as she pushed through a thicket that hadn't been there seconds before, muttering coordinates under her breath like incantations.

"East. Due east. The valley opens at the third ridge."

Apollo lagged behind the others, watching. The gold in his veins pulsed with quiet recognition.

This wasn't natural confusion, it was deliberate manipulation. The relic in his pack had been silent for nearly an hour, which worried him more than its taunts.

"You'd think our fearless leader would notice we've passed that crooked pine three times now," the relic's voice suddenly rang out, loud enough for everyone to hear. "But then, noticing things was never her strong suit, was it?"

Lyra's shoulders stiffened, but she didn't slow or turn. "Ignore it," she called back to the group. "It's just trying to confuse us."

"Oh, I don't need to try, Queen of Nowhere," the relic shot back, its tone dripping with mockery. "You're doing a splendid job of that yourself. Tell me, Pathfinder of Circles, how many more hours shall we spend admiring the same hillside?"

A muscle jumped in Lyra's jaw, but she pressed on, back rigid. The others exchanged uncomfortable glances, all except Cale, whose dark eyes remained fixed on the shifting terrain ahead.

Apollo felt the weight of the relic shift in his pack, almost like it was settling in for a performance. The gold in his veins warmed in response, a quiet harmony he tried to ignore.

"Perhaps," the relic continued, its voice sweetly venomous, "we could save time by simply walking in place. The scenery would change just as much."

Thorin stopped abruptly, his face flushing dark beneath his beard. "That's it," he growled, swinging his pack down and extracting his axe.

The blade caught the midmorning light, glinting with deadly promise. "I've had enough of this cursed thing."

Apollo tensed. "Thorin—"

"I warned you all," the dwarf continued, advancing toward Apollo with his axe raised. "Said from the beginning we should smash it and be done."

The relic's laughter bubbled up, delighted and taunting. "Oh yes, the hammer solution! When all you have is an axe, every problem looks like kindling. Go on then, little man. Take your swing. See what happens when you try to break something older than your entire bloodline."

Thorin's knuckles whitened around the axe handle. His eyes, narrowed to slits, fixed on Apollo's pack.

Apollo stepped sideways, positioning himself between a gnarled tree trunk and Renna. "We don't know what would happen," he said quietly, forcing calm into his voice. "It could make things worse."

"Worse?" Thorin's laugh was harsh. "We're walking in circles while this thing mocks us. How could it be worse?"

"Remember the cave," Apollo said, watching Thorin's eyes. "Remember how it felt when the tide came in. This isn't something we should act on in anger."

The relic chuckled. "Listen to pretty-boy. He's smarter than he looks. Not that it's a high bar to clear."

Thorin hesitated, axe still raised. For a moment, Apollo thought he might swing anyway. Then Nik stepped forward, placing a hand on Thorin's arm.

"He's right," Nik said, his usual smile nowhere to be seen. "We don't know what we're dealing with."

Thorin lowered the axe slowly, his face still dark with rage. "Fine," he spat. "But when this thing gets us all killed, remember I tried to stop it."

The tension eased, but only fractionally. Apollo felt sweat cooling on his back as Thorin stomped away, muttering curses under his breath.

They continued walking, the landscape shifting around them like a fever dream. Trees appeared where none had been, rocks changed shape and position, and twice Apollo could have sworn the sun jumped positions in the sky.

"I almost think it knows more than we do," Nik said suddenly, breaking the strained silence. His voice was quiet, almost contemplative. "About where we're going, I mean."

Lyra turned on him, green eyes flashing. "Don't start," she warned. "That's exactly what it wants."

"I'm just saying," Nik continued, spreading his hands in a placating gesture, "maybe there's a reason we keep ending up in the same place. Maybe we're supposed to go another way."

"And follow the directions of something that does nothing but mock us?" Renna's voice was sharp with scorn. "Brilliant strategy."

Nik's face fell, the rare moment of honesty met with derision. He shrugged, trying to recapture his usual nonchalance. "Just a thought."

Apollo watched the exchange with growing unease. The cracks in their unity were widening by the hour.

The relic had gone quiet again, but Apollo could feel its attention, focused and waiting. The gold in his veins hummed with anticipation.

They climbed a steep incline, the ground beneath their feet shifting treacherously with each step. At the crest, the path split three ways, or seemed to, as Apollo couldn't be sure any of it was real anymore.

"Careful, pretty-boy, cliff's on your right, unless you want to swan dive," the relic said suddenly, addressing Apollo directly for the first time that day.

Apollo hesitated. The others continued forward, ignoring the taunt. But something in the relic's tone made him pause. He glanced right and saw nothing but solid ground, covered in the same scrubby vegetation that blanketed the rest of the hillside.

'What if...'

Making his decision in an instant, Apollo shifted slightly to the left. The ground beneath his feet remained solid. But ahead, where moments before there had been only twisted paths and impenetrable thickets, the landscape suddenly cleared. A straight trail opened before them, cutting through the underbrush like a well-used road.

Apollo blinked, certain he was imagining things. But no, the path was there, obvious and inviting where seconds ago there had been only confusion.

The others continued forward, not seeming to notice the change. Only Cale paused, glancing back at Apollo with an expression that could have been curiosity or recognition.

Their eyes met briefly, and something passed between them, an acknowledgment, unspoken but clear.

Cale knew. He'd seen what happened when Apollo followed the relic's direction.

Apollo fell back into step with the group, saying nothing about what had just occurred. The gold in his veins warmed with something that felt uncomfortably like satisfaction.

By midday, the strain was visible on everyone's faces. Lyra pushed on with grim determination, refusing to acknowledge they were making no progress.

Thorin stalked along with his hand never far from his axe, eyes constantly darting to Apollo's pack. Renna's spear tapped against the ground with increasing force, a physical manifestation of her simmering frustration.

Nik had grown unusually quiet, his usual stream of chatter dried up in the face of the group's fracturing morale.

Only Cale and Apollo maintained any semblance of neutrality, though for entirely different reasons. Cale watched and waited, his patience seemingly infinite.

Apollo kept his revelation to himself, the decision solidifying with each step: the relic must be obeyed, at least by him.

When they finally made camp as the sun began its descent, no one had the energy for their usual banter.

They ate in silence, each lost in private thoughts. Apollo set his bedroll slightly apart from the others, the relic a constant presence against his back.

One by one, exhaustion claimed them. Nik first, then Thorin with his usual rumbling snores. Renna lay with her back to the fire, but the tension in her shoulders betrayed her wakefulness for a long time before she too succumbed. Lyra stared into the flames until her eyes grew heavy, finally curling on her side with one hand still near her knife.

Cale was the last to sleep, his dark eyes meeting Apollo's across the dying fire in silent communication before he finally closed them.

Apollo remained awake, watching the coals pulse from orange to red to gray. The night deepened around him, stars wheeling overhead in their ancient patterns.

"You already know, golden-boy," the relic whispered, its voice so close it might have been inside his head. "You'll walk where I tell you. The rest will follow...or they'll break."

Apollo stayed silent, staring into the coals. The gold in his veins pulsed in quiet agreement. The path was crooked, but he was the only one willing to walk it.

Apollo waited until the camp had fallen into the deep rhythms of sleep before he moved. He slipped his hand into his pack, fingers brushing against the cloth-wrapped relic. It warmed at his touch, a living pulse that matched the gold stirring beneath his skin.

'I understand now,' he thought, carefully extracting the bundle. *'You're not just mocking us. You're teaching us.'*

He unwrapped the spiral artifact, its surface catching the dying firelight and transforming it into something richer, deeper. The metal, if it was metal at all, seemed to drink in the glow, swirling with colors that shouldn't exist in the darkness.

The dog lifted its head from where it had been curled, watching Apollo with unblinking eyes. It made no sound, merely observed as Apollo turned the relic over in his hands, feeling its weight, its intent.

"Show me."

Chapter 47: The Straight Road (1)

The relic slipped from Apollo's grasp as Lyra's voice cut through the night.

"What are you doing?"

Her silhouette appeared against the fading embers, rigid with tension. Apollo froze, the unwrapped artifact gleaming between them like a confession. The gold in his veins retreated beneath his skin, a guilty current running cold.

"Lyra, I can explain—" he began, but she was already advancing, knife drawn, eyes reflecting pinpricks of dying firelight.

"I knew it," she hissed, her voice low enough not to wake the others. "You've been listening to it all along."

Apollo rose slowly, hands raised in a placating gesture. "It's not what you think."

"No?" Her laugh was brittle as frost. "Because it looks like you're communing with the thing that's been mocking us, leading us in circles, and driving wedges between us since we found it."

The commotion roused Renna, who sat up with the instant alertness of someone accustomed to danger. Her gaze flicked between Apollo and Lyra, then settled on the exposed relic.

"You absolute fool," Renna said, voice thick with disgust as she reached for her spear. "After everything we've been through, you're taking orders from that thing?"

Apollo felt the camp stirring around him, Thorin's snores cutting off abruptly, Nik rolling to his feet with unusual grace, Cale's watchful silence. The dog pressed against his leg, a warm weight that somehow steadied him.

"It knows the way," Apollo said, forcing himself to meet their accusing stares. "It's been showing me...showing us...all along."

Thorin was up now, axe already in hand, face darkening to a dangerous shade beneath his beard. "Showing us what? How to walk in circles until we die of thirst?"

"No," Apollo said, standing his ground even as Thorin advanced. "The paths. The real ones. When I listen to it...follow its instructions...the way opens."

"That's madness," Lyra spat. "It's manipulating you."

"Maybe it is," Apollo admitted. "But it's also guiding us. When it told me to avoid the cliff I couldn't see, a clear path appeared. When it mocked our direction, it was because we were going the wrong way."

"Convenient explanation," Renna said, her knuckles white around her spear shaft. "The thing insults us because it cares?"

"Not because it cares," Apollo corrected. "Because it's teaching us."

Thorin's laugh was harsh as grinding stone. "Teaching us what? To distrust each other? To jump at shadows?" His grip tightened on his axe. "I've had enough lessons for one lifetime."

The dwarf took another step forward, weapon raised. Apollo tensed, uncertain if Thorin meant to strike him or the relic...both seemed equally possible in the firelight's dying glow.

"Wait," Nik's voice cut through the tension. He stood slightly apart from the others, his usual easy demeanor replaced by something more thoughtful. "What if he's right?"

"You can't be serious," Lyra turned on him, incredulous.

"Just hear him out," Nik said, raising his hands. "We've been going in circles for days. Nothing we try works. Maybe... maybe we need to try something else."

Cale, who had remained silent until now, rose and moved to the edge of their small circle. "The relic responds to him," he said simply, eyes fixed on Apollo with that same measuring look he'd worn earlier. "I've seen it too. When he follows its directions, the path clears."

Apollo felt a rush of gratitude toward the quiet man, unexpected and powerful. "I'm not asking you to trust it," he said, addressing Lyra directly now. "I'm asking you to trust me."

The words hung in the air between them. Lyra's expression remained hard, unyielding.

"Prove it," she said finally. "Show us."

Apollo nodded, reaching for the relic again. It warmed in his palm, a satisfied weight. "Where?" he asked the artifact, voice low but clear in the stillness.

"North-northwest, golden-boy," the relic replied, its voice audible to all of them now. "Through the thorns that aren't thorns."

Apollo looked up, scanning the darkness beyond their camp. There, barely visible in the starlight, was a thicket of what looked like impenetrable brambles.

"That way," he said, pointing.

"There's nothing there but thorns," Thorin objected, though his axe had lowered slightly.

"Let's see," Apollo said, and started walking.

The others followed, Lyra and Renna flanking him closely, weapons still ready. As Apollo approached the thicket, the relic's voice came again, softer now, almost intimate.

"Left foot first, then right shoulder turned. The thorns are lies."

Apollo obeyed, stepping forward with his left foot and turning his right shoulder as he approached what looked like a solid wall of thorns. Instead of meeting resistance, he passed through as if the brambles were nothing but mist. Behind him, he heard Nik's soft exclamation of surprise.

"It's a path," Apollo called back, standing now in a clear corridor that cut straight through the thicket. "Come through exactly as I did."

One by one, they followed...Nik first, then Cale, then Thorin with obvious reluctance. Renna came last, after a long moment of silent debate with Lyra.

The path beyond was straight and clear, illuminated by starlight that seemed to pool on the ground like water. It led directly toward a distant ridge, a route that would have taken them days to find on their own...if they ever had.

"This doesn't mean I trust that thing," Lyra said, her voice tight as she stepped up beside Apollo. "Or that you should."

"I know," Apollo replied quietly. "But it's our best chance of getting out of here."

She didn't answer, but her silence felt less hostile than before. It was a beginning, at least.

As dawn broke over the ridge, they began their march in earnest, Apollo leading the way with the relic's voice a constant presence in his ear.

"Left foot on stone, not soil, golden-boy," it instructed as they navigated a particularly treacherous stretch. "The ground remembers your weight differently than the others."

Apollo obeyed, placing his feet exactly where directed. The path remained clear before them, though occasionally he caught glimpses of the warped, impossible landscape to either side.

Chapter 48: The Straight Road (2)

Trees that bent at wrong angles, rocks that shifted position when not directly observed.

"This is unnatural," Renna muttered behind him, her spear tapping nervously against the ground.

"So is walking in circles for days," Nik countered, though his usual humor was strained.

The relic guided them with a mixture of precise instructions and cutting remarks. "Right three steps, then left two, then straight until the split oak," it would say, then follow immediately with: "Try not to trip over your own feet this time. Even the dog has better balance than you."

Apollo bore the insults in silence, focusing on the path ahead. The gold in his veins had warmed again, flowing more freely with each correct step. He could feel the relic's satisfaction like a physical presence against his spine.

By midday, they had covered more ground than in the previous three days combined. The warped landscape began to stabilize around them, reality reasserting itself in slow, grudging increments.

Trees stood straight again, rocks remained where placed, and the path, while still visible only to Apollo through the relic's guidance...no longer shifted treacherously beneath their feet.

"It's working," Nik said during a brief rest, his voice low but excited. "We're actually getting somewhere."

Thorin grunted, unwilling to admit the obvious. Lyra kept her distance, watching Apollo with an expression that mixed reluctant acceptance with deep suspicion. Renna stayed close to her, the two women forming a united front of wary cooperation.

Only Cale seemed genuinely at ease with their new arrangement, his quiet presence a constant reassurance at Apollo's back.

They pressed on through the afternoon, the relic's instructions growing less frequent as the path straightened before them. Its mockery, however, remained consistent, a stream of barbed observations and cutting remarks that seemed designed to maintain its dominance even as its guidance became less necessary.

"Almost there, golden-boy," it announced as they began the final ascent toward the ridge that had been their goal for days. "Try not to look too pleased with yourself. You're just following orders, after all."

Apollo ignored the taunt, focusing instead on the increasingly normal terrain. The warped wilderness was retreating behind them like a tide going out, leaving solid reality in its wake.

As they crested the ridge, the relic gave one final command: "Stop here. Look down."

Apollo halted, the others coming to rest beside him. Below, spread out in the valley like a painting, lay a city, a real city, with walls and towers and the distant shimmer of water. Smoke rose from countless chimneys, and even from this distance, they could hear the faint ringing of bells marking the hour.

"We did it," Nik breathed, his face split in a genuine grin for the first time in days.

"The relic did it," Lyra corrected, her voice flat despite the obvious relief in her stance.

"I told you so," the artifact announced smugly, its voice loud enough for all to hear. "You've learned to walk the Path. Or at least, golden-boy has. The rest of you just followed along like good little sheep."

Thorin spat on the ground, but even his habitual anger seemed muted in the face of their success.

"What now?" Renna asked, looking to Apollo despite herself.

The relic answered before he could. "Now you go down into the city like civilized people instead of wandering the wilderness like savages. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Apollo met Lyra's eyes across the group. There was no triumph in her gaze, only a warning he understood too well. This victory had come at a price, and the bill might still be coming due.

The descent into the valley was almost anticlimactic after the strange journey through the warped wilderness. The path was clear, the slope gentle, and by sunset, they stood before the city gates, solid oak banded with iron, flanked by guards who eyed their ragged appearance with professional suspicion.

"Names and business," the captain demanded, a heavyset woman with a scar that bisected her left eyebrow.

"Travelers seeking shelter," Cale answered smoothly before any of them could speak. "We've come a long way."

The guard studied them, her gaze lingering on Apollo's pack where the relic now lay silent. For a heart-stopping moment, he thought she might demand to see it. Instead, she simply nodded.

"Inn's on the main square. Keep your weapons peace-tied while inside the walls."

They entered the city in silence, each absorbing the sudden shift from wilderness to civilization in their own way. Nik's eyes darted everywhere, cataloging valuables and escape routes with professional habit.

Thorin seemed to relax slightly, the familiar sounds and smells of a working city easing some of his tension. Renna kept her spear close, peace-tied but ready, her gaze suspicious of every shadow.

Lyra walked ahead, her shoulders stiff with unspoken tension. Apollo followed, hyper-aware of the weight of both the relic against his spine and the collective distrust now directed his way. The city unfolded around them, real buildings with solid walls, streets that didn't shift beneath their feet, lanterns glowing with steady flames rather than the disorienting flickers of the wilderness.

It hit Apollo like a wall of sensations, smoke from cooking fires, salt carried from nearby docks, and the unmistakable tang of iron from the blacksmith quarter.

All of it crashed over him as they passed beneath the shadow of the massive buildings, a stark contrast to the wilderness that had been their only companion for weeks.

"As he said keep your weapons visible but your hands clear," Lyra murmured, falling into step beside him. Her green eyes darted between the guards who flanked the entrance, their armor polished to a gleam that spoke of discipline rather than vanity. "We're just travelers. Nothing more."

Apollo nodded, adjusting his pack where the relic lay wrapped and unusually silent. The gold in his veins had cooled to a sluggish crawl beneath his skin, as if uncertain about this new environment.

The streets opened before them into a chaotic tapestry of ordinary life. A woman haggled fiercely over the price of fish, her voice rising above the general din.

Children darted between market stalls, their laughter sharp and bright against the low murmur of commerce. Guards patrolled in pairs, their gazes sweeping the crowd with practiced indifference.

'So normal,' Apollo thought, watching a fruit vendor polish apples on his sleeve. *'Almost too normal after everything.'*

Chapter 49: Streets of Smoke and Stone

Their group stood out like blood on snow. Road-worn and tense, they moved with the heightened awareness of those who had survived too much to ever truly relax.

Thorin's beard was matted with dust from the trail, Nik's usually impeccable clothes hung in tatters, and Renna's knuckles remained white around her peace-tied spear.

Even Cale, typically impossible to read, kept his eyes moving constantly, cataloging every potential threat.

A guard's gaze lingered on them a moment too long. Apollo felt rather than saw Lyra stiffen beside him.

"We need to blend in," she said, voice low but carrying to each of them. "We're too obvious like this. Traveling together, looking like we've fought our way through hell."

"Haven't we?" Nik muttered, but his usual humor fell flat.

Lyra's mouth tightened. "Split up. Meet back at sundown. Renna and I will find the lodging. The rest of you..." she swept her gaze across them, "...try to look like you belong here."

Thorin grunted his agreement, already turning toward the eastern quarter. "Going to find some real steel," he announced. "Not this peace-tied nonsense." He stomped away, his limp barely noticeable now that he had a purpose.

Nik's face brightened. "I'll check the markets. See what people are saying." The gleam in his eye suggested he'd be doing more than just listening, but no one bothered to caution him against pickpocketing. Some habits were too ingrained to break.

Cale merely nodded, then drifted away without a word, melting into the crowd with surprising ease for a man of his size.

Apollo found himself alone in the press of bodies, the relic a dead weight against his spine. The city closed around him, a maze of stone and noise and life that somehow felt more confining than the open wilderness had been.

'Where to?' he wondered, letting his feet carry him forward. The gold in his veins remained cool and quiet, offering no guidance.

He wandered without direction, past shops and homes and taverns already doing brisk business despite the early hour.

The city unfolded around him, revealing itself in layers. Narrow alleys opened onto sunlit squares. Stairways led to upper walkways that offered glimpses into private courtyards.

Everywhere, people lived their lives with the peculiar intensity of those who had no idea what lurked beyond their walls.

Apollo turned a corner and stopped short. Before him spread a small plaza dominated by a weathered mural that covered an entire wall. The painting was faded, colors dulled by years of sun and rain, but the symbols were unmistakable, divine sigils arranged in a pattern he recognized immediately.

'My family's work,' he thought, the realization hitting him like a physical blow. The central figure...barely discernible now...had once been a rendering of Zeus, surrounded by the lesser gods.

Apollo's own symbol, the golden lyre, was still visible in the lower right corner, though someone had scratched deep gouges through it.

A chill ran through him despite the warmth of the day. These were old gods to these people, legends, myths, stories to frighten children. Not family.

He forced himself to turn away, continuing his aimless exploration. The city pressed in closer now, the buildings leaning toward each other as the streets narrowed. Here, the smell of salt grew stronger, mingling with the stench of too many bodies in too little space.

A beggar sat huddled in an alcove, his face hidden beneath matted hair and a beard that might have once been red. As Apollo passed, the man's head snapped up, eyes suddenly fixing on him with unsettling clarity.

"The fallen still fall," the beggar whispered, his voice cracked but carrying clearly. "Even gods bleed gold when they hit the ground."

Apollo froze, his heart hammering against his ribs. The beggar held his gaze for one impossible moment, then looked away, resuming his mumbled litany as if nothing had happened.

'He can't know,' Apollo told himself, forcing his feet to move again. *'No one knows what I am. What I was.'* But the gold in his veins had warmed at the beggar's words, pulsing once beneath his skin like a warning.

He quickened his pace, wanting distance between himself and those knowing eyes. The streets widened again as he entered what appeared to be the city's main square. A fountain dominated the center, water cascading from the outstretched hands of a stone figure whose features had been worn smooth by time.

As Apollo approached, the gold in his veins suddenly flared hot, flowing through him with an intensity he hadn't felt since before the warped wilderness.

He gasped, one hand flying to his chest as the sensation peaked and then ebbed, leaving behind a residual warmth that pooled in his fingertips.

The fountain. Something about the water, or what lay beneath it, had triggered a response in his divine blood.

Apollo approached cautiously, aware of people moving around him, of the need to appear normal. He dipped his fingers into the water. Nothing happened. No flash of recognition, no surge of power.

Just cool water against his skin. And yet, the gold in his veins continued to pulse gently, as if in recognition of something he couldn't perceive.

Most disturbing of all was the relic's continued silence. After days of mockery and instruction, its quiet felt deliberate, calculating. Like it was letting him stew in his own confusion.

'What are you waiting for?' he thought, directing the question inward, where the artifact's presence lay coiled against his spine. No answer came, not even the usual sardonic chuckle.

The sun began its descent toward the western horizon, painting the city in hues of amber and bronze. Apollo made his way back toward the central market, where Lyra had told them to meet. His nerves felt raw, exposed, every sense heightened to painful clarity.

The inn Lyra had secured stood three stories tall at the edge of the market square, its weathered sign depicting a rearing horse with a broken bridle. Inside, the common room hummed with conversation and the clatter of wooden tankards against tables.

Apollo spotted the others immediately. They had claimed a corner table, partially shielded from the rest of the room by a wooden pillar carved with intertwining vines. Lyra sat with her back to the wall, green eyes constantly scanning the room even as she leaned forward in apparent conversation with Renna.

"There he is," Nik called, waving Apollo over with a grin that seemed brighter than it had in days. His pockets bulged suspiciously, and a new dagger hung at his belt, evidence of a productive afternoon in the markets.

Thorin looked up from his ale, face split by a rare smile. His beard had been trimmed and rebraided, and fresh axe fittings gleamed at his belt. "Found a proper smith," he announced as Apollo took a seat. "Man knows his metal. Fixed what needed fixing."

Renna, by contrast, looked tenser than ever, her fingers drumming a nervous rhythm against the table. "Guards were watching the east gate when we came through," she said without preamble. "Same ones are still there four hours later. That's not normal rotation."

"They're looking for someone," Lyra agreed, her voice pitched low beneath the tavern's noise. "We need to be careful."

Apollo nodded, absorbing the warning. His gaze drifted to Cale, who sat slightly apart from the others, his dark eyes fixed on Apollo with unsettling intensity.

The quiet man hadn't changed position when Apollo approached, hadn't spoken, but there was something in his steady gaze that suggested he was seeing more than the others.

Nik leaned forward, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Heard interesting things in the market. City's on edge. Something about strange lights in the hills. People gone missing."

His eyes gleamed with excitement. "And get this...there's talk of a procession tonight. Some local ritual they do when the moon's right."

"We should be gone before then," Lyra said firmly. "First light tomorrow. This place isn't safe."

Apollo listened as they exchanged information, each sharing what they'd observed during their separate explorations. But his mind kept returning to the mural, to the beggar's knowing eyes, to the fountain that had made his blood sing.

The city wasn't just a waypoint. It was part of the Path, he was certain of it now.

Later, as the others retired to their rooms, Apollo lay awake, staring at the ceiling beams. The relic, silent all day, finally stirred against his spine.

"Better, isn't it?" it whispered, voice sliding into his mind like cold fingers. "But don't mistake stillness for safety, golden-boy. Even cities have teeth."

Apollo turned onto his side, one hand slipping beneath his pillow to grip the hilt of his knife. "What are we doing here?" he asked, voice barely audible. "What's in this city that matters to you?"

The relic's chuckle rippled through him. "Who says we're here for me? Perhaps we're here for you, fallen star. Perhaps we're here for what you left behind."

Before Apollo could question it further, a sound drifted through the partially open window, not the usual tavern noise or the distant calls of the night watch, but something rhythmic and deliberate. Drums, he realized, their cadence slow and measured, like a heartbeat growing gradually stronger.

The relic fell silent again, but Apollo could feel its satisfaction radiating through his pack. Whatever game they were playing, the next move had just begun.

Chapter 50: Procession of Ash

The drums woke Apollo from a dream of drowning.

He sat upright in bed, heart hammering as the rhythm penetrated the inn's thin walls, a slow, deliberate cadence that seemed to bypass his ears and strike directly at his core. The gold in his veins stirred in response, warming beneath his skin.

"You hear that?" Nik was already at the window, silhouetted against the deepening twilight. His voice held none of its usual flippancy.

Apollo swung his legs over the edge of the bed, muscles protesting after hours of fitful sleep. "How could I not?" The relic pulsed against his spine, suddenly alert, like a predator scenting prey.

Lyra appeared in the doorway, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders, eyes hard with tension. "Everyone up. Now." She didn't wait for a response, just turned and disappeared down the hall.

By the time Apollo reached the common room, the others had gathered at the large bay window that overlooked the square.

Thorin stood with arms crossed, his expression hidden beneath his freshly braided beard. Renna leaned forward, one hand resting on her spear as if expecting trouble. Cale remained slightly apart, his dark eyes reflecting the first flickers of torchlight from outside.

"It's starting," Nik whispered, breath fogging the glass.

The square had transformed in the hour since sunset. Hundreds of townsfolk now filled the space, each wearing a dark cloak that blended into the gathering darkness.

They stood in concentric circles around the fountain, faces turned inward, waiting. The drums grew louder, each beat now accompanied by a low brass note that hung in the air like smoke.

Torches flared to life along the perimeter, their sudden brilliance revealing the scale of the gathering. What had seemed like dozens was now clearly hundreds, perhaps the entire population of the city's central district.

"We should stay here," Lyra said, her voice pitched low. "Whatever this is, it's not our business."

Nik turned to her, eyes bright with the feverish curiosity that always preceded his worst decisions. "Are you joking? This is exactly what I was hearing about in the market. The

ritual procession. It only happens when the moon aligns with some constellation they call the Drowned King."

"All the more reason to stay clear of it," Lyra countered. "Local rituals aren't for outsiders."

Apollo watched as the crowd began to move, forming a sinuous line that wound around the fountain three times before stretching toward the eastern edge of the square.

The drums never faltered, their rhythm as steady as a heartbeat.

"We should at least see where they're going," Nik pressed. "Could be important. Could be valuable."

Thorin made a noise somewhere between a grunt and a growl. "Humans and their theatrics. Never trust a ceremony where everyone hides their face." Despite his words, Apollo noticed the dwarf's eyes tracking the procession with uneasy fascination.

The relic remained oddly silent, but its weight against Apollo's spine felt heavier, more insistent. The gold in his veins pulsed in time with the drums, each beat sending a warm current through his body.

"If we go," Lyra said, clearly recognizing she was outnumbered, "we stay at a distance. We observe only. First sign of trouble, we're back here and gone by morning. Understood?"

Nik's grin was answer enough. Renna nodded once, sharp and decisive. Thorin grumbled something unintelligible but didn't object.

They slipped out the side entrance, avoiding the innkeeper's curious gaze. The night air hit Apollo like a physical force, thick with the smell of incense and something else, something older and brinier that reminded him of the ocean they'd left behind.

Lyra led them through narrow side streets that ran parallel to the main thoroughfare, where the procession now flowed like a dark river.

The drums were joined by voices, hundreds of them chanting in unison, though Apollo couldn't make out the words from this distance.

They found a vantage point in an alley between a cooperage and a tannery, the mixed smells of fresh wood and curing leather almost but not quite masking the incense. From here, they could see the procession without being seen, shadows among shadows.

"What are they carrying?" Renna whispered, pointing to tall poles that rose above the crowd at regular intervals.

Apollo squinted, trying to make out details in the flickering torchlight. The poles supported what looked like effigies, human-shaped figures draped in cloth, their faces blank ovals of white wood or plaster.

But there was something wrong about them, something in their proportions that set his teeth on edge.

'Too many limbs,' he realized, counting the appendages that hung at awkward angles from one of the nearer figures. *'And the heads aren't right.'*

As the procession drew closer, he could see that what he'd taken for blank faces were actually masks, smooth, featureless, with only the suggestion of eyes and mouth rendered in shallow depressions.

They might once have been meant to represent gods, but time or intention had twisted them into something grotesque.

Children darted between the marchers, scattering flower petals that looked black in the torchlight. Behind them came figures in elaborate masks, swinging censers that released coils of pungent smoke.

The chanting grew louder, resolving into words that Apollo could almost grasp, almost, but not quite, as if they were speaking a language he had once known but had forgotten.

Then he saw it, the central figure, taller than the rest, cloaked in fabric that seemed to drink in the torchlight rather than reflect it. In its hands, it carried a vessel, a wide bowl filled with water that glowed with a faint, pulsing light.

Apollo's breath caught in his throat. The chant shifted, and suddenly he could understand it, not because the words had changed, but because something in him had realigned, like a key turning in a lock.

"...from the depths he rises, from the darkness he returns, bearing gifts of sight and sorrow..."

It was a hymn to Poseidon. Or it had been, once. The original verses had been about the god's generosity, his dominion over the seas that gave life to coastal cities. This version was darker, focused on appeasement rather than praise, on fear rather than reverence.

The gold in Apollo's veins flared hot, a sudden surge that made him gasp. At the same moment, the relic pulsed against his spine, a sharp, insistent pressure that felt almost like recognition.

"Apollo?" Lyra's voice seemed to come from very far away. "Are you alright?"

He couldn't answer. The procession was passing directly before their hiding place now, and he could see the water in the vessel clearly. It wasn't just glowing, it was moving, swirling in patterns that had nothing to do with the carrier's steady pace.

Patterns that reminded him of the ocean they'd left behind, of the cave where they'd found the relic, of things much older than this city or its rituals.

Then the voice came, sliding into his mind like ice water down his spine.

"Look at them," the relic sneered, its tone dripping with contempt. "Worshipping shadows of shadows. Do you see it? That's your family, rewritten as a pantomime for frightened cattle."

Apollo clenched his jaw, fighting to keep his expression neutral. The others were watching the procession, not him, but he couldn't risk drawing attention.

"And they don't even know you're here to watch," the relic continued, delighted by its own cruelty. "Delicious."

The word hung in Apollo's mind, a perfect crystallization of the relic's malice.

He felt physically ill, a cold sweat breaking out across his forehead as the procession continued past their hiding place, the glowing water and its hooded bearer disappearing around a corner.

"We need to go back," Lyra said, turning away from the spectacle. Her eyes narrowed as she took in Apollo's face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he managed, though the word felt like gravel in his throat. "Just the incense. It's strong."

Lyra clearly didn't believe him, but she didn't press. "We've seen enough. This isn't our business."

"But we haven't seen where they're going," Nik protested, already edging toward the end of the alley. "Processions always end somewhere, and that somewhere usually hides something worth finding."

"No," Lyra's voice was firm. "We're already too exposed. This city is on edge, and we're strangers. We need to keep our heads down until morning."

Renna, who had been silent until now, stepped forward. "Those guards at the east gate," she said, her voice low but intense. "The ones watching too carefully? They're in the procession. Near the front. This is connected somehow."

Apollo glanced at Cale, expecting the quiet man to side with Lyra as he usually did in matters of caution. But Cale wasn't looking at any of them. His gaze remained fixed on the corner where the glowing vessel had disappeared, his expression unreadable in the dim light.

"We should follow," Apollo heard himself say, the words emerging before he could reconsider them. "At a distance. Just to see where it leads."

Lyra turned to him, surprise and something like betrayal flashing across her face. "After everything we've been through? You want to risk exposure for curiosity?"

"It's not just curiosity," Apollo said, though he couldn't explain the certainty he felt. The gold in his veins had cooled, but the memory of its recognition remained. Whatever that water was, whatever ritual they were witnessing, it was connected to him, to what he had been, to what he might be again.

Thorin cleared his throat, the sound like stones grinding together. "Much as I hate to agree with the boy," he said, nodding toward Nik, "there's something off about all this. Better to know what we're dealing with than be caught unawares."

Lyra looked from face to face, clearly seeing she was outvoted. Her shoulders slumped slightly, the only outward sign of her frustration. "Fine. But we stay at least a hundred paces back. First sign of trouble, we scatter and meet back at the inn. No heroics, no curiosity, no lingering. Clear?"

They all nodded, even Nik, though his agreement seemed more perfunctory than sincere.

They moved as a group, keeping to the shadows of side streets and alleyways, tracking the procession by its drums and chanting rather than direct sight.

The city seemed to close around them as they went, buildings leaning closer together, streets narrowing until they were little more than crevices between stone walls.

The drums grew louder, the chanting more intense. Apollo felt the relic shift against his spine, its weight a constant reminder of its presence.

It had fallen silent after its initial mockery, but he could sense its attention, focused and waiting.

They turned a final corner and froze. Before them, the narrow street opened into a small plaza dominated by a structure Apollo hadn't seen during his earlier explorations, a massive stone archway set into the very ground, steps descending into darkness beneath the city itself.

The procession was funneling through it, torches disappearing one by one into whatever lay below. The drums echoed strangely now, as if coming from a vast, empty space.