

The Golden Fool

#Chapter 51: The Spark and the Core (1) - Read The Golden Fool Chapter 51: The Spark and the Core (1)

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The shadows around them deepened as they descended the worn stone steps. Apollo hung back, letting the others press ahead into the underground chamber that opened before them like a wound in the earth.

The air grew thick with incense and the press of too many bodies, the ceiling low enough that Thorin had to stoop slightly as they found places along the back wall.

Hundreds of cloaked figures crowded the space, their collective breath creating a fog that hung in the torchlight. At the center of the chamber stood a raised dais, upon which rested a wide stone vessel filled with water that reflected the torches with unnatural brightness.

Apollo leaned against the cool stone wall, watching the proceedings with detached interest. The gold in his veins remained quiet, neither warming nor responding to the ritual unfolding before them.

This wasn't the first ceremony he'd witnessed in his long existence, nor would it be the last, though the others didn't know that.

A hush fell over the crowd as a figure in elaborate robes emerged from a side passage. The priest, for that was clearly what he was, wore a mask that reminded Apollo of the distorted effigies from the procession, only more refined, its features suggesting both man and fish in unsettling combination.

"What is this?" Nik whispered, leaning close enough that Apollo could smell the nervousness on him, sharp and acrid beneath his usual scent of leather and stolen perfumes.

"Some kind of offering," Apollo replied, keeping his voice low. "To what, I'm not certain yet."

The priest raised his arms, beginning a chant that echoed strangely in the chamber. The crowd joined in, their voices creating a dissonant harmony that set Apollo's teeth on edge. The language was old, older than the city above them, its syllables twisted by generations of oral transmission into something barely recognizable.

As the chanting reached a crescendo, the priest stepped forward to the vessel. He extended his hands over the water, palms down, fingers splayed. His voice rose above the others, commanding rather than beseeching.

Then it happened.

A thin flame appeared in the priest's right palm, not from a hidden mechanism or sleight of hand, but manifesting directly from his flesh. It twisted into shape, coiling like a serpent before spreading to his other hand. Both palms now cupped fire that cast no shadow, its light unnaturally steady in the still air of the chamber.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd, reverent and awed. Beside Apollo, Thorin swore under his breath, the dwarf's usual composure cracking at the display. On his other side, Renna's knuckles whitened on her spear, her stance shifting subtly into one of combat readiness.

"That's... impossible," Nik whispered, his voice barely audible over the renewed chanting.

Lyra narrowed her eyes, suspicion flaring in their green depths. "No. It's something else. Trickery." Her hand drifted toward her knife, an unconscious gesture of self-protection.

Apollo, for once, felt nothing but boredom. He'd seen this before, countless times, in countless variations, performed with varying degrees of skill. This particular demonstration was mediocre at best.

"Not a trick," he said, not bothering to lower his voice. "Just crude."

The words fell into a momentary lull in the chanting. Several nearby worshippers turned, their masked faces unreadable but their postures suggesting offense. Apollo didn't care. The gold in his veins remained cool, unimpressed.

His companions turned to him as one, their expressions ranging from shock to suspicion to curiosity. Even Cale, usually so impassive, raised an eyebrow in silent question.

"What do you mean, 'crude'?" Lyra demanded, her voice low but intense. "That man is holding fire in his bare hands."

Apollo sighed, feeling the weight of their stares. He'd said too much, revealed too much knowledge, again. The relic in his pack seemed to pulse once, as if in anticipation.

"Fine," he relented, speaking quietly but firmly enough for all of them to hear. "Every living thing has an Aether Core, a crystalline structure formed at birth. It sits here." He tapped his sternum lightly. "The core gathers ambient aether, energy that suffuses the world around us."

The priest's flames grew brighter as Apollo spoke, casting dancing shadows across the rapt faces of the crowd.

"With training," Apollo continued, "a person can draw from their core and channel it through the body, shaping it into heat, light, motion, whatever they need. What you're seeing is basic Evocation. The fire priest is using his own life-energy, filtered through the core, and directing it outward."

Nik's eyes widened with fascination, but Lyra's narrowed further in suspicion.

"It's inefficient," Apollo added, unable to keep the disdain from his voice. "Dangerous, too. Burns the body if pushed too far. This is why mortals age faster when they practice. They spend themselves for power."

He fell silent, aware he'd said more than he intended. The others stared at him, processing this revelation. The ceremony continued before them, the priest now lowering the flames to touch the surface of the water, which began to steam and bubble.

Thorin was the first to speak, his gruff voice barely audible over the chanting.

"Dwarves have tales," he muttered, tugging at his beard. "Stone hearts, they called them. Crystals in the chest that glowed when a master craftsman worked. Always thought it was just stories meant to inspire the apprentices. Never believed it was real."

Nik leaned forward eagerly. "Could I learn it? To do what he's doing?"

Apollo glanced at him, measuring the young man's potential with a single look. "If your core is strong enough. Most aren't."

Lyra's expression had gone cold and calculating. "So this city has trained mages," she said, her tone flat. "That complicates things."

Renna just looked uneasy, her grip still tight on her spear. "Playing with fire like that... it feels wrong."

The relic chose that moment to make its presence known, its voice sliding into Apollo's mind with practiced malice.

"Listen to you," it chuckled, the sound like stones grinding together. "Pretending you're a teacher now. Explaining scraps of what you hoarded for centuries."

Apollo kept his expression neutral, though the barb struck deeper than he cared to admit.

"Careful, golden-boy," the relic continued. "Teach them too much, and they might not need you at all."

Apollo ignored it outwardly, but inside, he felt the sting of truth. The relic had a talent for finding the exact fear that would hurt most, in this case, the growing realization that his companions valued him primarily for his knowledge, not for himself. Knowledge that, piece by piece, he was giving away.

'They'll never know what I was,' he thought, watching the priest's display with renewed bitterness. *'Only what I know.'*

Before them, the priest's flames roared higher, bathing the chamber in orange glow. The chanting rose to match it, hundreds of voices merging into a single, pulsing sound.

The offerings, bundles of herbs, strips of cloth inscribed with prayers, small figurines carved from wood and bone, ignited as the priest passed his burning hands over them.

Smoke curled upward toward a narrow fissure in the ceiling, a black column spiraling into the darkness above.

Chapter 52: The Spark and the Core (2)

The gold in Apollo's veins warmed suddenly, pulsing in time with the ritual. Something in the dark was answering, not to the priest or his amateur flames, but to the older, deeper power that still flowed through Apollo's diminished form.

He glanced at his companions, finding them all watching the ritual with varying degrees of unease. Nik's earlier fascination had given way to something more cautious. Lyra's hand hadn't moved from her knife. Thorin's scowl had deepened, and Renna looked ready to bolt at the first sign of danger.

Even Cale, usually so composed, had tensed, his eyes darting between the priest and the exits.

In that moment of shared disquiet, a silent understanding passed between them. They had assumed the city would be a refuge, a place to rest and resupply before continuing their journey. Instead, they had stumbled into something older and more dangerous than mere walls and guards.

The mortals had power of their own. And the city was not the defenseless haven they had hoped for.

"So there are more of these... mages?" Nik asked, eyes darting back to the priest and his conjured flames.

"Of course there are," Apollo replied, irritation slipping into his voice. "But skill varies widely. What you're seeing is rudimentary at best."

Lyra edged closer, her earlier suspicion now tinged with reluctant curiosity. "How powerful can they become?"

Apollo hesitated. The relic's warning echoed in his mind, but something in Lyra's expression, a genuine desire to understand rather than merely exploit, loosened his tongue.

"The Aether core has ten tiers of development," he said, keeping his voice low. "Most people have what's called a Nascent core...Tier 10. They can barely sense Aether, much less manipulate it. Minor cantrips at most, lighting a candle, warming water."

The priest below finished his display, the flames receding into his palms as the crowd murmured in appreciation. Apollo snorted softly.

"Tier 9 is an Initiate," he continued. "Basic spellcasting, simple enchantments that might last a day or two. Your fire priest down there is probably a 9, maybe a weak 8 at best."

Thorin's brow furrowed. "And at worst?"

Apollo's lips quirked into a humorless smile. "At Tier 8, Adept, you get reliable combat magic, sustained enchantments that can last weeks. Tier 7 Scholars can manipulate multiple elements simultaneously, perform complex spellwork that would burn out lesser cores."

Nik whistled low, earning a sharp glance from nearby worshippers. "And beyond that?"

"Masters at Tier 6 can create entirely new spells, understand advanced magical theory that most can barely comprehend." Apollo's voice took on a distant quality, as if reciting from memory. "Tier 5 Elites can enhance their physical abilities, strength, speed, senses, and their battle magic can level small buildings."

The gold in his veins warmed as he spoke, responding to the memories of power that once flowed through him like sunlight. The relic remained silent, but he felt its attention, sharp and focused.

"The upper tiers are exceedingly rare," he added, almost to himself. "Sovereigns at Tier 4 can alter weather patterns, bend nature to their will. Transcendents at Tier 3 begin to touch reality itself, potentially achieving immortality."

Renna made a small, disbelieving sound. "Immortality? That's just stories."

"Is it?" Apollo asked, meeting her eyes. Something in his gaze made her look away first.

"The final tiers are practically mythical," he said, his voice dropping even lower. "Tier 2 Celestials possess demigod-level abilities, creating magical domains that follow their

own rules. And Tier 1..." He trailed off, the gold in his veins pulsing with bitter remembrance.

"Divine," he finished flatly. "Mastery over fundamental forces. God-like power."

Silence fell between them as the implications sank in. Below, the ceremony continued, the priest now leading the crowd in a call-and-response that echoed against the stone walls.

"You speak as if you've seen them," Lyra said, studying Apollo's face with renewed intensity. "These higher tiers."

The relic's warning pressed against his mind. *'Careful, golden-boy. They only value what you know, not what you are.'*

"I've read accounts," Apollo lied smoothly. "Ancient texts, mostly fragmented. The higher tiers haven't been seen in this realm for generations, if they ever truly existed."

"And you?" Nik asked, eyes bright with curiosity. "What tier are you?"

Apollo felt the others watching him, waiting. The gold in his veins retreated, cooling beneath his skin.

"Nascent," he admitted, the truth bitter on his tongue. "Barely that. Whatever potential I might have had was... damaged long ago."

It wasn't entirely a lie. His divine power had been stripped, his connection to the cosmic Aether severed when he was cast down. What remained was a shadow, a memory of godhood trapped in mortal flesh.

"So that's why you know so much but can do so little," Thorin said, blunt as always.

Apollo felt the barb land, sharper than the dwarf could possibly know. "Yes," he replied simply. "That's exactly why."

Before anyone could press further, movement near the dais caught their attention. The ceremony was shifting to its next phase. The priest raised a ceremonial knife, its blade gleaming unnaturally in the torchlight.

"We should go," Lyra said, tension returning to her voice. "Before they notice we don't belong."

Apollo nodded, grateful for the interruption. He'd revealed too much already, walked too close to truths he couldn't afford to share. The relic's weight pressed against his spine, a constant reminder of secrets still kept.

As they slipped from the chamber, retracing their steps toward the surface, Apollo felt the gold in his veins cool completely. Whatever power had briefly stirred during the ritual was dormant once more, leaving him as he had been since his fall, diminished, mortal, alone with knowledge he could share but power he could not reclaim.

The night air hit them like a blessing as they emerged from the underground temple. Stars glittered overhead, cold and distant as the divine realm Apollo had once called home.

'They'll never understand what I was,' he thought, falling into step behind the others as they made their way back toward the inn. 'And perhaps that's for the best.'

The relic, for once, had no comment. Its silence felt almost like agreement.

Chapter 53: Echoes in the Night

Apollo climbed the inn's narrow staircase, the memory of fire dancing on the priest's palms burning brighter in his mind than the actual flames had in the chamber below. The others followed close behind, their footsteps unnaturally loud in the midnight quiet, as if the very cobblestones beneath them had grown suspicious of their presence.

"We need to leave this place," Thorin growled once they'd reached the relative safety of the second-floor landing. His voice was low but intense, beard still bristling with agitation.

"Something about this city isn't right. The way those people watched that fire-show like it was a miracle instead of a parlor trick."

Renna nodded, her fingers still wrapped around her peace-tied spear as if she expected to need it at any moment. "First light tomorrow. No delays, no excuses. I've seen enough to know we don't belong here."

Apollo said nothing as they moved down the hallway toward their rooms. The gold in his veins had gone dormant again, but the memory of its brief awakening lingered, a phantom warmth that reminded him of what he'd lost. What he might never regain.

Nik, by contrast, practically vibrated with excitement. He'd produced a small leather-bound notebook from somewhere inside his jacket and was frantically scribbling notes by the dim light of the wall sconces.

"Did you see how the flame coiled before it spread?" he whispered, pen never pausing. "And the way it responded to his breath patterns? There's a technique there, a real system. I'm sure of it."

Lyra snatched the notebook from his hands, snapping it shut with a decisive thwack. "Stop that. We're trying not to draw attention, remember?"

"But this is important!" Nik protested, reaching for his stolen property. "This is the first concrete evidence I've seen that..."

"That what?" Lyra cut him off, voice sharp as a blade. "That magic exists? That people can throw fire from their hands? We all saw it. Writing it down won't make it make more sense."

Apollo watched the exchange, noting the fear beneath Lyra's anger, the desperate curiosity driving Nik's enthusiasm. Both reactions were familiar, he'd seen them countless times throughout his long existence, mortals confronting power they didn't understand.

"The common room," Cale said quietly, breaking his usual silence. "Less obvious than huddling in a hallway. We need to talk."

The inn's common room was nearly empty at this late hour. A lone barmaid wiped down tables with mechanical efficiency, barely glancing up as they claimed a corner table far from both the entrance and the kitchen doors. A single candle guttered between them, casting their faces in shifting shadow.

Apollo took a long pull from the ale Thorin had ordered, grimacing at its bitter taste. Mortal drinks rarely satisfied him, but tonight he welcomed the burn, the momentary distraction from the weight of the relic against his spine and the questions he knew were coming.

"So," Nik began, having reclaimed his notebook and positioned it carefully beneath the table, out of Lyra's immediate reach. "About these Aether cores, could any of us learn to do what that priest did? Channel energy through our bodies?"

Lyra's eyes flashed with warning. "That's not what we should be focusing on right now."

"Why not?" Nik countered, leaning forward. "If we're in a city of fire-wielders, shouldn't we understand what we're dealing with? Maybe even level the playing field?"

Thorin snorted, foam clinging to his beard as he lowered his tankard. "Mortals pretending to be gods. That's all it is. Parlor tricks dressed up as divine power."

"You don't 'pretend,'" Apollo cut in, his voice sharper than he'd intended. The others turned to him, surprised by the sudden intensity. "You burn. That's the price."

Silence fell over the table. Even the barmaid seemed to pause in her endless wiping, though Apollo knew that was just his imagination, his senses heightened by the memory of power.

"What do you mean?" Nik asked, pen poised above his notebook, eager for knowledge that Apollo suddenly felt reluctant to provide.

"Magic isn't creation," Apollo said finally, measuring his words with care. "It's consumption. You draw energy through your core, yes, but that energy comes from somewhere. From you. From your life force."

Renna leaned forward, skepticism written across her features. "But the priest looked fine. Healthy, even."

"For now," Apollo replied. "Small workings, small price. But it accumulates. Burns hotter with each casting. Some can last decades before showing signs of deterioration. Others burn out in years. It depends on the strength of the core and the wisdom of the wielder."

"So it's dangerous," Lyra said, seizing on the confirmation of her suspicions.

"All power is dangerous," Apollo countered. "But this particular kind? It's consumption dressed as creation. A beautiful lie that eats you from within."

He fell silent, aware he'd revealed more bitterness than he'd intended. The others exchanged glances, processing his words.

"But with proper training..." Nik began.

"Listen to him...the fallen lecturing on moderation. Hilarious."

The relic's voice cut through their conversation, audible to all of them despite emanating from Apollo's pack. Its tone dripped with mockery, each syllable precisely calculated to undermine.

Nik froze, pen suspended above his notebook. Thorin's hand drifted toward his axe, while Lyra's eyes darted around the room, checking if anyone else had heard.

"Oh, don't worry about the barmaid," the relic continued, as if reading Lyra's concern. "She's too busy wondering if her husband has found the letters she hid beneath the floorboards. Humans and their petty secrets."

Apollo felt heat rise to his face, embarrassment and anger mingling in equal measure. The relic had been quiet for hours, letting him explain and pontificate, only to cut him down at the precise moment when the others might have begun to trust his judgment.

Nik, to Apollo's surprise, recovered first. He cleared his throat, a nervous smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Well," he said, addressing the pack as if it were just another drinking companion, "at least one of us is enjoying the conversation. Though I have to say, your timing could use some work. I was just getting to the good questions."

The quip hung in the air for a moment, too bold or too foolish to be immediately processed. Then Renna snorted, a sound of surprise more than humor. Cale's lips twitched upward. Even Thorin gave a grudging chuckle.

Just like that, the tension cracked, not broken, but momentarily bridged by Nik's willingness to treat the impossible as commonplace. Apollo felt a rush of unexpected gratitude toward the young man, whose bravado often masked a keener intelligence than most gave him credit for.

The moment passed quickly. Lyra rose, her expression making it clear that she considered the discussion finished. "We should rest. Early start tomorrow, remember?"

The others nodded, draining their drinks and gathering their belongings. Apollo remained seated, watching as they filed toward the stairs, Nik still scribbling in his notebook despite Lyra's disapproving glance.

"Coming?" Cale asked, pausing at the edge of the table.

Apollo shook his head. "In a bit. I need some air first."

Cale studied him for a moment, then nodded once and followed the others, leaving Apollo alone with the guttering candle and the weight of the relic against his spine.

Once they were gone, Apollo moved to the window seat, looking out over the now-empty square. The city had fallen silent after the procession, its streets deserted save for the occasional patrol of watchmen. The fountain stood dark and still at the center, no hint of the power that had briefly stirred beneath its waters.

'What are you hiding?' he wondered, eyes tracing the familiar contours of the square. *'What else lives beneath your streets?'*

As if in answer, he felt it, a faint ripple in the Aether, distinct from the crude working he'd witnessed in the underground chamber. This was older, sharper, closer to the divine energies he remembered from his time on Olympus. The gold in his veins warmed in response, a subtle current that spread from his core to his fingertips.

Apollo closed his eyes, focusing on the sensation. It wasn't coming from the temple or the fountain, but from somewhere deeper, somewhere the procession hadn't led them. A power that existed alongside the fire priest's amateur conjurings but remained separate, hidden even from those who thought themselves masters of magic.

His veins warmed further as he concentrated, echoing the brief flare he'd felt during the ritual. The connection was tenuous but undeniable. Whatever lurked beneath the city wasn't just a relic of forgotten worship, it was active, aware, and possibly divine in origin.

The realization sent a chill through him despite the warmth in his blood. This city held more than just a handful of fire-priests playing at power. Something older dwelled here, something that might recognize what he had been, what he still carried within his diminished form.

From the streets below, a new sound drifted up, faint chanting, similar to what they'd heard in the procession but subtly different in rhythm and tone. Apollo leaned closer to the glass, straining to locate its source. The sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, as if rising from the very stones of the city.

'Not from the temple,' he realized with growing unease. *'From somewhere deeper.'*

Apollo shut the window with more force than necessary, cutting off the distant chanting. The gold in his veins cooled again, retreating beneath his skin as if seeking shelter from whatever had stirred it.

"Sleep well, golden-boy," the relic chuckled softly in his mind, its voice almost gentle in its mockery. "Tomorrow will be louder."

Apollo didn't respond, but as he turned away from the window, he couldn't shake the feeling that the city itself was watching him, waiting to see what the fallen god would do next.

Chapter 54: The Midnight Intruder

Apollo woke to the sound of splintering wood as night's silence shattered into chaos. The door to their rented room burst inward with a flare of crimson fire that painted the walls in bloody light. He jerked upright, sleep evaporating in an instant as a hooded figure stepped through the ruined doorframe.

The intruder's hands wove complex patterns in the air, each gesture trailing ribbons of flame. Words spilled from beneath the hood, guttural, harsh syllables that made the floorboards beneath Apollo's bed begin to hiss and smoke.

"What in all hells—" Thorin's voice cut through the darkness, followed by a stream of dwarven curses as he fumbled for his axe.

Across the room, Nik tumbled from his bed in a tangle of blankets, narrowly avoiding a lick of flame that scorched the wall where his head had been moments before.

Lyra was already on her feet, knife gleaming in her hand, her green eyes reflecting the intruder's fire. Cale moved with surprising speed for his size, positioning himself in front of Renna, one arm extended protectively.

The magician's fire cast his face in fractured glimpses, pale skin, a thin mouth twisted in contempt, eyes that reflected the flames with unnatural intensity. He flung another ball

of crackling energy into the center of the room, where it exploded in a shower of sparks that ignited the bedding and set the curtains ablaze.

"Outsiders should not meddle in holy rites," the intruder sneered, his voice carrying the same rhythmic cadence Apollo had heard in the underground chamber. "The city has eyes. The depths have watchers."

Lyra lunged forward, knife aimed at the man's throat, but hit an invisible barrier that flared red at her touch. She stumbled back, cursing as angry welts rose on her exposed skin.

Thorin grabbed a wooden stool and hurled it with all his considerable strength. The furniture splintered against the same barrier, fragments raining down uselessly.

The magician laughed, a sound like grinding glass. "Is this all? Knives and furniture?" He raised his hands again, flames dancing between his fingers. "The temple demands proper sacrifice for trespass."

Apollo felt the sluggish gold in his veins stir, responding to the threat with a warmth he hadn't felt since before his exile.

He rose slowly from his bed, bare feet pressing against the smoldering floorboards. The sensation should have been painful, but the building heat in his blood dulled everything except the pulse of power awakening within him.

'Not yet,' he thought, watching as the magician gathered another, larger ball of flame. *'Not here. Not in front of them.'*

But the choice was made for him as the intruder hurled his attack directly at Nik, who stood frozen, eyes wide with terror.

Apollo moved without conscious thought, one hand rising in a gesture as natural as breathing. He didn't chant like the fire priest, didn't need the elaborate gestures the magician employed. Power simply bled from him, raw and instinctive.

The fireball struck his outstretched palm and unraveled, not extinguished but devoured, the flame separating into harmless sparks that swirled around his fingers before vanishing entirely.

Golden light pulsed beneath his skin, tracing the network of veins from his heart to his fingertips.

The magician faltered, his next incantation dying on his lips as he took in the sight before him.

Apollo felt words rise to his tongue, not the clumsy, mortal language he'd been using since his fall, but something older, purer. Words of power that had shaped stars and commanded tides.

"Let my light blind you." he intoned, his voice resonating with authority that filled the small room.

The gold in his veins flared, no longer confined beneath his skin but radiating outward in a wave of searing brilliance. The light filled the room, banishing shadows, consuming the magician's flames as if they were nothing more than candles in a hurricane.

It struck the intruder's barrier and shattered it, the sound like breaking glass magnified a hundredfold.

The force of it slammed the magician against the wall. He slid to the floor, blood trickling from his nose and the corners of his eyes, his arrogance replaced by naked fear.

"What—" he coughed, spitting red onto the scorched floorboards. "What are you?"

Apollo said nothing, but the gold light continued to pulse around him, casting his shadow in sharp relief against the wall, a shadow that seemed, for just a moment, to wear a crown of rays.

The magician scrambled backward, fumbling for the window. His cloak caught on the splintered sill, tearing to reveal the ceremonial robes beneath—the same style Apollo had seen in the underground temple.

"This isn't over," the man snarled, one foot already over the ledge. "The Eye will see you. All of you." His gaze locked with Apollo's, hatred mingling with terror. "Especially you, whatever you are."

Then he was gone, vanishing into the darkness beyond. The only evidence of his presence: scorch marks on the floor and walls, and the lingering stench of sulfur that hung in the air like a promise.

The golden light receded, drawing back into Apollo's skin until only a faint shimmer remained beneath the surface. He lowered his hand slowly, feeling the familiar weakness return as the power ebbed. His legs trembled, threatening to give way beneath him.

The silence that followed felt absolute. Apollo turned to find five pairs of eyes fixed on him, expressions ranging from awe to fear to calculation.

Nik was the first to break the stillness. "That..." he swallowed hard, pointing a shaking finger at Apollo, "that wasn't Tier Nine."

Thorin spat on the floor, whether to clear the taste of smoke or express his feelings, Apollo couldn't tell. "Didn't seem like any tier you mentioned," the dwarf muttered, his beard singed at the edges, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Lyra said nothing, but her gaze cut deeper than any blade as she studied Apollo with hard, evaluating eyes. Her knife remained in her hand, though she'd lowered it to her side.

Renna and Cale exchanged glances, a silent communication passing between them that Apollo couldn't interpret.

"We need to leave this city," Apollo said, his voice rough after the power that had flowed through it moments before. "Now."

No one moved. No one seemed capable of movement, still processing what they'd witnessed.

"Well, that secret didn't last long," the relic's voice broke the silence, its mocking tone echoing from Apollo's pack. "I was taking bets with myself on how many more days you'd pretend to be just another wandering scholar. Not even one full night! Impressive, really."

Apollo closed his eyes briefly, fighting the urge to snap back at the artifact. When he opened them again, the others were still staring, their expressions now edged with something new, not just fear or awe, but hurt. Betrayal.

'They know I've been lying,' he thought, the realization sinking like a stone in his stomach. *'Not everything. But enough.'*

Outside, a bell began to toll, not the regular marking of hours, but an urgent, uneven clanging that spoke of alarm, of warning. The city was waking. The Eye, whatever it was, would soon be looking for them.

"Pack," Apollo said, forcing authority into his voice despite the exhaustion creeping through his limbs. "We have minutes, not hours."

This time, they moved.

The golden light faded from Apollo's skin, leaving behind a bone-deep fatigue that made his knees threaten to buckle.

He steadied himself against the wall, feeling the rough texture of charred wood beneath his palm. The room reeked of smoke and ozone, the familiar aftermath of power hastily unleashed.

"We need to move," he repeated, his voice hoarse. "That man will return with others."

The silence stretched, taut as a bowstring. Then Thorin grunted, breaking the spell as he stuffed his meager belongings into his pack with quick, efficient movements.

"Knew you were hiding something," the dwarf muttered, not meeting Apollo's eyes. "Just didn't think it'd be this."

Apollo ignored the accusation, focusing instead on gathering his own possessions. The relic pulsed against his hands as he lifted it, warm and somehow satisfied, as if pleased by the chaos it had witnessed.

He wrapped it quickly, shoving it deep into his pack where its mocking voice might be muffled, if not silenced completely.

Nik darted around the room, snatching up scattered items with nervous energy. "That was... you just... the light came right out of your skin!" His voice pitched higher with each word. "You said you were Nascent! That was not Nascent!"

"Not now, Nik," Lyra cut in, her tone glacial. She had already packed, her movements economical, nothing wasted. The knife remained in her hand, its edge catching the moonlight from the broken window. Her green eyes never left Apollo as she spoke. "We get clear of the city first. Then we talk."

The implied threat hung in the air between them. Apollo felt the gold in his veins retreat further, cooling beneath his skin. He'd revealed too much, too soon, and the fragile trust he'd built with these companions was fracturing before his eyes.

The bell continued its frantic pealing, joined now by others across the city. Shouts echoed from the street below as the night watch mobilized. The Eye, whatever it was, had been alerted.

Cale appeared in the doorway, having slipped out while the others argued. "Back stairs," he said, his usual economy of words unaffected by the night's events. "Guards at the front. Five, maybe six."

Renna checked her spear, testing the peace-tie with a scowl before slicing through it with a small knife. "East gate?" she asked Cale, who shook his head.

"Too obvious. North wall has a breach. Old drainage tunnel. Tight, but passable."

Apollo slung his pack over his shoulder, wincing as the weight settled against muscles already protesting the surge of power that had coursed through them. Divine energy through mortal flesh, the combination was never comfortable, even in the small amounts he could still channel.

Chapter 55: The City on Alert

Smoke curled from the doorframe as Apollo raced down the inn's back stairs, the acrid scent burning his nostrils with each ragged breath. Behind him, floorboards creaked under the weight of his companions, their shadows dancing wildly against the wall as flames consumed what remained of their room.

"Move faster," Lyra hissed from somewhere above, her voice barely audible over the growing cacophony outside, shouts from the city guard, dogs barking with predatory eagerness, and the relentless tolling of alarm bells that seemed to vibrate through the very walls.

Apollo's legs trembled with each step, divine power still ebbing from his veins like a retreating tide, leaving exhaustion in its wake. The gold beneath his skin had cooled to a dull ache, a reminder of what he'd revealed and could no longer hide.

"Did you see what he did up there?" Nik whispered too loudly, stumbling on the narrow stairs. "The way the light just poured out of his—"

"Not now," Lyra snapped, the words slicing through the air like her knife.

Apollo winced, not from her tone but from the unmistakable fear beneath it. Fear of him. The relic chose that moment to make its presence known, its voice sliding into his mind with practiced malice.

"Look at you all," it snickered, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Scurrying like common thieves. And here I thought I was traveling with heroes."

No one responded. They reached the bottom of the stairs and paused at the back door, listening to the chaos that awaited them. Cale pressed his ear against the wood, then held up three fingers, guards, close.

'This is my fault,' Apollo thought as sweat cooled against his skin. *'If I'd been stronger, if I'd controlled the power better...'*

Thorin shouldered past him, axe gripped in white-knuckled hands. "Standing here won't improve our odds," he muttered, the singed edges of his beard giving his scowl an even fiercer cast.

Cale nodded once, then eased the door open just enough to scan the alley behind the inn. He slipped through the gap with surprising grace for his size, and the others followed – first Renna with her spear held ready, then Nik practically on her heels, then Lyra, her movements fluid and silent.

Thorin gave Apollo a hard look before stepping through. "After you, mageling" he said, the newly minted title carrying more accusation than reverence.

The alley hit Apollo like a wall of sound and sensation, torchlight reflecting off wet cobblestones, the distant roar of a mobilizing city, and the unmistakable tingle of magic hanging in the air like static before a storm. He stumbled slightly, caught himself against the rough stone wall, and forced his legs to move.

Cale led them through a maze of narrow passages, each turn taking them deeper into the shadowed heart of the city. Apollo could feel the others watching him, measuring him with every step, not as a companion now, but as an unknown quantity, a danger they couldn't calculate.

They emerged onto a wider street and froze. The main thoroughfare ahead blazed with torchlight, guards in polished armor marching in tight formation, their weapons gleaming. Above them, residents had emerged onto balconies, some holding lanterns that swung like captive stars, others pointing and shouting directions to the guards below.

Worst of all were the wards, shimmering barriers of crimson energy that hung across major intersections like spider webs, detection magic that would flare at their passing.

Apollo recognized the crude but effective spellwork, designed to sense strangers, outsiders, those who didn't belong.

"We can't cross that," Lyra breathed, pulling back into the shadows.

Cale shook his head. "Don't need to." He gestured toward a narrow gap between buildings that Apollo would have missed entirely. "This way. Cuts behind the tanner's district. Fewer patrols, more stink."

They slipped into the passage, forced to move single file through the constricted space. Apollo found himself in the middle of their line, Lyra and Cale ahead, Thorin, Nik, and Renna behind, positioned, he realized, where they could watch him from both directions. The thought sent a fresh wave of isolation through him, colder than the night air against his skin.

Cale navigated the backstreets with the confidence of a native, each turn seeming random but gradually building a pattern that Apollo recognized was taking them north, toward the city wall. The tanner's district lived up to its reputation, the stench of curing leather and chemical baths making his eyes water. At least it would mask their scent from the dogs.

They had nearly reached the northern quarter when disaster struck. A side street Apollo had thought empty suddenly filled with light as a procession of robed figures rounded the corner, each holding a lantern that glowed with unnatural blue flame.

"Priests," Renna whispered, pulling back against the wall. "The ones from the temple."

Apollo felt it immediately, the blue flames weren't ordinary fire but detection magic, specifically attuned to divine energy. Even with his powers diminished, the residual gold in his veins would light up like a beacon if those lanterns came any closer.

'They're hunting me,'

he realized, pressing deeper into the shadows. The gold stirred beneath his skin, responding to the threat with a warm pulse that would betray him instantly.

"They'll see me," he whispered, the admission burning his throat. "The lanterns, they're designed to find...me."

Lyra's eyes widened fractionally, the only indication she'd heard him. The priests advanced, their lanterns swinging in methodical arcs that swept the street ahead of them.

Apollo closed his eyes, concentrating on forcing the gold deeper, away from his skin where it would react to the detection spell.

Pain lanced through him as the divine energy retreated, not meant to be compressed or hidden but to shine, to radiate. He bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood, using the sharp mortal pain to focus.

The priests were less than twenty paces away now, their lanterns beginning to flicker and pulse as they sensed something just at the edge of their range.

Thorin moved suddenly, shoving past Apollo to the mouth of their hiding place. With one powerful kick, he sent a barrel tumbling into the street. It crashed onto its side, contents spilling across the cobblestones, pickled something, judging by the sharp vinegar smell that cut through even the tannery stench.

The priests turned toward the noise, lanterns swinging in unison. Thorin was already back in the shadows, one hand clamped over Nik's mouth to stifle his nervous breathing.

"Cats," one of the priests declared after a moment, the disappointment evident in his voice. "Always in the refuse."

They continued their sweep, but their attention had shifted, the pattern of their search disrupted by Thorin's distraction. Apollo felt the gold settle deeper within him, painful but hidden, as the blue light passed over their hiding place and continued down the street.

"Quick," Cale murmured once the priests had turned the corner. "North gate's too watched. We need the drainage tunnel."

They moved faster now, no longer trying to appear casual but simply to remain unseen. Apollo's entire body ached, the gold in his veins compressed unnaturally, like a spring coiled too tight. Each step sent fresh pain shooting through his legs.

The drainage tunnel, when they reached it, proved less inviting than its name suggested. A narrow opening in the base of the north wall, partially collapsed and oozing with foul-smelling water that reflected the moonlight in oily patterns.

"You can't be serious," Renna said, staring at the dark passage with undisguised revulsion. "That's barely wide enough for a child."

"Wide enough," Cale replied simply. "Used it before. Tight for shoulders, but passable."

"What about guards?" Lyra asked, already scanning the top of the wall above them.

"Patrols every ten minutes. We have three before the next one."

Nik peered into the tunnel entrance, then jerked back. "Are those, are those rat droppings? Gods, there are rats in there. Probably massive ones. Probably hungry ones."

"Not now, Nik," Lyra said for the second time that night. She turned to Apollo, her expression hardening. "You first."

The order was clear, they wanted him where they could see him, not at their backs. Apollo nodded once, then dropped to his hands and knees. The tunnel mouth gaped before him, a throat of stone and earth that smelled of mildew and decay. He crawled forward, feeling cold water immediately soak through his trousers.

The tunnel closed around him like a fist, the ceiling so low he had to press his cheek against the slimy floor to make progress. Behind him, he heard splashing as the others followed, Renna's colorful curses echoing in the confined space.

"Seven hells and all their demons," she spat as something skittered across her hand. "When we get out of here, I'm burning these clothes."

"At least you fit," Thorin grunted, his broader frame scraping against the stone walls with each movement. "If I get stuck, just leave me. I'll take as many with me as I can before the end."

Apollo kept moving, ignoring the cold seeping into his bones and the persistent ache of the gold compressed within his veins. Water deepened as they progressed, rising from ankle to mid-calf, its chill numbing his legs.

"I think something just swam past my face," Nik whispered, his voice tight with barely controlled panic. "Something with teeth. I felt teeth."

"It was a leaf," Lyra hissed from behind him. "Keep moving."

They had crawled perhaps fifty yards when boots thudded on the wall above them, accompanied by the jingle of armor and weapons. Apollo froze, and the line behind him accorded to a halt.

A beam of light cut through the grate directly above them, illuminating the tunnel in harsh white radiance. Apollo pressed himself against the floor, water covering half his face as he held perfectly still. The others did the same, a line of statues in the fetid stream.

The guard above paused, his shadow falling across the grate as he peered down into the drainage tunnel. Apollo held his breath, feeling the gold in his veins stir traitorously at the proximity of another human. If it flared now, they were finished.

A hand closed around his ankle, Lyra, he realized, pulling him deeper into shadow, away from the direct line of the guard's vision. He let himself be moved, grateful for her quick thinking even as he registered the irony: she still didn't trust him, but she would save him to save them all.

"Thought I saw something," the guard muttered above them.

"Probably rats," another voice replied, bored and distant. "This whole section's infested. Come on, we're supposed to check the east wall next."

The light withdrew, and boots moved away, growing fainter until only the drip of water broke the silence. Apollo released his breath slowly, feeling the gold uncoil slightly within him, no longer compressed by fear.

"Go," Lyra whispered, releasing his ankle.

They crawled faster now, aware that their escape had been noticed, that the city was fully mobilizing.