The Golden Fool

#Chapter 6: One Small Sun - Read The Golden Fool Chapter 6: One Small Sun

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The stench of sickness hit Apollo even before the door shut behind him, a cloying, animal rot, sweetened by the herb bundles that drooped from the rafters like desiccated bats. For an instant, the god recoiled.

'This is what it comes to?' He, who had banished pestilence with a gesture, now forced to blink away tears stung not by empathy but by ammonia and decay.

The girl, Liska, let the blanket puddle at her ankles and tiptoed forward. "Mama, I brought someone," she said, her voice a brittle reed.

A woman lay on the cot, mid-thirties, perhaps, though the years had been salted with famine and fear.

Her face was a shrunken moon, cheeks collapsed, pale as cheese rind but for the wild fever roses stippling her brow. Every shallow breath snapped and popped, the sound of a green log burning.

Apollo hovered in the dusk between the doorway and the cot, uncertainty burning in his throat. It was not for him to trespass in these chambers of mortal grief.

But Liska's eyes, hungry for miracle, he knew that hunger, for it had made him, unmade him, and now called him to kneel at every bed of suffering in the world.

He crouched beside the woman, noting the bruised shadow under each fingernail, the webbed capillaries snaking up her neck.

"May I?" he said, reaching with a hand that only trembled a little. Liska nodded, lips pressed tight as a sutured wound. The sick woman's eyelids fluttered, but she did not wake.

Her name, Apollo learned from the girl, was Hessa. The name carried the hard "h" of the old river tribes and, for some reason, made him think of frost.

He pressed two fingers to the pulse-point at her wrist, it was rapid, thready, the rhythm of drowning.

He searched, reflexively, for the golden corona of vitality that used to halo every living thing. Nothing. His sight was only mortal, no more than a clever trick of nerves and guesswork and hope. He almost laughed at the pettiness of it.

'Once, I could see the illness crawl, could name its genus and unweave it with a rhyme,' he remembered, *'but now I am reduced to the games of men, observation, deduction, patience.'*

Still, some habits persist. He spoke to Liska in a voice meant for the dying. "She's burning up. Has Othra given feverroot?"

Liska shook her head. "Said we had to save it. For the little ones."

Apollo looked at the sleeping woman, then at the child, and felt a pang of admiration for Othra's logic, and a greater pang for its cruelty. The gods had invented triage, but mortals had perfected it.

He took a cup from the shelf, crudely turned, the rim chipped and stained dark with years of use, and went to the hearth, where a kettle hissed with the threat of boiling over.

He strained water through a scrap of muslin, found a scrap of bark that might pass for willow, and mashed it with the hilt of a knife.

It was ritual, in the old way, movements that bound the body to the task, so that the mind was freed for worse torments.

He brought the cup to Hessa's lips, let Liska steady her mother's head, and trickled the bitter into the breach between clenched teeth.

Some dribbled out, dark and muddy, and pooled in the hollow of her throat. Apollo dabbed it away with the hem of his sleeve.

"Will it help?" Liska's voice was so thin it barely left her mouth.

He lied, as gently as he could. "If anything will."

But the fever was a living thing, and it despised intrusion. Hessa convulsed, the body's revolt so violent it nearly toppled her from the cot.

She spewed the mixture, coughed blood and sputum in a spray that flecked Apollo's face and the girl's hands.

Liska began to wail, the sound a high, unbroken thread, as her mother twisted in the sheets and began to seize.

He saw, in that moment, all the failures of mortality. The medicines, the prayers, the waiting for strength to return that never did. Apollo, who had once been the god of medicine as well as of song, recognized the uselessness of both.

He wiped the blood from his chin, caught Liska's flailing arms, and pressed her head to his shoulder.

"It's all right," he murmured, as if the words meant anything at all.

"It's all right. I have you, you have her, it's all the same in the end."

He hoped Liska was too young to parse the meaning.

The seizure ended as swiftly as it began. Hessa stilled, her breath now a series of wet rattles, the chest rising and falling in diminishing arcs.

Apollo checked her pulse again, and found the thread thinner, more desperate. He'd seen this before, a body in its last act, rehearsing the exit.

He looked at Liska and, in the brittle light coming through the shuttered window, saw the divine cruelty of resemblance.

How the daughter's features, even in her snot-streaked panic, echoed the mother's. It would be a long grief, this one.

But the god in him was not yet finished. Apollo shut his eyes and reached, not with hand or voice, but with the remnant of that old, solar ache inside him.

He had sworn not to touch the aether, not to risk the attention of the ones who watched for such transgressions, but here, where the alternatives were death and despair, he decided that one small sun might go unnoticed.

He let his mind empty, then filled it with the memory of a summer afternoon. The way honey light poured through olive groves, the sting of sweat on golden skin, the sound of bees.

He called to the fire in the air, the secret music of white blood and marrow, and poured it into the shape of Hessa's dying body.

At first, nothing. Then, an answering shudder, Hessa's limbs slackened, the jaw clenched and unclenched. Her breath normalized, from an ugly, dying rattle into something closer to a healthy gasp.

The fever blush faded from her cheeks, replaced by a fleeting, impossible clarity in the eyes as Hessa blinked awake.

Liska, dumbstruck, stared at her mother as if expecting a further trick, another seizure, the return of the blood-froth. Instead, Hessa’s hand reached for her child, unsteady but purposeful.

She managed a smile, weak but real, and in that moment Apollo saw in Liska’s face the beginning of hope and the shadow of suspicion both.

He pressed the cup back into Hessa’s hands. "Drink," he said, and she did, and this time it stayed down.

He watched the pulse at her neck smooth itself, watched the haze in her eyes clear as if scrubbed by wind.

Hessa’s breathing evened, the violent percussion of minutes before replaced with deliberate, human effort.

Apollo resisted the urge to check his own hands for some telltale sign, a glow, a stigmata, anything.

But there was only the ache, and in his mind the memory of a thousand such resurrections, none as costly as this.

For a long time, the room was silent but for the breathing of three people, two mortal, one something else, knelt in the mud of his own undoing.

Liska hugged her mother, and the woman, though clearly exhausted, stroked the girl’s hair with all the tenderness that sickness had denied them for weeks.

When Liska turned, Apollo saw in her eyes a question she was afraid to ask. "What did you do?" she whispered.

He pressed a finger to his lips. "Don’t speak of it," he said, and the words fell out of his mouth with the force of law. "If you must, call it luck. Or call it Othra’s medicine. But you will tell no one the rest."

Liska nodded, wide-eyed as a fawn, and for a moment, Apollo sensed the possibility of worship rising in her,a dangerous thing, here at the edge of the world, when worship was the very fuel of his damnation.

He stood, dizzy with the effort. Hessa, sapped but alive, managed a hoarse "thank you" as she drifted back toward a genuine sleep.

The girl followed Apollo to the door, blanket bunched at her throat, and watched as he limped out into the fading day.

He walked in a daze, the world shimmering at its edges. His wound throbbed, the new pain layered over the old, a sandwich of suffering that at least felt honest.

The sun, low and mean behind the clouds, cast his shadow ahead of him, long, hunched, more scarecrow than god.

Apollo steered himself back toward Othra’s hut, letting the call-and-response of birds and distant axes guide him.

Each step felt heavier, he wondered if his punishment would be to suffer mortality’s cost with each miracle, to trade days of his own exile for each life restored.

Othra was inside, hunched over the low table with a pestle in her fist and a constellation of dried roots scattered like bones.

She looked up as he entered, first with the calculation of a predator, then with a glimmer of something like exasperated relief.

"You’re ambulatory, then," she said, and smacked the pestle down with a sound like a fractured knuckle. "I told you to rest. Which part of that did you not understand?"

He did not answer at once. The room was close, full of the resinous hush of things that grew in darkness.

He steadied himself against the door, uncertain whether he was about to vomit or weep. "There was a child," he said, but stopped, the weight of what had just transpired crowding the words from his mouth.

Othra snorted. "There are two dozen children in this village, if you count the ones who can still walk on their own. Most of them sick, and most of them past my help. Did you go looking for a grave to fall into?"

He could feel her gaze, hard and sharp as a whetted spoon, slicing through his hesitation. He considered telling her the truth, confessing the sliver of solar fire he had spent, the old power that had startled even the disease, but the words would not form.

To say it aloud was to make it real, and there was a part of him that still cherished the illusion of his own decay.

"I wanted to help," he said. "That’s all."

Othra rose, shoulders a hunch of stone beneath her shawl. She crossed the room and took his face in her cracked, purple-stained hands.

She turned his head left, then right, humming as she checked his eyes for fever, his lips for the pallor of infection.

"You wanted, so you did," she said, low. "That’s how people die stupid." But her hands softened at the edge of his jaw.

She let go, stepped back, and jerked a thumb at the cot. "Sit," she ordered. "You’re gray as a drowned cat, and half as warm. The fever’ll get you if you stand in that muck much longer."

Obedient, he lowered himself onto the cot, feeling the sharp twinge of healing bone and a deeper, foreign exhaustion that hummed through every cell.

In the hut’s gloom, the fire snapped blue and green, its sparks dancing in the draft from the eaves.

Othra busied herself with the mortar, but her eyes kept flicking over to him, as if expecting him to burst into flames or sprout wings.

After a time, she said, "You’re not from the south. You’re not from anywhere I know, and I’ve known more than most."

She set the pestle down and leaned on the table, peering at him across the churned surface.

Apollo tried on a smile, found it brittle. "Maybe I’m just good at hiding."

"Maybe you’re just bad at dying." Othra wiped her hands on her apron, then pulled a battered tin cup from the shelf.

Chapter 7: Gods Are Cause And Cure

She filled it from the pot on

the hearth and set it in Apollo’s hand. The flavor was nearly identical to yesterday’s, scorched and peevish, no balm at all, but it cut the tremor in his muscles and coaxed a shallow warmth up his throat.

He sipped it, and Othra let the silence press in. From outside came the thud of logs splitting and the dull, wordless bellow of men at labor, but the hut itself was insulated, wrapped in a hush that made every tick of the fire seem like a clock wound down.

"You should rest," Othra said, but her words were flat, no more than the shadow of concern, spoken out of habit.

She was about to say more, or perhaps just blink away the moment, when the door burst open with a violence that scattered every loose leaf and herb along the rafters.

The man with the spear, the one who had found Apollo, stood in the doorway, sweat streaking a face gone ashen and wild.

He cradled something in his arms, something wrapped in blankets that mewled and jerked. Behind him, a drizzle of muddy water pattered onto the reed-mat floor.

"Othra," he barked, "the babe's sick. She won't eat and her skin's hot as a forge." His voice, which the night before had measured and judged, was now all undiluted panic.

Othra was across the room before the word had finished. She snatched the bundle from the man and peeled back its layers with the deftness of a butcher.

The child was tiny, far too small for the world it had landed in, its face was red and puffy, lips cracked and dry. The infant's eyes, when they opened, were blue as glacier melt and just as cold.

"She's burning up," Othra muttered, then spat on her thumb and ran it along the baby's gums. She turned to Apollo, eyes narrow. "You seem to know fevers as well. Tell me if this is the kind that takes them quick, or the kind that lingers."

He did not want to touch the child. He did not want to risk the anger of whatever power had banished him, or the wrath of the mortals should he fail.

But the man's gaze was desperate, and Othra's expectation left no room for cowardice.

Apollo set the cup aside and leaned in, his hands hovering just above the baby's mottled chest.

He could feel the heat radiating off her, aggressive and wrong, the tide of infection already at flood.

The baby's breathing was shallow, each inhalation a squeaking struggle.

He closed his eyes, searching for even a thread of the old diagnostic sight, but there was nothing, just the knowledge, the memory of a thousand deaths, and the certainty that this child was already closer to the underworld than to the world above.

"She has little time," he said softly. "If you have willow bark, give it, but keep her cool and pray." There was more he might have done, were he whole, were he allowed, but Apollo forced down the urge to try. Even the gods knew the cost of hubris, in the end.

Othra nodded, setting the baby down in a reed cradle beside the fire. The man with the spear hovered, hands flexing toward his weapon and back, like a moth denied flame.

He looked at Apollo, then at Othra, then back, and the confusion in his face curdled into something darker. "She was healthy until yesterday," he said, voice low. "Until he came."

Othra didn't bother to answer, but the man was not finished. He advanced a step, spear in hand, the blade's edge catching the hearth-light. "No one else in the hut is sick. Not the mother, not the son. Just her. She fed at dawn, and by dusk she was burning."

Apollo felt the pulse of accusation, familiar as old music. He met the man's eyes and saw there the same blend of fear and suspicion that had greeted the first plague, the first famine, in every corner of the earth.

'Gods are always cause and cure,' he thought, *'never innocent bystander.'*

"I have brought nothing here but myself," Apollo said, voice gentle. "Disease does not travel by foot. Your village is beset, but not by me."

"Then why did Othra's medicine fail?" the man persisted, voice rising. "Why does it always fail now, after years and years of working?"

Outside, voices drifted closer, neighbors drawn by the commotion, by the sharpness of panic. Othra reached for her knife, not as a threat but as a tool, setting it on the table between herself and the man.

"Enough," she said, the word a hammer-blow. "If you want to gut him, wait until the child is either dead or saved. Until then, your job is to breathe and let me work."

He shifted, but did not drop the spear. Apollo looked at the child again, saw the slight tremor in her limbs, the glaze already forming on her lips. The fever would crack her, one way or another, within the day.

He forced himself to move, to act, and took up a strip of linen from the shelf, soaked it in the bucket near the fire, then wrung it out.

The ritual, gentle, steady, cooling the child's brow and the tender creases of her arms, was both ancient and insufficient.

But it was something, and for a time, that was all any of them had.

The man with the spear did not leave. He stood over Apollo, arms crossed, as if by sheer will he could force a cure.

Othra ground more willow, muttering to herself, hands shaking with the intensity of her focus. The baby whimpered, too weak even to cry.

An hour passed, then two, and the world outside Othra’s hut faded to a soft, blue dusk. The village, Apollo could sense, was gathering at the threshold, waiting for news, for a scapegoat, for a miracle.

When the baby failed to rouse at sunset, when even the cool cloths brought no comfort, the man with the spear reached the end of his patience.

He stabbed the spear into the pallet so hard the wood cracked. "If she dies, it’s his doing," he said, words flattening the hush. "Either by curse or rotten luck. Mark me."

Othra looked up from her mortar, and for all her compact frame, she seemed to broaden, a cold rage pouring into the lines of her face. "Mark you for a fool, Yvant. This child’s blood is no more his than the moon’s."

She scraped the paste from the bowl onto her finger and, ignoring Yvant’s looming, smeared it along the baby’s gums and down her throat.

The smell, sharp even above the fever-sweetness, seemed to rouse the infant for a moment; her mouth worked, chewing in reflex, before she fell limp again.

Apollo stood, slow and careful, ignoring the way his ribs stitched tight with each breath. "I am sorry," he said, and there was no divinity in it, only the subdued manner of the condemned.

He found his way outside, into the burnt-blue evening, and let the cold air comb the sweat from his brow.

Villagers clustered in the mud, their faces bleached by anxiety and the slanting, dying light. A woman in a patched shawl whispered behind her palm as he passed.

A youth spat and turned away, his contempt too brittle to hold Apollo’s gaze.

He walked to the edge of the clearing, boots squelching, and sank onto a broken cart wheel half-submerged at the field’s edge.

There, for the first time since exile, he allowed himself to weep.

He kept the sobbing quiet, tight between his teeth. It was neither the proud, operatic grief of a god nor the dignified silence of a man who has weathered loss, it was something mean and childlike, a convulsion of shame and fury at being caught in the web of mortals, needing and failing and grasping after the smallest flicker of control.

The evening crawled on, and dark began to settle its weight against the palisade.

When Apollo finally wiped his eyes, he saw that the forest beyond the fields had gone strange, there was a shimmer to the air that he recognized as the first stirrings of aether, the world’s old magic bleeding through at the edge of thought.

He looked skyward, and for an instant, the clouds parted, revealing the antique shape of constellations he himself had named, back when humans were still squinting up from the mud, abashed by the mystery of stars.

He ached for that certainty, the old order, his place among the spheres, the clean logic of myth. Instead, he had only the cold, the stink, the doubtful eyes of mortals, and the doom of a child that would likely not see sunrise.

"Her name is Mirra," said a voice behind him.

He turned, slow, leaden, to find Yvant, the spear-man, standing at a respectful remove.

The anger was gone from his face, replaced by exhaustion and the deeper grief of the already-bereaved.

Yvant’s eyes were brown, flecked with amber, and they held the bleak steadiness of someone who had killed more than he’d loved.

"Mirra," Apollo repeated, letting the name resolve on his tongue.

Yvant shifted his weight, as if the name alone were a burden. "I spoke poorly," he said, voice gone low. "Forgive the threat. When a man’s child is dying, even gods would be accused."

The apology was as begrudging as a soldier’s field meal, swallowed only because to leave it would mean death.

Apollo regarded him, unsure if this was a peace offering or merely the ritual of men at the margins of disaster. "You were not wrong to fear," he said. "I would have done the same, once."

Yvant grunted, a sound halfway to laughter. He leaned on his spear, the blade buried in the churned mud, and watched the sky where the stars were now burning with a clarity unknown to city nights. "You talk like a man who’s seen his own share of ruin."

"More than I ever wished," Apollo said, though the words came out brittle with the echo of centuries.

They stood together, the silence less hostile now, as if the mutual recognition of weakness had drawn a line between them and the rest of the waking world.

After a time, Yvant spoke again, softer. "Othra was my mother’s sister. When the fever took our village, she saved what she could. Hauled the rest up the ridge, burned the bodies herself. I watched her break a man’s jaw with a soup ladle when he wouldn’t leave his wife’s corpse. Never seen her lose before now. Not ever."

He did not say the rest, how the sight of Othra’s hands trembling over the sick baby had taken something solid out of him, left behind only the sand and the tides.

Apollo studied the man’s face, the deep creases that bracketed his mouth, the scar at the temple that ached blue in the cold.

"She is not lost yet," he said, though the words tasted more of habit than hope. "Children can surprise you."

Yvant nodded, then fished something from his belt, a small flask, lacquered black and stoppered with bone. He sloshed it with the care of a priest handling relics, then passed it over. "Mead," he said. "You’ll need it, tonight."

Apollo took the flask, raised it in silent salute, and drank. The stuff scorched him, then settled into a warmth so sudden he nearly wept again. "Thank you," he said, and meant it.

A holler came from the village, women’s voices, loud with the raw, unselfconscious terror of people whose world is always ending.

Yvant spun, fear crowding out his shame, and took off at a run. Apollo followed, his legs unwilling but compelled.

They reached Othra’s hut in time to find her at the threshold, back pressed to the door, arms stretched wide like a shield. Villagers clustered in a semi-circle, some clutching knives, others slinging stones in their fists.

The baby’s mother stood behind Othra, hair wild, eyes rolling, keening an animal sound. In the reed cradle, the baby lay still as a doll.

Chapter 8: A Song For The Dead

For an instant, Apollo thought the child had died in the interim. But Othra barked out, "She sleeps!" and the sound cut through the mob like a thrown axe.

The mother lunged to the cradle, hands frantic as she searched the child’s chest for movement.

When she saw the rise and fall, the faint, healthy flush eking its way into the baby’s cheeks, she gave a low, incredulous sob.

The hush that followed was thick as pitch, broken only by the slow realization rippling outward, the child had survived.

For a moment, the crowd hovered at the pivot between relief and suspicion, then suspicion asserted itself, as it always did among the desperate.

"Healing root," someone hissed, a woman with a bent nose and a baby bundled in her own arms. Her voice carried wild, bright accusation.

"She used the willow and the feverroot on the babe. That was meant for all of us."

A murmur caught and multiplied, hands tightening on stones, faces collapsing into the familiar grimace of those cheated by fate.

Another man, shoulders hunched with the violence of his years, spat into the mud.

"You hoard it for your favorites. My brother’s child is burning, but you said there was none to spare."

He glared at Othra, then at Apollo, and Apollo understood in that instant the old, old logic of sacrifice.

Othra straightened, jaw squared and mouth set like a blade. "If I hadn’t, she’d be dead already. There will be more feverroot, once the foragers return."

"Or none," said the bent-nosed woman. "And then what? Another child gone, while you keep yours breathing."

The air thickened, the crowd drawing closer, gathering itself for either surge or collapse. Apollo saw how the villagers orbited Othra, a churning of hate and need, the centripetal force of exile looming at the edge.

He knew from countless plagues how quick a mob could turn, how little it cared who bled so long as something did.

He stepped in front of Othra, his arms loose but ready.

"You need her more than you know," he said, voice pitched to carry.

"Kill her and you have nothing but worms and prayer, and I promise you the worms will not answer."

A stone arced from the crowd, striking the door frame with a thunk. Another followed, grazing Apollo’s shoulder.

The pain was minor, but the symbolism was not lost on him. *'First the god, then the healer,'* he thought, *'and after that, only the grave.'*

Yvant shoved his way to the front, spear horizontal, keeping the crowd at bay.

"Enough," he roared, the word as sudden as thunder.

"We are not animals. Othra saved your children and your kin, all these years. You blame her now because you're afraid. But you owe her your lives, every one of you."

For a moment, it seemed the mob might turn on him, too. Then the baby in the cradle gave a soft, mewling cry, and the crowd stilled.

Even the bent-nosed woman fell silent, rocking her own child as if uncertain whether it would be the next to burn.

Othra's chest heaved once, and she staggered, a tremor passing from her knees to the top of her scalp.

The night shouldered in, the flicker of torches painting the crowd's faces in grotesque relief, predator, scavenger, the doomed and the soon-to-be.

The silence hung so long it threatened to birth a new, terrible outcome, until a young man in a torn jerkin, eyes rimmed with the red of fresh grief, surged forward with a pitchfork raised like a banner.

Yvant was turned half to the crowd, his voice still raised in argument when the pitchfork caught him in the side.

A wet, audible pop, and the shaft drove straight through, the lower prong tangling in his ribs. The force of it threw him against Othra, who tried to break his fall but only succeeded in staggering backward, herself pinioned by his dead weight.

For a single, impossible moment, the only sound was the hiss of torch fire.

Then the crowd, freed from its momentary paralysis, erupted. The woman with the bent nose shrieked, unsure if she was fleeing or attacking.

Another man, younger still, tore the spear from Yvant's memoryless hands, wielding it at Apollo with the desperate, incompetent violence of a cornered animal.

Apollo ducked the first swing, reaching instinctively for the old power that had taught men to fight and win.

Nothing answered.

The spear clipped his ear, warm blood sluicing down his neck, and in the next instant Othra was on the ground, Yvant’s body splayed across hers, his face already slackening into the mask of the beloved dead.

The villagers pressed in, a maelstrom of hunger and old, unreasoning terror. Someone seized Apollo by the hair, another by the arm, and suddenly he was dragged to his knees, boots digging deep furrows in the mud.

A foot pressed between his shoulder blades, pinning him, while a babble of voices debated whether to cut his throat or simply bury him alive in the midden.

He waited for the knife, for the club, for the stone, waited with the bleak calm of one who has seen this scene rendered in every epoch, every civilization, the ending always the same.

But as the debate mounted, so too did the discord: some shouted for clemency, others for proof, a few to let the godless murderer go and save their wrath for the next, more deserving target.

Above the melee, Othra’s voice rose, a banshee’s wail, cracked by grief and rage. "You fools! Don’t you see? The fever is in you!"

She clawed at the mob, her hands spattered with Yvant’s blood, her eyes wild as the moon.

"You think killing him will save you? He’s no more to blame than the wind or the worms."

Her words fell on the crowd like a curse.

There was a faltering, then a shudder, for a second, they saw themselves, not as a righteous fury, but as the dying animals they were, muddied, scared, and already marked for death by some invader too small for even Olympus to see.

The foot eased from Apollo’s back. The hands that had gripped his hair and arms fell away, uncertain and clammy.

Apollo rolled onto his side, coughing up the taste of blood and mud, and blinked through the haze to where Yvant’s body sprawled, haloed by the torchlight and the ruin of Othra’s grief.

He dragged himself toward the fallen man. The movement was neither grand nor dignified, it was the crawl of the condemned toward a relic or a grave.

The villagers recoiled as he passed, clearing a path as if afraid his shadow could infect them.

When he reached Yvant, Apollo paused, kneeling in the muck beside the corpse, the spear still shuddering in its wound.

The music that lived inside him, the old, golden song, had been a source of power, of arrogance, of command over life and death.

Here, now, it was a splintered, shivering thing. He pressed two fingers to Yvant's throat, found the absence, then closed the man's eyes with a thumb and a gentleness no one had ever accused him of possessing.

He could have said nothing. It was not his place, not anymore. But the silence in the clearing clamored for meaning, for ritual, for the illusion of order.

Apollo bowed his head and began to sing.

The song was ancient, one of the first, forged in the blue dark before men understood the difference between lullaby and lament.

It was a hymn to the setting sun, a promise that even godlight could be lost and yet return, battered and changed.

The language was older than the stones, the timbre rough as sea glass. It vibrated in Apollo's ruined chest, rebounding from his cracked ribs and the fever-damp lungs, filling the clearing with a sound both beautiful and broken.

Othra's keening quieted, the villagers petrified by the strangeness of it. Even those who had moments ago shrieked for blood now listened, transfixed, as if the song might explain what had just happened, or at least soften its edges.

He watched as the feverroot woman knelt in the mud, tears streaming openly down her face.

The mother of the revived baby cradled her child as if it might vanish at any moment. One by one, the villagers lowered their weapons, their faces slackening from masks of vengeance to the blank, naked stare of the newly-bereaved.

Apollo sang Yvant's name into the hush, once, twice, then a third time, until the syllables lost their shape and became an offering to whatever hungered for the dead in this place.

It was not a prayer, it was not even forgiveness. It was simply the act of remembering, of refusing to let a life slip past the ledger without song.

When it ended, the hush was complete. No one moved. Othra stood, blood-caked and trembling, her eyes locked on Apollo's as if daring him to betray the moment with a word.

He did not. Some debts, even for the gods, were meant to remain uncollected.

The morning came like an apology, soft, gray, and wet enough to rinse the worst of the night from the village’s collective skin.

They buried Yvant at the lip of the forest, beneath the roots of a yew that had survived the old burnings.

Othra presided, her hands washed clean, her hair bound up in a knot that made her look even more severe than usual.

The villagers came in waves, some alone, some by the handful, bringing small, strange offerings.

A scrap of blue cloth, a whittled charm, a few with nothing but open palms and the slow, deliberate lowering of the head.

Apollo was there, but apart, standing a dozen paces off, watching as if through the scrim of a vanished world.

Liska found him as the crowd drifted away. She wore a tunic several sizes too large, belted with a strip of dyed gut, and her eyes were red but dry.

"You sang," she said, as if it explained everything.

He nodded. "It’s what I do."

She mulled this over, then shrugged. "Mama says you’re leaving. She says you have to."

"She’s right." He watched as Othra finished tamping the earth. The woman’s shoulders slumped, as if the act of burial drained even the memory of strength from her body. "It’s better that way. For everyone."

Liska wrinkled her nose, unconvinced. "You could stay. The fever’s gone. People are scared, but... it’s not all bad." She paused, then added, "If you want, I’ll show you the place in the woods where the mushrooms grow. The red ones. They taste like rain, if you cook them first."

He almost laughed at the offer, so earnest it hurt. "Thank you," he said. "But I have to be somewhere else."

He left her at the graveside, walking back through the waking village, where the violence of the night before had burnt out and left only the silt of regret.

Even the dogs, fighters and scavengers all, gave him a berth.

He found Othra in her hut, scrubbing dried blood from the table. She didn’t look up. "I suppose you’ll want your cloak back," she said, voice flat and without expectation.

He let the silence answer for him. She finished the scrubbing, set the rag aside, then poured two cups from a battered jug that smelled of apples and something faintly medicinal.

"The road east is flooded last I heard," she said, passing him the cup.

"But you could skirt the hills, keep to the forest until you hit the old king’s road. There’s a market town, Marrowgate, three days if you walk without dying. Four, if you die a little on the way."

He sipped, and the liquid bit his tongue, then warmed his chest. "What’s in Marrowgate?"

"Everything and nothing. People who don’t ask questions. Enough faces you can lose your own in." Othra’s gaze was hard, but behind it, something unwound, just a fraction. "They have a watchtower. You might like it."

"Why would I?"

Othra shrugged, as if the effort of explaining was beneath her. "People like you always want to see what’s coming."

Chapter 9: Roads Without Gods

He savored the line. "I never know if the next horror will come from the mountains or the sea," he replied, and found that, for the first time in a while, he was not lying.

Othra ducked under the table and came up with a brittle sheath of parchment, the corners curled and the surface stippled with scars from a dozen hands before his.

She smoothed it flat with both palms and pointed to the cluster of ink-dark shapes along the edge.

"If you’re going anywhere, you’ll want to know the world you’re walking into." Her finger traced the rough bounds.

"We’re here, north of the split river, in the woods of Outer Groth. Most of the land east is marsh, then hardens to scrub. There’s the old keep on the ridge, but it’s been empty since the last cull."

Apollo leaned over the map, watching as her callused finger hopped from border to border.

The shapes were less cartography than conjecture, every town marked with a symbol that looked like a scab or a wound. "Who rules here?" he asked.

"No one you'd care to meet," Othra replied.

"The coast belongs to the Sable Duke, though his grip doesn't reach this far inland. The river's held by the Temple Guard, fanatics, mostly. West is the old empire, what's left of it. They say the city of Glassmar is still standing, but I wouldn't trust the news. South, it's the republics, each smaller and meaner than the last. If you keep going, you'll hit the salt cities, though by then, you'll be dead or rich, maybe both."

He took it in, following the jagged lines as if they were the score of a forgotten song. "And the mountains?"

She grunted. "The Cloudspines. Beyond that, nothing but stories." She eyed him, and for a moment he could see the shape of the person she might have been without the long siege of grief and necessity. "You're not planning to stay off the roads, are you?"

He shook his head. "I have to move. East, then south."

"Good," she said, rolling up the map and shoving it into his hands. "You stay here, you'll be dead before the month turns."

He tucked it under his arm, unsure if the gift was a kindness or a veiled command. Othra reached for the jug, refilled her own cup, and regarded him with the weary magnanimity of an old god taking confession.

"There's places out there worse than here," she said.

"You see a village by a black creek, keep walking. If you catch the smell of roasted copper, turn around. And never, never eat the bread if it's still warm." She looked up, and he realized she was perfectly serious.

He nodded, thinking how every world, every civilization, had its own subtle rules of survival; mortal or divine, the only real wisdom was knowing when to run.

She pushed a small parcel across the table and a walking stick. "Dried meat, strip of cheese, and the last of the white root. Use it only if you're dying for real."

She hesitated, then added, "You owe me a favor. Not the kind you pay back with coin."

He took the bundle, the map, and the bitter understanding that Othra had decided his future with the same blunt force she'd used on his wounds.

She poured another cup of her sour cider and knocked it back, then turned away, busying herself with some new, necessary task.

He left her there, shoulders hunched, already unreachable.

The road east was less a road than a series of betrayals strung together by ruts and deadfall. He walked it with the slow, calculated indifference of an invalid, every step measured out of spite for the world that wanted him crawling.

The morning's drizzle clung to his hair, soaked the old tunic, chilled the sweat at his collarbones, but Apollo pressed forward, refusing to cede even a degree to the weather or his own body's revolt.

He kept to the forest margins, where the new growth bled into the ghosts of old burns, and the only witnesses were the stunted pines and mourning doves.

The map was no help, distances shrank and expanded according to the logic of a dying civilization, and half the landmarks had already been swallowed by regrowth or rot.

He trusted nothing but the sun's slow rise behind the clouds and the memory of how the world ought to be stitched together.

By noon, he was already on the far side of the next valley. Looking back, the village had vanished, erased by the folds of ground and the slow, forgiving haze.

A relief, but also a wound: for all its cruelties and squalor, the village had offered him a place, a function, even if only to be blamed and then exiled.

'Onward,' he told himself, though his legs begged otherwise.

The woods thickened, and the terrain grew unpredictable, quagmires disguised as meadows, sudden swells of granite, the black twist of bramble ready to snag and draw blood.

Once, when he paused to piss against a birch, he glimpsed a pair of eyes in the understory, yellow, flattened by the gloom.

Predator or scavenger, it trailed him for half an hour, never daring closer, then peeled off when the trees gave way to a long, stony ridge.

He ate on the move, tearing strips of Othra's jerky with teeth still sore from the night's beatings.

The cheese was pungent, almost offensive, it left his tongue numb, which he counted as a mercy.

For hours, there was only the rhythm of walking, the ache in his side, and the inexorable sense that something was following.

He pushed the suspicion aside. Paranoia, he told himself, was the birthright of every exile.

By twilight, the woods ended abruptly at the edge of a vast, churned plain. Once, Apollo guessed, it had been farmland, terraced rows of stubble and shale, punctuated by the withered skeletons of windmills.

Now, it was a sea of mud and wind, the only movement a murder of crows pecking at a patch of dark, unnameable spoil.

He skirted the field, following the line of an old stone wall.

A quarter of a league along the crumbling wall, he heard a voice. At first, Apollo mistook it for the wind, high and tuneless, a child’s hum carried over the barren rows, but as he rounded a tangle of half-dead hawthorn, he found the singer, a girl, no more than fifteen, perched on a toppled grindstone.

Her hair was the color of frostbitten wheat, scraped back with a leather thong, and her face was so pale it seemed almost luminous in the dusk.

She wore breeches hitched high and a patched vest that might once have belonged to a much larger brother.

Her feet were bare, scabbed and splayed against the freezing earth as if daring it to break her.

She did not look up when he approached, but her humming stopped, replaced by the slow, surgical picking of a scab on her elbow.

A basket rested at her side, half-filled with scavenged roots and something that looked like a withered gourd.

"Not much for travelers, this way," she said, still not meeting his eye.

Her accent was local but softened, no hint of the swamp drawl, more the clipped lilt of someone who read aloud, if only to herself. "The town’s the other direction."

"I’m not headed to town," Apollo replied, unsure whether to keep moving or risk the strangeness of conversation. "Just passing through."

This earned him a sidelong glance. Her eyes were a muddy green, flecked with gold where the sun caught them.

"Nobody passes through. Pasture’s all brined. If you’re not after the villages, you’re after the field. And no one but idiots and thieves comes for the field."

"What’s special about it?"

She snorted and spat, a glistening arc landing on the rocks. "Nothing. That’s the problem. Used to be barley. Then it was wheat. Now, it’s nothing."

She looked at him squarely now, as if daring him to say what all the rest did. "Father says the ground’s cursed. He won’t let us plant, but he won’t sell it off, either. Says it’s a matter of blood and principle."

Apollo followed her gaze to the open land: a long, pocked patch of earth that seemed to drink more light than it reflected.

No birds circled overhead, and not even the crows were bold enough to hop the wall. He felt the tingle of old power there, a resonance in the soles of his feet. Not divine, but not wholly human, either.

"You live close by?" he asked, keeping his hands visible and his voice low.

The girl nodded, chin jutting toward a distant stand of black willows where an old farmhouse sagged like a drunk at the end of a bender.

"That’s ours. If you’re looking for work or food, there’s neither, unless you count the rats." She flexed her toes, as if to demonstrate her ease with hunger. "Name’s Vela."

"Apollo," he said, which, stripped of its godly freight, sounded almost plausible.

Vela considered this, then shrugged. "You can come in, if you want. Just don’t mind my father. He’s mean even when sober."

Something in the way she said this, bored, but not quite hopeless, made Apollo wonder how long she’d been warning off strangers, and how many had listened.

He shook his head. "I won’t trouble you," he said.

The words surprised even him, he’d been ready to accept any fraying thread of hospitality, if only to escape the ache in his bones.

But there was a clarity to the girl’s posture, a warning not just of threat but of kinship, the pride of those who had nothing left to lose, and so would kill to keep it.

He recognized the pose. He had lived it once, in finer clothes and under better names.

She seemed to sense his withdrawal and, with a flick of her heel, sent a stone arcing into the field. "Suit yourself," she said, but did not get up.

The silence between them stretched, thin as the light.

Apollo turned to go, then looked back, unable to resist a question. "What happened to the crops?"

Vela picked at the gourd’s rind with a small knife, more for the motion than any hope of a meal. "Some say blight. Others say the river changed. Last year, a man from the city came with a barrow full of powders and told us to sprinkle them at dusk. Next morning, the dogs were dead and the barley was blacker than my father’s teeth."

She gestured at the field, its furrows glistening with brine. "It’s not coming back. That’s what I think."

He recognized, then, the underlying signature, faint, but unmistakable, like the tail of a comet in a cloudy dusk.

The stench of another power, one that had moved through here before him, wound itself into the dead furrows and the ragged lines of her wrists.

It was not Olympian. It was older, or perhaps just hungrier, it had left a thumbprint in the dirt that would outlast the bones of the families who farmed it.

Apollo almost offered to look at the field, to test the soil with the old rites, but stopped himself.

The knowledge would only confirm what Vela already knew, and would frame him, again, as the bearer of bad news.

Instead, he met her eyes, and for the first time, she did not look away.

"You have a gift for land," he said. "You see it clearer than most."

She snorted, but the edge of her mouth softened. "Tell that to my father."

He gave a slight bow, the gesture ingrained, shorn of its regal bearing but not of dignity. "You will outlast the curse," he said, and the statement was both prophecy and apology.

She watched him go, and, as he rounded the next bend, he felt the gaze on his back, not hopeful, not angry, just waiting.

The way all children watched the old gods, long after the gods had stopped watching them.

Chapter 10: Marrowgate

He traveled on, the landscape yawning into a three-day monotony of freezing wind, shallow gullies, and the black veins of marshland that grew fatter as he approached the river.

The banks had long since collapsed, taking half the ancient causeway with them, so that his crossing was less a march than a series of leaps from stone to stone, with a dozen chances to drown or snap an ankle along the way.

The first night, he slept beneath the upturned hull of a wrecked river skiff, gnawed by mites and the memory of a lullaby that might have been his own.

On the second, he found a half-abandoned shrine, its walls scorched with the sigils of every faith that had ever tried and failed to claim the hinterlands.

He left a coin for the dead, though he doubted any would bother to collect.

By the time the towers of Marrowgate came into view, Apollo was half-starved and wholly filth, and more than once had to pause and spit blood into the mud just to keep moving.

The city was a contradiction: a ring of pale, ossified ramparts rising out of the salt marsh, its flanks swaddled in the blue haze of woodsmoke and the stink of boiling tallow.

The gate itself arched, ribbed in bone-white stone, stood open to the morning, guarded only by two children in armor so mis-sized and patched that it looked like a carnival mockery of war.

He passed through the gate in silence. Neither child challenged him. The streets within were a warren of alleys, each clogged with refuse and the industry of the desperate.

Vendors hawked roots and scrap, mending women squatted in the gutters with their baskets of ragwork.

Above, the tenements leaned together like drunks, their windows stitched with the yellow light of crowded lives.

Every surface was etched with messages: threats, bargains, the names of gods long since lapsed.

A woman with a face tattooed in spirals offered to sell him a charm against plague.

He demurred, but she pressed a lump of beeswax into his palm anyway, whispering in a voice so hoarse it might have been disease itself.

He pocketed the charm, out of habit more than hope.

He walked until the alleys widened into a square, at the center of which hunched a structure that might once have been a temple, or a courthouse, or both.

Its roof was gone, blown off by fire or by time, and the columns that remained were webbed with iron scaffolds, as if someone had tried to stitch the ruins back together and then given up halfway through.

A notice board sagged at the edge of the square, its surface so layered with decrees, warrants, and pleas for help that the oldest notices had rotted into illegibility and the newest were already scored with knife cuts.

Apollo lingered there, scanning the script, most of it crude and ill-spelled, more threat than information.

But one posting caught his eye: a call for healers, any with even the meanest art, to report to the east quarter. Payment in coin, food, or safe lodging.

He considered ignoring it. But hunger, and the deeper ache of irrelevance, drove him toward the promise of utility.

The east quarter clung to the marsh edge, where the city’s walls were lowest and the stink of the salt flats crept in with every tide.

Apollo followed the signs, a crude red slash painted on doors, on gutterstone, even on the skin of the ailing and their minders, down a warren of alleys that narrowed with every turning, until the sky was a trickle of cold daylight and the ground was slick with the seepage of overfull middens.

The sick-house was a reclaimed warehouse, its upper windows knocked out and patched with rags and twisted wire.

The entrance was watched by two men in filthy blue sashes, leaning on cudgels, their eyes yellow with fatigue and suspicion. One of them stopped him with a bark.

"You a surgeon, then? Or just a picker?"

Apollo considered the word picker. He decided it was better not to ask. "I have some training," he said, letting his voice slip into the flat humility mortals expected.

The man grinned, showing a rack of teeth that had, at some point in the past, endured a violent sorting. "Don’t need ’training’ so much as hands." He jerked a thumb at the door. "Follow. Don’t touch nothin’ that ain’t breathing."

Inside, the air changed: it was thick not just with the wet, sweet reek of rot, but with the massed exhalation of dozens, maybe hundreds, of the dying and the doomed.

The cots were crammed so tightly along the floor that Apollo had to step over them, careful not to tread on arms or the loose, sallow feet that stuck out at random angles.

A woman, head shaven, arms banded with black string, met him near the rear, where a curtain of burlap offered a pretense of privacy for the most desperate. "You volunteering?" she asked, voice flinty.

He nodded, and she eyed him for a heartbeat, then shrugged. "Good. We need more help with the splits. The bleeding’s worst in the mornings, but you can start now. Tools are that way, if you don’t have your own."

She pointed him toward a scarred bench, where a roll of knives and hooks lay soaking in sour water.

He picked out a blade, its edge more jagged than true, and forced himself into the work. Each patient was much like the last: a child, a woman, an old man, all burning with fever and fighting the agony of eruption.

The disease began with a cough, then a darkening of the gums, then one day the flesh split open along the jawline or ribs, a black resin crusting at the wound’s lip. None survived long after that.

He did what he could. He cleaned, bandaged, sometimes cut away the necrotic tissue if the patient screamed loud enough to prove there was something left to save.

He found that if he hummed, not a song, exactly, just an old, repetitive phrase, the pain seemed to slow, and his hands moved less from memory than from the echo of another life.

The other orderlies watched him with something between contempt and curiosity. No one here had the energy for rivalry.

They simply worked, rotating the dying from cot to cot, hauling away the dead when space was needed.

After a timeless spell of blood and exhaustion, the head orderly, Apollo heard the others call her "Nara" tossed him a rag and jerked her chin toward the exit. "You’re done for now. Stand in the yard if you don’t want to take the sickness home."

He rinsed his arms in a barrel of brined water and staggered out to the yard, where the dying sunlight pooled in a slant of colorless amber.

The air was cold, edged with the promise of frost, but after the stench of the sick-house it felt almost clean.

He let himself slump against a post, closed his eyes, and counted the heartbeats slow until he remembered how to breathe.

A shadow fell over him. "You took the shift through dusk. People notice that." It was Nara again, eyes narrowed, the scars on her scalp catching the light in fine, pink traceries.

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

She reached into a cloth purse at her belt and pulled out two coins, rough discs pressed with the crude likeness of a wolf’s head.

She pressed them into his palm; they were warm from her body, and heavier than he expected. "One for the work, one for the quiet. Some talk too much the first day."

He weighed the coins, recognizing neither the alloy nor the insignia. But worth was always arbitrary: the breath of mortal commerce, the promise of food or shelter. "Thank you," he said.

Nara shrugged, but her mouth twitched at the edges. "If you want more, come back tomorrow. If you don’t, nobody will curse your name. Just don’t cross the north alley after dark. They say there’s a cutter who preys on the weak ones."

He let the warning pass over him, the way a wolf lets the wind pass through its pelt. "Will you sleep tonight?" he asked, and surprised himself with the question.

She hesitated, then gave a sharp, amused grunt. "If the dead are kind, maybe. But there’s so many of them, some are bound to be bastards."

She thumbed her nose, leaving a streak of black across the bridge.

"Try the stew house by the river. It’s cheap and thick, and they pour two cups for every coin if you don’t ask what’s in it." She turned, then paused.

"You’re not what you look like," she said, not quite a question.

He smiled. "No one is," and the words hung between them, strangely cordial.

She left, and Apollo lingered until the light was almost gone, the yard slowly filling with the shufflings of other orderlies, the odd, hushed laugh, the unsteady singing of someone already drunk.

The coins burned in his palm, marking him: not as a god, or even a healer, but as someone who could be owed or paid, who had a stake in the world’s slow turning.