

The Golden Fool #Chapter 4: Treating A Fallen God - Read The Golden Fool Chapter 4: Treating A Fallen God

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He refused them this entertainment, though the woman's touch was as merciless as any torment devised by Hades.

She wiped her palms on her skirts and eyed him sidelong. "I am called Othra," she said, as if carving her name in granite.

Her slate eyes sparkled with a humor so dry it threatened to ignite. "Healer, midwife, fixer of all things soft and leaking. This will not be gentle."

Apollo considered a retort, something barbed and dazzling, but found himself caught by the steadiness of her stare.

'She sees me like a frog sees the fly, something to be taken apart.'

He nodded, which cost him another flare of pain. Othra grinned, revealing teeth more wolf than woman, and set about her work.

She barked orders at the children, who scattered, and then drew her implements from a pouch stitched with runes. The contents were simple, almost insultingly so.

A bone-handled knife, a pot of sticky resin, a wad of dried moss, cords of sinew, a flask that promised only agony.

Othra pressed the flask into Apollo's hand. "Drink," she said. "For the pain, and to keep your tongue from wagging too much."

He drank.

It was not the honeyed nectar of Olympus, nor even the mulled wine of a prosperous city. It tasted of scorched roots and regret, and left a raw scorch that ran all the way to his toes.

For a terrible moment, he wondered if it was poison, or if Othra simply enjoyed watching her patients squirm. She gave him no time to ponder, the blade was already slicing through the skin, brisk as opening fruit.

The world went momentarily white. Apollo, who had witnessed the sundering of cities and the birth of stars, fixed his eyes on the strange, unyielding face of Othra, refusing to grant her, or the mortals gathered, the spectacle of a scream.

The knife worked beneath his ribs, deft and merciless, and he felt the peculiar liberation of pressure, the slither of something foreign leaving his body. Blood surged, hot and immediate, pouring over his hip and onto the packed earth.

Othra clucked her tongue, working the moss into the wound with the same economy as a scribe copying out a familiar curse. "You don't bleed like a man, but you heal like one," she said, voice pitched low for his ears alone.

"What are you, Lio? What brings you to crawl at the edge of our world?"

He managed, through teeth gritted tight enough to splinter, "Curiosity. And the enduring stupidity of hope."

She laughed, not unkindly, and set about cauterizing the wound with a sliver of sun-heated metal pulled from the fire. The smell was obscene, Apollo watched the curl of smoke rise from his own flesh, and for the first time felt not horror, but a kind of detached interest.

'So this is suffering, unadorned by fate or prophecy.'

When it was done, Othra bound him in linen and bark, tracing a sigil over the dressing that prickled with faint, familiar energy. The pain ebbed, replaced by the recollection of ancient songs, snatches of the old tongue, threading harmony into agony.

The other mortals drifted out, eyes averted and feet avoiding the black blood slick, but Othra lingered, wiping her hands on a scrap of rag and regarding him with a raptor's patience.

"Can you stand?" she asked, and before he could muster a dignified refusal, she slung his arm over her bony shoulder and levered him upright.

He balked at letting a woman.. let alone one smaller than certain breeds of ram, bear his weight, but found the alternative, collapsing face down into his own ichor, unpalatable.

They shuffled through the mossy threshold, his wounded side jolting with each step, down a slope where smoky sunlight filtered through the teeth of the pine forest.

Othra's hut was not the sort of place one discovered by accident, it was wedged into the roots of a dead yew, its walls wattled with bone-white reeds, its door a repurposed shrine tablet that bore the faded, vandalized likeness of some forgotten saint.

The air inside pressed close and hot, heavy with the scent of simmering poultices and old grief.

Othra eased him onto a pallet layered with sheep pelts and dried ferns. He caught his breath, taking in the interior.

Bundles of herbs strung from rafters, a shelf lined with clay vessels, a cracked mirror leaning drunkenly against the wall, reflecting his own face.

Bloodless, eyes sunk and burning. Othra's eyes, he noticed for the first time, were a queer shade between slate and stormcloud, more mineral than liquid, and her lashes so pale they looked singed away.

The left eye drooped at the outer corner, lending her every glance a slantwise calculation. On her cheek, just below the bone where a warrior's helmet would rest, was a seam of old scar, as if someone had tried to split her face and failed.

He watched as she moved about the room.

First to the shelf, where she scraped a spoonful of amber resin into a cup, then to the hearth, where a kettle, blackened and lopsided, hung over a blue-tongued flame. She poured water, the steam leaping up as though it, too, wished to escape the confines of this place.

"I will not ask your true name again," she said, not turning. "It is a small village. Most who come here do so for one of two reasons: to disappear, or to ransom the dead."

She dropped a twist of herb into the cup. The scent was sharp, resinous, astringent as betrayal. "But you are neither kind. You have the hands of a harper, the feet of a runner, the stare of a thing that remembers better times."

Apollo tried to muster a compliment. "You see much for a healer."

"Pain opens the eyes," she replied, setting the cup beside him. "Drink. Not for the wound, but for the fever. There is a sickness running through the valley."

She rolled up the sleeves of her tunic, revealing arms corded with sinew, burn marks striping the skin in parallel crescents. "Started with the spring lambs, as it always does. Now it takes the children first, and the old. Soon it will take the rest."

She unstopped another flask, this time pouring a measure into her own callused palm, rubbing it between her fingers before daubing it onto Apollo's wound.

"You need not fear it. Your malady is older, and less contagious."

The taste of the tea was an assault, resin and vinegar, undertones of rot, a bitterness that snagged his tongue and refused to let go. Apollo drank regardless, holding Othra's gaze, refusing to submit to her scrutiny.

He had seen healers before, on battlefields, in firelit halls, beside the sickbeds of doomed heroes, but none with hands so quick to cut away the parts that could not be saved.

She watched as he drank, arms folded, and finally settled herself on a stool opposite. For a time, they listened to the rain.

Othra worked a blade between her nails, prying out the dirt and sap with surgical precision, while Apollo contemplated the ceiling's slow and rhythmic drip.

He grew aware, gradually, of the absence within him. Where once there had been a sun.

Clean, inextinguishable, forever rising, now there was only the faintest glow, the memory of radiance. He could feel the world pressing in, hungry, unconcerned with what had been lost.

Apollo wondered what the gods dreamt of, if they dreamed at all, or if, once cast down, even dreams proved a luxury.

"You will want to sleep," Othra said, at last. "When you wake, if you wake, you will tell me what you are running from. I will have payment, one way or the other."

He considered the threat, measured its weight, and found it almost comforting. "I have nothing worth your trouble."

Othra snorted. "Then you will owe me. I collect debts with interest. Ask anyone." She gathered her tools, arranged them in a hessian bundle with the same care she'd used on his flesh, and turned back at the door.

"I will send the boy with broth in the morning," she added, then left him alone with the fire.

Sleep was not a voluntary act. It seized him, dragged him under long before he let the cup slip from his hand.

The darkness that greeted Apollo was not the gentle velvet of oblivion but a world of shapes and memory, burned into him as stars cling to the night.

He saw, briefly, his old self. Radiant and despised, torching the world with each act of kindness. He saw the face of the father who had thrown him down, and the mother who had wept at the edge of the heavens as he fell.

Mostly, he saw the faces of the mortals he'd scorned from afar, now so close that their breath mingled with his own.

He woke once, in the deep blue before dawn, to the sound of the boy Othra had sent, the one with the missing tooth, setting down a bowl of broth by his head.

The boy watched him for a moment, uncertain, then whispered, "I thought you would look different. Or be dead."

Chapter 5: Victim Of The Plague

Apollo was too tired to argue. Instead, he slurped the lukewarm broth, found in it the ghost of anise and marrow, and let his mind sink into the depths of the pallet beneath him again.

Sleep came yet again, and this time, so did a dream.

He dreamed of the palace at Delphi, columns scorched white by sun, echoing with the laughter of nymphs who no longer remembered his name.

He dreamed of his own hands, unbloodied, coaxing gold from the lyre, then smashing it against a marble step as if to punish the song for daring to persist in a world gone small and cold.

In the dream, he walked the length of the palace alone, calling for his sister, his muses, his hounds, and finding only the echo of his own voice, as thin and bitter as the tea Othra had pressed on him.

He awoke after a time that could have been minutes or years. The hut's interior was washed in the sickly light of dawn, and beside the fire, Othra sat hunched over a shallow basin, her hands red to the wrist.

She made no move to acknowledge him until he sat up, wincing at the fresh heat where flesh had sealed over the wound.

Othra's eyes flicked to him, measuring. "You survived the night. That means something here."

He said nothing. The air in the hut, though still thick with the odors of roots and animal, seemed less oppressive than before. Through the gaps in the wall, he could see slats of sky, brightening by the moment.

There was an urge inside him to get up, to walk into the dawn and see if he could still command the sun to rise by the old rituals, but he stayed where he was, letting the minutes build a palisade around his new, ruined self.

Othra cleaned her hands in silence, then crossed to where he sat. She pressed her palm to his brow, fingers cool and sure. "The fever is gone," she said. "You will live." She did not sound disappointed, but neither did she sound especially pleased.

He felt the need to fill the silence, to justify the space he occupied. "Your remedies are unlike any I've known."

She grunted. "You come from the south. City-bred, perhaps, or farther yet. What did you do there, before the forest took you?"

He sifted through a hundred plausible lies, but none seemed worth the labor. "I was... a singer. Once." He smiled, though he could feel the lie clench his heart. "Now I am only a listener."

Othra stared for a moment, then barked a laugh sharp enough to crack bone. "You will find little music here, unless you count the howling of wolves and the moaning of the dying."

She reached for a pouch at her belt, withdrew a pinch of dried petals, and dropped them into the embers. The fire snapped, spat blue, filled the air with a sweet and unfamiliar odor.

"Rest," she said. "Whatever sent you here will find you soon enough. You may as well heal first."

He nodded, then forced himself back down onto the pallet, arms folded behind his head. Othra, apparently satisfied that he would not die at her convenience, ducked out into the gray light.

He lay for some time, counting the slow beat of blood behind his eyes, until the noise of the waking village seeped in.

The clanging of metal, the cawing of birds, the muttered bartering that passed for commerce in this muddy outpost.

For all his injuries, Apollo was not built for idleness. The world outside pressed against the hut, demanding witness, and despite the ache in every joint, he rose and dressed himself in the least offensive scraps he could find, his own torn tunic, washed and dried on the line behind Othra's hut, now faintly scented with smoke and rosemary.

He stepped out, squinting against the day. The rain had slackened, but the ground was a morass, each step a betrayal of dignity as his borrowed boots sucked and slithered through the muck.

The village seemed smaller from within than it had from the forest's edge: two dozen huts at most, huddled around the remains of a stone keep that looked to have been gutted by fire generations ago.

At its heart, the communal fire still burned, though only a handful of villagers lingered there, clutching mugs and trading rumors.

Apollo felt the eyes of the village on him, children peering from behind rain barrels, a teenager with a shock of hair and a nose bent badly out of alignment, the guards at the gate, shifting their weight with studied indifference.

A trio of women kneading dough in the open, hands white with flour, who only looked up when he passed. He returned their gazes with what he hoped was a disarming smile, but more likely a rictus of pain.

'So this is to be my dominion,' he thought, 'a kingdom of mud and suspicion.'

He drifted toward the ruined keep, where the man with the spear from yesterday stood sentry.

The man, whose name Apollo still did not know, nodded at him, neither friendly nor hostile, just the flick of a head that said, you are seen.

He stood in the shadow of a toppled column, whittling a length of wood into something sharp and utilitarian.

Apollo thought to ask about the village, its rules, its alliances, but the words felt too large for his mouth.

Instead, he sat on what remained of a stone step, letting the sun work at his bones, watching how the mortals moved around their day.

Not all of them avoided him. The boy with the missing tooth reappeared, this time with a wooden hoop and stick, chasing it through the mud with a wildness that made Apollo ache for a kind of innocence he had never possessed.

One of the flour-dusted women, hair braided in the northern style, offered him a scrap of bread as she passed.

He accepted it, bowing his head in the old Olympian fashion, and when he caught her eye she grinned slyly, as if she alone in the village knew what a god looked like when starved of worship.

He wandered for an hour, or maybe only minutes before the children, this time two girls and a boy, all knobby knees and snub noses, were engaged in a war with fistfuls of mud and shrieks that could strip bark from a birch.

He felt them clock his presence, and for a moment, the youngest girl, her hair the color of wet sand and eyes startlingly blue, stared at him with a frankness that made him pause mid-step.

She sat alone on a stone near the well, shoulders trembling, a rough-spun blanket bundled about her knees. Unlike the others, she did not flinch or avert her eyes, but held his gaze with a queer, hollow defiance.

As Apollo approached, she wiped her nose on the back of her hand, leaving a muddy streak across her upper lip.

He crouched, careful to keep his hands where she could see them, and offered a smile. "You look as though you've fought a titan," he said, voice gentled by the memory of his own sister's childhood tantrums.

The girl sniffed, eyed him with the skepticism of someone who had been on the wrong end of too many lies. "You're the one Othra patched up," she said.

He nodded. "And you are?"

She hesitated, as if the question were a trick. "Liska."

"A proud name," he said, even as he wondered what act of heroism or folly had earned it.

"What troubles you, Liska? I promise not to tell the others."

She looked away, gaze fixed on the well's rim. Her hands twisted the blanket tighter, worrying at the loose threads. "My Mother is sick...her name is Hessa" she said.

"Othra says it's the lung rot, but I heard the men say it's the black cough. They say she'll die before the next moon, like the others."

Apollo felt a coldness, this one not from the weather. Othra's words returned to him: the sickness that took the children and old first, then the rest.

Plague was a familiar enemy, in mortal and divine annals alike, but here it had the intimacy of a whispered curse.

"I lost my mother, too," he said, the lie easier than the truth. "I remember it hurt, but the hurt changes. It lets you remember the good things, later."

Liska's lower lip quivered. "She's not dead yet."

"Then there is hope," he said, surprising himself with the conviction in his voice. "Othra is the best healer I've ever known. She saved me, didn't she?"

The girl's eyes, so like a northern sky in winter, met his. "She said you were dead. Then you weren't."

Apollo shrugged, as if resurrection were a minor inconvenience. "Sometimes people are wrong about these things. May I see your mother?"

She considered, then nodded, leaping down from the stone. She led him past the well and down a path lined with the remnants of shrine markers, fetishes of root and bone, tied with scraps of cloth, each a testament to some lost plea.

They came to a hut smaller than Othra's, its door hung askew and smoke leaking from a hole in the roof.