

# The Golden Fool

## Chapter 109 109: The Temple Beneath (2)

The ocean remained impossibly calm along their route while continuing to break in natural waves elsewhere, as if concentrating its attention on maintaining this passage.

Thorin remained rooted to the beach, his expression thunderous. "This is madness," he growled, watching as Mira and Nik advanced further along the strange path. "I'll not drown chasing a boy's visions."

"Then stay here alone," Renna said pragmatically, already removing her own boots. "Though I'd wager splitting our group is more dangerous than whatever waits in that temple."

"You too?" Thorin's bushy eyebrows shot up in disbelief. "I thought you had more sense."

Renna shrugged, tucking her boots into her pack. "I've survived this long by recognizing when the flow of events is too strong to fight. This ocean, this temple, whatever's happening to Cale, it's all connected to our path forward. Fighting it seems... unwise."

"Unwise," Thorin repeated, his voice heavy with disgust. "Drowning seems more than unwise. It seems fatal."

"Then stay dry and alive on shore," Renna replied evenly. "But alone."

The hunter stepped onto the path, her movements precise and confident despite the strangeness of their situation. The water swirled once around her ankles, then settled into the same gentle flow that accompanied the others.

Apollo felt the bow's thrumming intensify, no longer painful but eager, pulling him toward the temple with undisguised anticipation.

The gold in his veins surged in response, warming beneath his skin as if recognizing something long forgotten waiting amid those ruined columns.

Lyra still stood beside him, her assessment now encompassing the entire impossible scene, the ocean, the temple, Cale's communion with the waters, and the path that had formed to welcome followers.

"After you," she said quietly. "I want to see what that bow does when you step onto the path."

Apollo met her gaze, finding no hostility there, only keen interest and unwavering determination. Without a word, he moved forward, feeling the bow's excitement build with each step toward the water's edge.

The moment his boot touched the first shell, the bow released a single, pure note, not audible to human ears, but Apollo felt it resonate through the gold in his veins like a bell struck in perfect pitch.

The ocean responded instantly, the water around his foot glowing briefly with the same blue-gold light that had emanated from his arrows.

Lyra's sharp intake of breath told him she'd seen it too. "I thought as much," she murmured. "It recognizes you as well, though differently than Cale."

She stepped onto the path beside him, her green eyes never leaving his face. The water swirled around her feet normally, offering neither the reverential treatment it gave Cale nor the momentary illumination it had shown Apollo.

Just ordinary water behaving in an extraordinary pattern.

Thorin remained on shore, watching their progress with increasing agitation. The dwarf paced back and forth, axe gripped so tightly his knuckles shone white against his weathered skin.

Finally, with a curse that would have made a sailor blush, he yanked off his boots and stuffed them into his pack.

"If you all drown, don't expect me to fish out your corpses," he grumbled, stepping reluctantly onto the path. The water seemed to hesitate around his feet, as if considering whether to accept this reluctant traveler, before settling into the same pattern it showed for the others.

They moved forward in loose formation, following Cale's unwavering progress toward the temple. As they drew nearer, the ruins rose higher from the water, broken columns of pristine white marble, collapsed archways that must once have soared fifty feet above the ground, and at the center, a structure that remained partially intact despite centuries submerged.

Apollo noticed something strange happening beneath the water's surface. Carvings that had been weathered by time and tide began to glow with faint blue radiance, the same patterns they'd seen in the forest ruins, but more elaborate, more numerous.

Waves and dolphins, sea creatures both real and mythical, and everywhere, the trident symbol that had marked Cale's connection to this place.

The light spread outward from where Cale walked, illuminating their path with soft blue radiance that shimmered beneath the surface.

It revealed the true scale of what lay beneath, not just a temple, but an entire complex that must have covered acres before the waters claimed it.

The bow thrummed against Apollo's back with increasing urgency, not painful now but eager, like a hound straining at its leash when the hunt's quarry is sighted.

It pulled him forward with unmistakable purpose, drawing him toward something waiting within the temple's heart.

'It knows this place,' Apollo realized, feeling the gold in his veins respond to the bow's excitement. 'It was made here, or blessed here, or connected to this place somehow.'

Cale had reached the first steps of the temple proper, a broad staircase that rose from the water like a pathway to another world. He paused there, still waist-deep in the impossible ocean, his gaze fixed on something the others couldn't yet see.

The water continued to swirl around him, caressing rather than hindering, moving with deliberate purpose that defied natural currents.

Apollo felt the bow's vibration change subtly as he approached the submerged stairs, no longer merely eager but reverent, as if recognizing sacred ground.

The gold in his veins responded in kind, warming beneath his skin with familiar recognition.

"It's massive," Mira whispered, her voice carrying easily across the unnaturally still water. "The temple must have been... incredible."

"Before it sank into an ocean that doesn't exist?" Thorin muttered, though his gruff voice couldn't entirely hide his awe. "I've seen dwarven halls carved from living mountain, but nothing like this."

Lyra moved closer to Apollo, her steps measured and careful on the half-submerged pathway. "The carvings are getting clearer," she observed, pointing to where intricate designs glowed beneath the surface. "And they're all connected somehow."

She was right. What had seemed like separate patterns, waves and creatures, symbols and script, now revealed themselves as parts of a vast, continuous design that flowed beneath their feet.

The blue illumination pulsed gently, matching the rhythm of the bow against Apollo's back.

Cale began climbing the temple steps.