

The Golden Fool

Chapter 110 110: The Ocean's Path

The ocean parted like a faithful servant as Cale waded deeper into the impossible sea. The water swirled around his legs, not with the chaotic churn of natural waves but with deliberate, almost reverent movement.

It caressed his skin, then pulled back, leaving barely a ripple in its wake as he advanced toward the submerged temple.

Apollo felt the bow against his back settle into a steady rhythm, its earlier frenzy replaced by a calm pulsing that matched Cale's measured steps.

The gold in his veins cooled to the same tempo, no longer burning with urgency but humming with satisfied recognition.

"Look at the water," Mira whispered, her voice barely audible over the gentle lapping of waves. "It's moving for him, like it knows him."

"Or it's hunting him," Thorin countered, his thick fingers still clenched around his axe haft. "I've seen predators lure their prey with gentle movements before they strike."

Nik shook his head, his usual humor absent from his pale face. "This isn't predatory. It's... welcoming him. Can't you feel it?"

"All I feel is wrong," Thorin growled. "Oceans don't appear in forests. Water doesn't part for men. Everything about this reeks of trap."

Apollo watched as Cale reached a point where the water should have risen to his chest, yet somehow remained at his waist, the surface dipping unnaturally around his form. The young man's movements had taken on a dreamlike quality, as if he walked not through water but through memories that had waited centuries for his return.

"The sea recognizes him," Apollo said quietly, the words slipping out before he could reconsider their wisdom.

Lyra's head snapped toward him, her green eyes narrowing with sudden intensity. "Recognizes?" She moved closer, her voice dropping so the others couldn't hear. "You know more than you're telling us."

Apollo kept his expression carefully neutral despite the sudden quickening of his pulse. "I have theories, nothing more."

"No." Lyra stepped directly into his path, blocking his view of Cale and the temple beyond. "Not theories. Knowledge. You've known something was happening since we found that spring, since the water responded to him. What aren't you telling us?"

The directness of her challenge caught Apollo off-guard. The gold in his veins warmed with warning, urging caution. "This isn't the time—"

"It's exactly the time," she insisted, her voice low but unyielding. "Our friend is wading into an impossible ocean toward a temple that shouldn't exist. What do you know about it?"

Apollo measured his response carefully, aware of how much hung in the balance. "The temple belongs to a sea god," he admitted finally. "Ancient. Powerful. Long forgotten by most."

"And Cale?" Lyra pressed, her gaze unflinching. "What's his connection to all this?"

The gold in Apollo's veins pulsed faster, warning against revealing too much. "The water responds to him in ways it shouldn't."

"Is he a descendant?" Lyra's question cut straight to the heart of what Apollo had suspected since the spring. "Does he carry this sea god's blood?"

Before Apollo could answer, Mira's voice rose in alarm behind them. "Something's happening to the water!"

They turned to see the ocean's surface transforming before their eyes. The waves that had been breaking naturally against the shore suddenly flattened, forming an unnaturally straight corridor that stretched from the beach directly to the temple ruins.

The water within this pathway didn't disappear, it remained a few inches deep, just enough to cover one's ankles, but it separated distinctly from the deeper waters on either side.

More remarkably, objects began rising from beneath the surface, shells larger than dinner plates, pieces of driftwood polished smooth by centuries underwater, fragments of marble that must once have been part of the temple itself. They emerged in a deliberate pattern, creating stepping points along the half-submerged path.

"It's building a road," Nik breathed, wonder momentarily overcoming his fear. "The ocean is making us a path to follow him."

Thorin spat onto the sand, his expression thunderous. "It's making us a path to our deaths. Only a fool walks into such an obvious trap."

"I'm going," Mira announced, already unlacing her boots. "Cale wouldn't abandon any of us. I won't abandon him."

"Mira, wait—" Thorin began, but she had already stepped onto the first shell, a massive scallop half-buried where water met shore.

The ocean lapped gently around her bare feet, swirling once before settling into an unnatural stillness. Her face registered surprise, then wonder.

"It's warm," she said softly. "And... it feels almost soft. Like it's welcoming me."

She took another step, then another, following the strange pathway that continued to form ahead of her. The water remained calm around her ankles, behaving nothing like natural seawater should.

Nik hesitated only briefly before limping forward to join her. "If you're going, I'm going," he declared, though Apollo noted how his fingers trembled as he removed his boots. "Cale would do the same for any of us."

Renna approached the water's edge with characteristic pragmatism, studying the phenomenon with careful eyes. She knelt, dipping her fingers into the shallow path, then brought them to her nose and lips.

"Salt," she confirmed, rising smoothly to her feet. "Real seawater, though it's behaving unlike any I've seen." She removed her boots methodically, securing them to her pack. "I'll go. Whatever awaits in that temple seems connected to our path forward."

Thorin remained rooted to the beach, his expression darkening with each person who joined the procession. "This is madness," he growled. "I'll not drown chasing visions and spirits."

Apollo felt the bow's gentle humming intensify as he approached the water's edge. It pulled him forward with subtle insistence, eager to follow the path toward the ancient temple. The gold in his veins responded in kind, warming beneath his skin as if recognizing something long forgotten waiting among those ruined columns.

Lyra moved beside him, her green eyes missing nothing. "After you," she said quietly. "I want to see what happens when you step onto that 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 but felt deep in his bones, resonating through the gold in his veins like a struck bell. The water around his foot glowed briefly with the same blue-gold light that had emanated from his arrows, then settled back into gentle movement.

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 movements graceful and measured. The water swirled around her feet normally, offering neither the reverence it showed Cale nor the momentary illumination it had given Apollo.

Thorin watched their progress with increasing agitation, pacing back and forth on the shore. His knuckles whitened around his axe haft as he muttered curses under his breath. Finally, with a particularly colorful expletive, he yanked off his boots and stuffed them into his pack.

"If you all drown," he growled, stepping reluctantly onto the path, "don't expect me to fish out your corpses."

The water hesitated around his feet, as if considering whether to accept this reluctant traveler, before settling into the same gentle pattern it showed the others.

Together, they advanced along the living pathway, the temple ruins rising higher as they approached.

Beneath the water's surface, carvings began to glow with soft blue radiance, intricate designs of waves and sea creatures, flowing in continuous patterns that connected like the veins of some vast organism.

The trident symbol appeared repeatedly, pulsing with particular brightness whenever Cale passed above it.

The bow thrummed eagerly against Apollo's back, not with the painful insistence of earlier but with the anticipation of homecoming. Each step closer to the temple intensified its response, the silent vibration traveling through his body to resonate with the gold in his veins.

They approached the temple's great stairs, a broad staircase that rose from the water like a pathway between worlds. Cale had already begun climbing, the ocean continuing its strange behavior, parting around him to maintain the same depth despite the rising steps.

Apollo watched as water flowed impossibly upward alongside Cale, defying every natural law to maintain its connection with Poseidon's descendant.

The sight stirred memories of his uncle's power, the sea god's dominion over waters that obeyed his will without question, that moved as extensions of his very thought.

The bow's eager humming reached a crescendo as Apollo placed his foot on the first step, following Cale toward whatever awaited them in the heart of the drowned temple.

The first step sent shockwaves through the bow that Apollo felt like physical blows against his spine. The weapon didn't just hum now, it sang, a wordless melody that vibrated through his bones and made the gold in his veins dance with recognition.

Each subsequent step up the temple stairs intensified the sensation until Apollo had to clench his jaw to keep from gasping aloud.

'It remembers this place,' he thought, one hand instinctively reaching back to steady the bow against his shoulder. 'It was forged here, or blessed here, or...'

The thought died as they climbed higher, the water continuing its impossible behavior around Cale's form.

It flowed upward alongside him like a living thing, maintaining perfect contact with his skin despite the rising stone beneath their feet.