

The Golden Fool #Chapter 111 111: The Drowned Stairs - Read The Golden Fool Chapter 111 111: The Drowned Stairs

The marble steps beneath Apollo's feet shimmered with impossible water, flowing upward against all natural law as they followed Cale into the temple depths. With each step, the bow across Apollo's back sang stronger, its vibration intensifying from a gentle hum to a piercing resonance that threatened to overwhelm his senses.

'By all the gods,' Apollo thought, gritting his teeth against the bow's mounting song. 'It's like it's trying to tear itself from my back.'

The gold in his veins responded to the weapon's call, warming beneath his skin until he felt as though molten metal flowed through his body rather than blood.

He forced himself to keep climbing, one hand reaching back to steady the bow as if that might quiet its frantic response to this place.

Ahead of them, Cale climbed with dreamlike certainty, his steps unwavering despite the water that clung to him like a living garment. It didn't merely wet his clothes but moved with him, flowing around his form in deliberate patterns that defied all natural behavior.

Where it touched his skin, faint blue luminescence bloomed, matching the glow of the submerged runes beneath their feet.

"This isn't right," Thorin muttered from behind Apollo, his voice barely audible over the gentle lapping of impossible waves. "Water doesn't move like that. Doesn't cling like that. Like it's... escorting him."

Despite his complaints, the dwarf stayed close, his heavy breathing betraying both exertion and anxiety. His boots made wet slapping sounds against the marble as he climbed, axe still gripped firmly in one hand.

Apollo forced himself to focus past the bow's insistent song, studying the architecture that emerged as they climbed higher.

The stairs widened as they ascended, leading toward a massive stone archway that loomed ahead, partly submerged in the strange, flowing water.

Ancient symbols adorned its weathered surface, worn by centuries beneath the waves yet still recognizable to Apollo's eyes.

'Poseidon's markings,' he realized, recognizing his uncle's sacred patterns. 'This was truly his temple.'

They reached the archway together, Cale passing beneath it without hesitation while the others paused to catch their breath and take in the sight that awaited them.

Beyond the arch stretched a vast chamber, its high ceiling supported by columns that rose like ancient trees from the shallow water that covered its floor.

But it was the walls that captured their attention. Every surface was covered in intricate murals that somehow had survived centuries submerged – scenes of epic sea battles where trident-wielding figures commanded waves against ships and sea monsters; images of gods and heroes locked in eternal conflict across azure depths; and dominating the far wall, a colossal trident rendered in such detail that it seemed to vibrate with power even from this distance.

Beneath the shallow water that covered the chamber's floor, runes pulsed with rhythmic blue light, making the water itself shimmer with uncanny illumination.

"By the light of the Aether," Mira whispered, her voice hushed with reverence. "It's beautiful. A sacred place preserved perfectly after all this time."

Thorin spat into the water, the gesture earning him a disapproving glare from Lyra. "Sacred?" he growled. "More like cursed. No temple should survive underwater for centuries. No ocean should exist in a forest's heart. Everything about this place is wrong."

Apollo stepped fully into the chamber, and the bow's song reached a crescendo that sent sharp pain lancing between his shoulder blades.

The weapon vibrated with such intensity that he feared it might shatter against his spine. The gold in his veins responded in kind, burning beneath his skin with recognition and reverence.

The water covering the chamber floor behaved unlike any natural liquid Apollo had ever encountered, even in his divine existence.

It moved not with the gentle ripples their footsteps should create, but with deliberate currents that shifted and flowed like a breathing creature. Where they stepped, the water responded not to physical disruption but to some deeper awareness, drawing back in some places while rising in others.

"The floor—" Nik began, then cried out as the water beneath his feet suddenly surged upward, tilting what had seemed solid stone. He staggered, arms pinwheeling as he fought for balance.

Renna caught him before he could fall, her hunter's reflexes quick despite their strange surroundings. "Careful," she warned, steadying him with a firm grip. "This water... it feels alive. Almost sentient. Like it's watching us."

Apollo knew she was right. The sea hadn't merely invaded this temple; it had become one with it, transforming into something that straddled the boundary between element and entity.

He felt the bow vibrating against his back, no longer singing with painful intensity but responding like an instrument being played by unseen hands, answering a call that only it could hear.

"It knows we're here," he murmured, more to himself than the others.

Lyra appeared at his side, her movement so silent that even Apollo's heightened senses hadn't detected her approach. "The bow," she said, her voice pitched low enough that only he could hear. "It's responding to this place. To the water. Just as it did in the forest when the wolves attacked."

Apollo kept his face carefully neutral. "Ancient places often affect ancient objects."

"No." Her green eyes narrowed, piercing through his practiced calm. "This is different. The bow reacts to you, only to you, and you to it. What are you not telling us about that weapon?"

"It's a relic of old power," Apollo replied, the practiced half-truth coming easily to his lips. "Forged in times when the boundaries between divine and mortal were less defined."

"And you?" Lyra pressed, stepping closer. "What are you? No ordinary archer wields arrows of light that can split the earth."

Before he could formulate a response that might satisfy without revealing too much, a sudden roar filled the chamber.

The water, which had been shifting gently around their ankles, surged upward with violent force. In seconds, it rose from ankle-deep to waist-high, forcing them to brace against the powerful current that threatened to sweep them off their feet.

"What's happening?" Mira cried, struggling to keep her footing as the water continued to rise, now reaching chest-height.

Apollo fought against the surge, the gold in his veins burning hot as he resisted the powerful flow. Around them all, the water churned and pushed, except where Cale stood.

Around the young man, the sea formed a perfect circle of calm, swirling protectively while battering against the others like a test of their resolve.

Thorin cursed, his sturdy frame better anchored than the others but his face twisted with fury as water splashed into his beard. "I told you!" he shouted above the roar. "Cursed! This whole place is trying to drown us!"

"Stay calm!" Mira called back, her injured arm held high above the churning surface. "It's just water! We can—"

Her words cut off as a wave crashed over her head, momentarily submerging her. She emerged sputtering, panic beginning to replace her earlier reverence.

Nik flailed against the current, his injured arm hampering his ability to stay upright. "I can't—" he gasped as water filled his mouth. "The floor keeps moving!"

Apollo reached for him, but another surge pushed them further apart. Through the chaos, he saw Cale standing perfectly still, the water continuing its strange protective swirl around him, touching but never threatening. The young man's expression remained distant, dreamlike, as if unaware of the others' peril.

Then, as if waking from a trance, Cale blinked. He looked around, truly seeing his companions' struggle for the first time. Without hesitation, he raised his hand, a simple gesture, palm outward toward the raging water.

The effect was immediate and impossible. The surging sea calmed instantly, not gradually receding but simply... obeying. It lowered around them all, settling back to ankle-depth with gentle lapping movements that contrasted sharply with its earlier violence.

Silence fell over the chamber as they all stared at Cale, their soaked clothing dripping into the now-placid water. The young man looked at his own outstretched hand with an expression of wonder and confusion, as if he couldn't quite believe what had just happened.

"You..." Thorin began, then stopped, words failing him for perhaps the first time since Apollo had known the dwarf.

No one spoke as Cale lowered his hand slowly, the water continuing its gentle movement around his ankles, caressing rather than threatening. The truth of his connection to this place, to Poseidon's domain, had been demonstrated too clearly for denial.

The moment of stunned recognition broke as Cale turned toward the chamber's far end, drawn once more by whatever force had guided him from the beginning. The others followed, still shaken by what they'd witnessed but unwilling to be left behind.

At the far end of the hall stood a massive stone door, easily fifteen feet tall and nearly as wide. Its surface was carved with the largest trident sigil Apollo had yet seen in the temple, a masterwork of ancient craftsmanship that dominated the entire door.

Unlike the other carvings they'd encountered, this one already glowed with faint blue light, pulsing in a rhythm that matched exactly the bow's vibration against Apollo's back.

Most remarkable of all was the water's behavior near the door. It flowed toward the stone barrier in distinct patterns, forming channels across the floor that resembled veins or arteries, all converging on the trident sigil as if feeding it with their essence.

Cale approached the door with that same dreamlike certainty that had characterized his journey through the temple. As he drew near, the trident's glow intensified, responding to his presence with unmistakable recognition.

He placed his palm against the carved symbol, and the light brightened further, illuminating his face from below with ethereal blue radiance.

But the door remained closed.

Cale frowned, pressing harder against the stone as if expecting it to yield to his touch alone. When nothing happened, he stepped back, confusion replacing certainty in his expression for the first time since they'd entered the temple.

The water continued to flow toward the door, gathering around Cale's feet before streaming toward the trident carving. The sea hummed, not a sound Apollo heard with his ears but felt in the gold of his veins, a deep, resonant tone that spoke of patience and expectation.

The bow answered that hum with its own vibration, creating a harmony that made Apollo's teeth ache with its intensity. Whatever waited beyond that door recognized both Cale and the weapon Apollo carried, and it was waiting for them to understand what was required.

As they gathered before the sealed entrance, Apollo felt the weight of ancient purpose settling around them.

The sea continued its patient humming, the bow its answering song, and between them all, Cale stood with his hand still outstretched toward the door that refused to yield, the water swirling around him like a living garment, awaiting his decision.