

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

48 Rising tide

The sun rose slowly over the snowy peaks, quietly illuminating the camp in the morning to wake up its occupants. The night had been calm, thanks to the traces of battle that were still left all around, and as a result Oakbud didn't have to chase away anything or anyone. After the exhausting previous day, getting a full night of sleep in a mountain camp was a luxury for sure, but a welcome one.

No words were exchanged until they finished eating breakfast, as Thani and Alice were both still thinking about it all. From the corner of her eye, the former could see Alice rub the spot where the lifegem had been embedded in her torso, making her sigh from guilt. Oakbud was the same, worried and apologetic; it was showing in his demeanour, perched on Alice's head and patting it regularly instead of his usual spot.

"I'm sorry... does it hurt or something? I was too impulsive and shouldn't have dragged you into this." As headstrong as she was, Thani knew it was her responsibility in the end, and couldn't keep it in anymore when Alice lifted her hand to her neck once again.

"I'm fine", She answered. "It's a bit uncomfortable, that's all. It really doesn't seem to do anything either, besides maybe giving it a rub each time I'll be worried about something." Her loose black hair was hiding her violet eyes as she packed her stuff up for the return trip. This flustered Thani, as she had lost the major part of her blessing of emotion sensing; she was able to feel strong negative emotions but couldn't read a troubled mood anymore.

"Sigh. I'm not angry at you or anything." She continued, startling her companion. "It was meant to happen the instant we decided to come back up here."

"What does Alice fairy mean?" The two others were curious now; what had made it so easy for Alice to accept the outcome?

"Think for a bit. Repose is the Ancestor of Granites, an old undying like the dragon we met before. He can probably see everything that's going on in the whole mountain range, be it us, Ocean's Guard, or even maybe the plains and ocean around it. How else could he know the context of our actions, and seek to teach us a lesson in return?"

"That's..."

"Repose is the Granite's Dad-mountain! Strong!"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure he's listening to us right now and watching the effects of yesterday's stunt. Even if I hadn't followed you both, do you really think he would have been unable to pull me there with you as an example? If I wasn't there at all, who would have it been? That's why I'm saying it was inevitable. I think he acted up because of you two, a God-candidate and Oakbud the seed of the God-Tree." Alice stood up. In a flash, she had finished folding the tent, cleaning up the food, tying her hair and donning her armour and weapons back on, ignoring Thani and the little spirit's plea. "Come on, let's go. We're going to miss lunch if we wait more before going."

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"Why does it look like someone half my age is wiser than me? Haaaah... To be honest, it would be easier for me to accept it you were angry... Elder Repose, if you're truly listening to us... I'm sorry."

"Me will learn more and think more too!" Oakbud followed Thani's initiative before jumping down from his perch and beginning to fold the second tent.

Far and high in the mountains, another powerful gust of wind ran through the frozen peaks before flying back to the ocean; perhaps a bit warmer, this time.

The fresh air stung her eyes, and Ashirijen closed her interior eyelid down again. It had been too long since her last trip to the surface, and she felt like she had forgotten many things about it. Squinting her eyes, she looked at the coast a few kilometres away, trying to estimate how much time she'd need to get there. Not that she was a slow swimmer, far from it; but distance was a tricky subject at sea without any instruments to help measure it. Looked like a few hours of effort, maybe more or less depending on the currents she'd encounter.

At least her spear was at her back, leaving both her webbed hands free to encroach on the water and propel her forward. She was the Child of Kali, the one that the distorted general belief wouldn't stain; as such, she bore none of the traits that were usually found on her followers, especially the white hair and empty pupils. She'd been swimming for a few days now and wishing for mastery over water magic all the while so the trip would be faster. Alas, she would be forever unable to mix paths between elemental magic and Kali.

Still, it was just senseless grumbling. She was the Goddess of the Self's Child; unchangeable, immovable, strong, resilient. Her own perfect body and mind to take on the world around her. The key to it all was the bearer's will, able to recover from any negative event, stand back up and continue to tread forward. When the will is strong, she is unstoppable. [It must end], was the mortal Kali's will when she stood facing Nidhögran; and he stopped, his own will pulled by hers out of his madness.

It was different from how Eludia and Monte's fate alteration work. If, for example, a rock was rolling down a slope, and she stood on its path : in Eludia's case, maybe the rock would bounce over her head, or hit some terrain that would deviate its trajectory so she would stay unharmed; or accelerate it further, for all she knew. Monte would have acted directly, punching the boulder or maybe digging a trench to redirect the danger, and the imposition of his will would have made it work. Kali, however, would have simply stood there, and let the boulder ram into her; she would have stood immovable, stopping the rock dead on its tracks, before gently pushing it away to continue walking.

And so, she swam tirelessly towards her goal, enlivened when she could finally spot a fishing town to aim for. She had found a big boat on the way before, however, remembering her race and nakedness she didn't try to board it. Its occupants would probably have attacked her before she could say anything, and the annoyance wasn't worth the clothes or the longer time to reach land.

She had no clothes, no money, no map; only her spear and Kali at her back. It was a good time to think about how she would contact the land-dwellers. First, she'd need to land a bit further from town and cover herself up a bit so they wouldn't just take her for a feral and mindless beast. Then, beat them down anyway to assert dominance, so they would listen to what she has to say, that is: a map, and some traveling equipment she couldn't pay for. The sea was so much better, honestly... dive down, catch a fish or two to eat, dive some more and find yourself a little cave or entwine yourself in algae to sleep without drifting, and repeat. Sighing, she reached the shore in the middle of the afternoon.

"Fuck. Now I remember why land is such a hassle." She watched in disgust as the parts of her blue skin not covered by her purple scales began covering themselves in a sticky and slippery mucus. "Even if I find clothes, they'll just get even less comfortable or ruined like this. And all the dust, damnit. Fucking sand, fucking leaves, fucking dirt! Everything's sticking to me now! Aaaaaaaaah!"

Ashirijen started venting her frustration by hitting some random trees around the beach she swam to, only to have more leaves fall and stick to her. But the offenders didn't get away scot-free either, as she left multiple trunks felled and full of spear marks with her massive strength. "Ugh, so much for the approachable appearance. Whatever." After

deciding against brushing off all the leaves, and leaving some around the waist and torso, she began her trek towards the coastal village through the clear woods.

Once she got in sighting distance, she finally met her first human in a long time. Both relieved and annoyed, she spoke what came to her mind: "Damn you're small. That's why the sea's way better."

Surprised at being hollered at by the towering nereid he hadn't seen or heard come from the woods behind him, the poor man prepared to scream, only to be silenced instantly by a sticky palm grabbing his throat. He was coming back quietly from picking seashells to eat for the night, and definitely didn't expect this kind of rucksack-harvest-breaking kind of encounter.

"Scream and you're dead; I'm not in the mood for nonsense. Oi, look at me, I'm not scary, right? Look, I've got eyes, a nose, a mouth, a head, arms, legs. Not scary, right? Nod if I don't need to bloody my hand right now."

Seeing the sharp fangs, horns, towering build and claws of the being in front of him, the man begged to differ, but still chose to nod weakly in order to save his life. Being called small was a first for his 1.84m, however he had more pressing matters to pertain to.

"Okay, first, believe me or not I'm not here to fight. Might look contradictory, but if I didn't catch you, I'd probably be knee deep in a vigilantes patrol by now." She released the man, thinking that she wouldn't get problems from him now that this was said. What she didn't expect, was the common-looking, short brown-haired man, to blankly stare at her for a few seconds.

"...beautiful voice..." She caught the weak whisper, reminding her of another thing that made relations between her race and humans difficult: just like mermaids, nereids boasted a beautiful magic-laced voice that could mesmerize others easily if they weren't careful. "Well, shit." Seemed like he nodded under her own suggestion and not because he agreed to not scream in panic, after all.

With the human under her influence, she had all the time she wanted to come up with a solution. Shortly after, she carefully modulated her voice so the charm wouldn't happen again, even though it felt very uncomfortable for her. Then, Ashirijen used the same trick as her Goddess facing Nidhögran, and imposed her self on the man's mind through her eyes to wake him up. Good thing she'd caught him again before that, because he really wanted to scream this time.

After a few more rounds of back-and-forth explanations and one-sided negotiations, it was decided that the man would leave his day's catch here while he'd go to the village and get someone a bit more responsible to come see her. She sat down against a tree

under the shade, watching the human's receding back, before grabbing a handful of shells and popping them open to eat with a sigh.

"Humans. What a pain."