

# 《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

## 49 High tide

By the time someone strong enough to resist her voice came back to check on her, Ashirijen was surrounded by discarded shells, still lazing around and breaking even more of them open. If the man had been any later, he probably wouldn't have had anything left to eat that night. If anything, her nonchalant appearance only worried the newcomer more: either she had a way to know he had come alone as convened, or she was strong enough to not care how many people he could bring. Locking eyes with her for a moment and seeing her smirk, he knew it was the latter. Another shell disappeared in her stomach.

While the two were watching each other, the 'casualty man' was picking the leftover shells back up quickly to bring back; he knew the nereid was waiting for him to leave before speaking. Still befuddled by the whole encounter, he left barely a minute after coming.

He was a follower of Deva, twice blessed; that afforded him an important position in the fishing town, the ability to cure sickness and injuries being highly sought after. He wasn't the strongest or the highest authority, but he was the one with the best shot at resisting her voice. The man was approximately 40 years old, with short greying hair cut short and well shaved. He wore tough boots, a simple temple robe with Deva's emblem on it, and a heavier jacket over it to defend against the salty wind of the coast. He was assessing the monster in front of him, estimating that he'd barely measure up to her lower ribs if she were standing right now. In any case, he didn't want to speak up first; in fact, stepping back a few more metres to get out of that oppressive air around her would be a blessing on its own.

"So? Are you a mute, or what? Did you even forget your name or something?" His train of thought was interrupted by the nereid. Well, that wasn't a good start, he thought; she sounded annoyed already. At least, his blessing protected him against the charm.

"My name is Mandale." She looked at him with interest, and her smirk widened into something that resembled a smile more.

"Not charmed! Great! Now we can talk, human!" She clapped her hands once in victory before continuing: "So, what did the other guy tell you?"

"Just that you don't want to fight, and want us to provide you with some... help?"

"Hah, you got that right; I'm not here to ask." Yes, definitely not someone they should be making angry. They only had three people with blessings in the village, him, the non-combatant, included. "Okay, now listen well, because I don't want to repeat myself. First, I need a place to crash for the night. Second, info on where in Liezel's name we are on this Gods-loved land. And third, some basic stuff like clothes and a bit of change to get me going. All clear?"

"That doesn't seem excessive... But I'm not sure what we could find to dress you with, honestly. We don't have anything that would fit your size. As for lodging, I think Old Jacques won't mind someone in his home too much; he spends all his time cooped up in his library and lab anyway..."

"So? Is that a yes, or do I need to begin hitting people?" Her toothy grin was unsettling; it looked like she'd be happy with both outcomes. "Just kidding. Let's move, little human." Ashirijen finally stood up, towering over the scared Mandale in front of her with all her height. "Don't look at me like that, it's not like I'll eat your kids or something. Leave that to the Sea-grippers below. Hah!"

The way to the village was a real road and the leaves stuck to Ashirijen's feet started to drop little by little, only to be replaced by dirt and dust adhering to her mucus. It wasn't comfortable, but shoes would stupidly fill with her secretions in record time and that would be even worse. She would need to find something tight enough to cut air contact but still able to serve as shoes later; the same went for the body parts that she shouldn't expose in human society to avoid creating more outrage. The little walk let her some time to converse with Kali a bit, as she felt her watching while Ashirijen made the first contact.

"Didn't you say you'd make an effort to be amicable? What kind of image do you want me to have?"

"Eh, no worries. They don't know I'm your Child and they're already scared shitless of me; don't need any more than that to get what I need here. Wouldn't they fall dead from shock if I told them? Would they even believe me? And, I don't like them anyway."

It was still the middle of the afternoon, so most of the population was busy left and right, without time to care about or even look at the nereid. That was good though; there was no guarantee she wouldn't lash out if people kept pestering her before she got settled in. They only had to walk past a few houses before arriving at their destination: the house-library-laboratory of Old Jacques. It was thrice the size of an ordinary house, but Ashirijen still had to hunch her back to stay inside because it didn't apply to ceiling height.

"Do you seriously want me to stay in this puny doll house?" She said with a frown. She'd already poked the roof with her horns multiple times and couldn't find a comfortable position to stand in; kneeling was absolutely out of the question.

"I'm sorry, but that's already the tallest building there is here. The only other option would be to sleep outside. I'll try to make this quick; if anyone can solve your clothes problem that'll be him." Mandale wasn't happy either, fearing her wrath, but they had to come in and meet the old weirdo. He wasn't actively participating in the village life, but he was very knowledgeable and had his ways to solve problems all around. "Hmph. Might as well jump back in the water to sleep indeed. Nothing beats the night waves for a good nap."

"Jacques ! It's Mandale, I need your help!" He shouted. The house was really big and looking for him would only be a waste of time. For a time, nothing happened so he hollered again; he hoped the old man hadn't gone outside picking stuff now.

..."~~~~oming!" Finally, a muffled voice was heard behind a door on their left and revealed the man people called Old Jacques. The simplest word to describe him was decrepit. He probably wasn't that old yet, maybe 55, but everything about him screamed "messy". His white hair was dirty and cut haphazardly, probably cut by himself roughly with a knife, his robes were dusty and stained, and his old wrinkled face had the characteristic pockmarks from a lack of sleep.

"Yes, Yes. What did you bring this time? Someone stuck some fishing hook in his arm again, is that it? Hmm? So, where's the idiot? Did you leave him outside for the bloodstains? Great, I haven't got all day. Show me the way, hop hop!" From the moment he entered the room, the little old man hadn't stopped walking and continued harping at Mandale with his weak voice.

Not even looking towards the door to the outside where Ashirijen stood, he went straight for a cupboard and started rummaging in it furiously. "Tweezers... knife... linens... I knew I left the distilled alcohol somewhere, where is it..."

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As perplexed as she was by the show, Ashirijen was getting tired of getting nothing done. "You're an interesting little human, I'll give you that. But you're here for me." The charming power of her voice be damned, at least he would look at her. And he did.

"Hmmm? What are you? Wait don't tell me, I know! Horns... fangs... don't look at me all surprised like that, will you? Sharp claws, webbed hands, blue skin, scales and fins on the limbs... you're a nereid! What's a sea nymph doing here on land? I'm busy

enough dealing with humans, so make it quick. Thank you Mandale, you can go now."

Ashirijen was too stunned to answer and didn't even notice the one who accompanied her there leaving. How did that little man resist her voice? She couldn't feel a shred of magic from him, he was... disappointingly mortal.

"Well? Maw-angler got your tongue? Spit it out already."

It only left one possibility... "You're a Child ?!" She couldn't believe it.

"Hmm? Are you deranged? Does an old man like me look that divine to you?" He stood arms crossed, his right foot tapping the ground ceaselessly from impatience.

"But you've got no magic! And you're resisting the charm of my voice!"

"Oh? Oh? You're right! I forgot about that." Jacques began pacing around, never stopping for a moment. "Eh, whatever. So, what are you here for, for the third time now!" He was looking at her again, standing facing her unfazed; but even though he stopped walking, his hands were now fiddling with the tweezers he picked up earlier.

"...Which God could tolerate a Child like you, or even choose you in the first place..." She had lost any notion of bullying the human before her, now taking him seriously. She was sure of it now; that little man was not ordinary at all. But she didn't know what to say either, her original purpose forgotten; Kali was silent too, even though the Goddess probably had recognised his status and God long before she did.

"Don't know, don't care. If it's true, maybe that's why I've felt a bit more limber the past few days." With these words, Jacques stuck the metallic instrument in his rope belt before pulling out a magnifying glass from Gods knew where and looking at his arms in detail. "Yes... even if it's not true, it certainly has merits to studying. But that's for later, will you finally tell me what you want?"

"Can't you take this more seriously!"

"Am I not? It's on my reflection list now! And besides, if the God wasn't happy with me, I'd be dead already!"

"You're insane!"

"And what are you going to do about it? For the last time, tell me why you're here! I've got an experiment running in the back and if it burns it'll all go to waste!"

"I... I need clothes and travel supplies for land." Her answer was almost meek under the continuous shocks the puny human was giving her. Kali help her, she'd go insane

at this pace!

"Well grab a curtain for all I care, do I look like a tailor? Who are you anyway? It's not everyday sea-dwellers come up and visit." Finally realizing the uniqueness of the situation they were in, Jacques was taking a growing interest in the nereid in front of him, enough to ask her name; an honour he reserved for the most fascinating study cases in his book. He took a step back and stopped examining his right arm to get a good look at her instead, putting the magnifying glass in a hidden pocket in the process.

"I am Ashirijen, a nereid, and chosen Child of Kali!" That, at least, was a question she could answer with confidence and pride. Her lost poise was back, and her magic radiated full blast in the room. She was projecting her Self on her surroundings through her gaze, like Kali did so many years before, imprinting her presence and proving her might. She would not hesitate anymore, not fear, not think. She had come to do some things, and they would be done.

However, the outburst had little effect outside damaging the roof with her head further when she stood tall, puffing her chest and showing a clenched fist. Jacques was not scared, but didn't stay unresponsive this time either; he had a new twinkle in his eyes.

"Now THAT is interesting... come closer and let's see if I can help you, the damn plants can burn for all I care!"

She hadn't seen when, but the tweezers and magnifying glass had made their way back to his hands.