

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

51 Receding tide

"What do you mean by 'we'? I've solved your problem, now get on your way and stop disturbing my experiments. Go ask Mandale for the rest of the things you need, I've got none of that for you. Shoo!"

Ashirijen was smiling way too much to his liking. The exposed fangs and shining purple snake-eyes gave him the shivers and her beauty did nothing to dampen the rising fear this time. It was as if she was a predator who just found a new toy to torment.

"What, YOU have got no money, no backpacks and travelling supplies? Heh, I bet even followers of Deva can lie better than that." She tilted her head back in laughter, speaking in an overly suave and sugary tone: "and since you're a bit of a know-it-all, surely you can bring me to a big city with lots of temples, riiiiight?"

"I I I... I'm sorry, what?"

"I've got a map, but it doesn't mean I can use it or that I know what's where! In fact, I don't even know where we are now. You're coming with me little man, like it or not."

"What? No! No, no, no! I have plenty of things going on here! Go and bother someone else!"

He knew he couldn't resist if she decided to grab him under her arm and run away from here, but he'd been living in this place for far too long and had accumulated way too much to be able to let it all go like this! He took a step back only to be matched by the nereid's step forward, except that her towering height brought her even closer to him now.

"Do I look like I'm giving you a choice? You messed with me enough, time for a bit of payback. What would I do anyway if I run out of the stuff you made, huh? Come back here pleading? Dream on!"

"You can't just take an old man like me and drag me on the road! So unreasonable!"

Jacques was grasping at straws now, evoking his physical condition that was unfit for travelling. Alas, that was a shot in the dark too and the sea nymph had an answer to it too.

"Hoho, all that brain and you can't accept you're a Child! It's good for you, the perfect occasion to show you that you're tougher than you look. Didn't you say you felt limber than before yesterday?" Her low laughter was incessant now, amused by his frantic backpedalling. "Come on, pick up some stuff and let's go; I'll carry you if I have to but you're not getting out that easy!"

Understanding he had no way out was only the start of his misery though: now he had to pack his essentials right away and lose everything else because he felt that Ashirijen wouldn't give him much time. Lamenting his misfortune, he could only start rummaging through his plentiful possessions and start to select what to bring and what to leave out.

With a happy smile on her face, Ashirijen watched as the decrepit old man shuffled along left and right. Picking up vials, moaning, putting them down, looking back at them, picking something else only to have his eye caught by another seemingly vital thing... The agony on his face was so satisfying! She wouldn't tire of seeing him like this for a long time. However, she still had an important mission to accomplish and as good as the show got, it didn't help. In the end she had to stop his frantic running inside the lab to remind him that his priority should be food and clothes, not lab equipment: they weren't exactly going on a leisure trip.

Apparently his mood could fall even further that it already did, and her intervention did exactly that. She even felt a bit mean to pour salt into the wound like this. His face now completely warped into a crying rictus, Jacques got out of the lab to gather his more vital possessions. As she thought, he was back in a flash with the strict minimum in tow.

"Why in the Gods' name are you doing this to me anyway? Isn't Kali all about sacrificing yourself for those around you?"

"Oh! That's the whole point actually: you've got that wrong. Try to ask your own God, I'm too lazy to give you the whole story myself."

That... that was thunderous news, coming from the Goddess' Child herself. Jacques wasn't in the right state of mind to appreciate it though, still half-crying while indulging in self-pity and doing his best to sort through all his equipment. When the sun approached its highest point, his choice had finally been made: he would save the core notes from his experiments, his pet pair of tweezers, and a portable magnifying

glass.

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"Alright, now that you've packed you can show me where we are and where we go to find the biggest temples. The more the better, the message will spread faster that way."

The red-eyed Jacques took a map from his bag and spread it out on a nearby table. He'd done so many experiments on that table... Cut thigs, written things... the burn marks from an explosion were still there after all those years... oh, and he hadn't realized some dried blood had been stuck to the corner like that; was it his? Probably not. Such a good table, and he had to leave it behind now. What a tragedy!

"Oi! Stop looking at the table like it's your long-lost wife and read the map!"

"I've never had a wife, young lady! Wait... How old are you anyway?"

Surprised by the snapping comeback, Ashirijen had to take a good second to gather her thoughts and answer; at least the man didn't have a breakdown and was still as insufferable as before. Knowing that the worst for him was still to come, the remark wasn't enough to attack her good mood.

"No idea. I'm an adult nereid for sure, and a well-built one at that. Why does it matter?"

"You don't keep track of your age?"

"Is there any point to that? Isn't it just depressing to have the counter go up every time you think about it? If I had to tell, uuuuh let me see... I think I've seen the same boat pass by multiple times close to my grotto, but it had a different chief. Like, the one with a grey beard was there for a few times and then it was another with dark hair. Oh, and I chose the coral for my spear before it was tall enough so I could have it grow straight enough. So, the map?"

Jacques was astonished and couldn't help but look at the nereid differently now. She looked like a young human adult! It seemed like he still had much to learn about marine species, but he could note down his questions and ask them during the trip.

"Wait, you must be even older than me if you watched your coral grow!"

"Who cares! Map!"

"Fine! I'll ask later! We're currently on the eastern coast of the Primal, a bit south of East Lake's forested estuary."

"No idea how I'd even get back to my grotto from there, all I know is that I swam for around ten days to get there."

"You don't know your way home?"

"What home, it's just a grotto. I can find another I like whenever I want to."

"R-Right..." Jacques had trouble fathoming exactly what kind of life Ashirijen had been leading up until now. Was this considered normal among sea-folk? "Kmh... Kmh... So, if you're looking for a big concentration of people and temples, you're looking for Ebb: it has a central temple of the Three and I think that every other God has a shrine there too; including Kali. If I remember well the Child of Nature is there as well."

"Woah! That's great stuff, if my message has the backing of three Children it might actually be listened to. That's one of the reasons why I'm taking you with me, by the way; people won't listen to a nereid but it's different if the message comes from a human. Show me where it is on the map!"

He pointed at another spot on the map with a finger: "It's here, along God's Eye Lake's shore, at the crossing with the outflowing river and forest. If I had to estimate the time it takes to get there, I would guess around a month."

"That's human walking speed! You're too slow! Look, there's waterways almost all the way, the only thing to cross on foot is the forest area between the two lakes. You just need to get a small boat and I'll drag everything there in half that time no sweat."

Jacques held his doubts concerning that part... Her dragging a boat with him and his stuff securely and lazily standing on it? That seemed way too nice from the condescending nereid. Looking into her eyes, he saw he'd hit the nail on the head.

"Might as well begin right now in fact."

"What do you- Put me down! Put me down!"

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Wondering what happened with the monster he had to bring back to town the day prior, Mandale decided to come back knocking on Jacques' door after his lunch. To his surprise, he found no one but an eerie lack of the usual glassware clinking noise. The door was even left unlocked! The old man said she was a nereid... Maybe they went to the seaside?

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He indeed found the strange duo at the pier, seemingly looking for a suitable vessel. Knowing the effects of her voice, Jacques was leading the negotiations but Mandale could see that the monster at his side wasn't pleased. Things were apparently turning south because she was carrying him under her arm and held her spear in the other hand; he hastened his pace, almost breaking into a run.

Alas, he got there too late and she couldn't hold herself back anymore. Face full of disgust, she started screaming: "I've played nice until now, don't make me change my mind!". The effect was instantaneous, and the glowing hostility disappeared like foam on the waves. Jacques followed up when he saw Mandale coming, trying to reassure him so the situation wouldn't devolve into pointless carnage.

"Yes! Yes! I'm not in danger, don't worry. I've got this under control! Oh, and they should come back to their senses in a few minutes. Just compensate them with what's left in my house..." The last few words turned his eyes teary again at the thought.

Smiling wryly, Mandale could only allow them to take their pick and leave with a small barque before the aggravated Ashirijen took matters into her own big hands.