

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

55 Smoke on the water 2

"I've been feeling better and better! Don't worry about my bag! As if, you old bag of bones!"

Snap.

The sound of her spear hitting a tree was soon followed by the sound of the tree hitting the ground. "Stronger doesn't mean strong at all. Even children could carry more than you do." Ashirijen was regretting following Jacques' advice to take the detour already, his bag on her back a grim reminder of her trusting mistake.

"Perhaps merfolk children would be able to, but I am an old human man and that's still superior to my own species' children." Jacques' wheezing voice answered shortly, trying to avoid getting side pain.

"Just shut up and walk faster if you've got enough energy to complain! I'm cooking alive here." Ashirijen continued venting on every tree that met her path, smacking them angrily with her spear and unrooting most as a result. Still, her being almost twice as tall as Jacques didn't make it easy for the old man to keep up, forcing him to hover between a run and a fast walk most of the time.

The worst enemy wasn't the weight of his bag or his slow walking speed, though. As a creature born in the sea and made for life at sea, the sun was tormenting her. Being away from a body of water for long was unnerving for the nereid. She missed the comfort of fresh water, the way movement took account of her whole body, the dimmed light of the depths that didn't assault her eyes. Being on land simply didn't feel right.

Alas she didn't get many opportunities to think about anything else. The dirt track followed the edge of the forest along the plains and provided her with a bit of shade, but it was still spoiled by the never changing scenery and unusual sensation of walking, guiding her thoughts back to her discomfort. Kali wasn't helping either, leaving her to endure that hardship by herself. On his side, Jacques was simply focusing on his breathing to keep up with the sculpted back of the giant walking in front of him. Whatever his wishes were, examining himself and the changes brought in him by the God of Time would have to wait.

An opportunity in the form of a pack of goblins presented itself during the first day's afternoon. Numbering only two people, Ashirijen and Jacques were a prime target for

the creatures. At almost five times their number, the goblins were confident in their victory and rushed at them from the treeline. They rushed at the two travellers without taking any precautions like flanking or even trying to weaken them from a distance first, not considering that their weapons made of wood, leather and rock wouldn't be able to hurt much. Their reckless charge was met with pure, unaltered violence. Goblins were already not tall compared to humans, and they were barely taller than Ashirijen's knees. The sound of her spear cutting the air was covered by dismayed cries of agony as she swiped her weapon sideways in front of her. Five out of the nine goblins were broken in half instantly and landed on top of each other following the movement of her strike, never to get up again. She couldn't be bothered to stab, as it would require one attack per foe. Without a word, she radiated her magical might, crushing the four remaining goblins to the ground; one step and another slash later, no other life besides Jacques' remained.

The old man looked wide-eyed at the scene of carnage, not used to bloodshed that didn't happen on his operating table. He had been that close. That close to that spear, to that horrible death, back in his house when he inadvertently asked her to get in a fish tank. He didn't even have time to move to safety. The creatures had been broken, their bodies crushed by the might of the nereid's blows, like badly glued parts of children's dolls. The calm look she gave him when she looked back to see if he was still walking after her, like nothing happened, shook him profoundly. That close. He had been that close. If, like she told him, the general understanding of Kali's worship was misguided, and... this... was the right path. Then what exactly was the right path? And whose was the other? The amount of emotional restraint she had shown that day was titanic and proved that she wasn't the Child of a God chosen at random. He silently swore to never bring that event up again, not even in her absence.

Nothing else happened the next two days. However, on the third Ashirijen was casting regular looks towards the deeper parts of the forest for the bigger part of the morning, sensing that they were followed. The beast was closing in slowly, testing their range of perception like a seasoned predator. Jacques didn't notice anything and was happy that she slowed down a little.

"Off the trail, on the plains. Now." With a commanding voice, she spoke to Jacques out of the blue, startling him. "Something's been stalking us for hours and I don't like it; I'm going to flush it out. And kill it, best if it turns back."

Frowning and a little worried, the old man did as he was told. If they were lucky, it wouldn't be anything too dangerous, maybe a few wolves. If they weren't, it would be a predated blessed beast. The answer would be given through Ashirijen's current display of threat. She had dropped the two heavy bags to free her movement and held her spear in her right hand, tipped towards the forest. Even though she had a good

grasp of the enemy's direction, she purposefully looked around to bait the creature. For good measure, she released a loud war cry and a sliver of her magic.

"Uh? It's gone?" Raising her brows in surprise, Ashirijen relaxed her guard a little. "That was really enough to intimidate it? Guess it's for the best." Picking up one of the bags, she signed Jacques that he could come back. "I can't feel it anymore, it's gone. Let's get to the lake today, I really need a good dip."

The walking encyclopaedia at her side stiffened. "Wait a second. When you say gone, has it disappeared, or did it go away?" There was a huge difference between the two; the first meant the creature could camouflage itself and got serious, aiming for the kill, while the second meant it had truly abandoned the chase.

Understanding the implications, the nereid instantly dropped the bag she had picked up and reaffirmed the grip on her spear. "It disapp- okay, time to get a bit serious. You go back in the open plain."

A gust of wind blew from her left, attracting her attention. A split-second later she ducked under her spear, dodging the mantis-like man-sized creature taking a swipe at her neck from another angle. Another fraction of a second later, the creature had disappeared back into the woods, still hidden from Ashirijen's senses.

"Fast and strong... Now it's getting interesting." She jumped over the next dash and parried the attack from below. "But if there's one thing I'm not afraid of, it's a fight. The moment I catch it it's dead."

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Jacques felt lucky that the giant mantis didn't go after him. It must have sensed that if it killed the nereid first, he wouldn't be able to run away or fight back. It was intelligent, could mask its presence and also use some wind magic. That was the kind of apex predator able to cut all possibility of travel on a road until it migrated or died. They were roughly equivalent to a four-times blessed human following a more combat-oriented God and often able to understand human speech, and even answer sometimes. The Cursed Third, Nidhögran's self-proclaimed kingdom was filled with them, but they could also be found in the more desolate parts of the Primal and the Jagged Heights. They were currently not that far from the biggest mountain range of the continent, the Roof of the Earth, but it was still surprising to find such a creature at the very edge of that zone.

Perhaps it had fled conflict with another beast, perhaps it just wanted to explore and extend its territory more. Jacques was pulled from his analysis by the noise created by the next collision. But look as he may, he couldn't catch a glimpse of the mantis. What

he saw on the other hand, was Ashirijen smiling fearlessly, waving her spear provocatively after each trade.

"Don't want to stay? I'll make you!" Her purple snake-eyes narrowed on the creature as soon as it left its cover. She'd been pulling it in, giving the beast confidence the whole time for this very moment. Since her purely physical capabilities weren't enough to beat it, it was about time she fought as a Child and used Kali's signature magic. Instead of dodging this time, Ashirijen stood her ground and took the hit head-on, catching one scythe with her spear and the other with her bare hand.

Kali, the Goddess of the Self, focused on refining her body and mind to the extreme, creating a complete inner world in the process and evolving into something more, something stronger. With nigh-infinite mental and physical poise, even a missing limb or two were barely chips on the corner of her inner world and would heal in seconds. In order to truly kill her, they would need to reduce the Goddess to dust entirely. Her other powers were all derived from that refined inner world, such as externalising it to overwrite her surroundings and make them her ruling domain or pulling them in to analyse them. Sensing people's presence and emotions was an application of the latter, and Ashirijen crushing goblins to the ground or catching the mantis bare-handed one of the former. The focus of people towards pain and sacrifice in her worship was nowhere near the full path, degenerating further with time and causing her current predicament.

"Gotcha."

The nereid was nowhere near Kali's level of mastery and refinement; she wasn't the Goddess after all, and living her whole life at sea hadn't let her refine much of anything besides 'water' in her inner world. It showed in her movements in general, fluid motions linking together and flexibility despite her size. Her character was still lacking, as was her experience, but right now it was more than enough.

Her cruel smile exposed her fangs, and with her eyes shining she unleashed her full strength. The man-sized mantis was paralysed, getting crushed slowly and painfully as the nereid pushed it down bit by bit. Crossing her eyes, it could see its own reflection being ground down under the absurd weight of Ashirijen's inner world.

From Jacques' point of view, she had caught the creature and it had stopped moving altogether. He knew something was up; it was like the time she clamoured her name and position when they met, but stronger. He had endured strong pressure at the time, but once again it seemed like she had gone the easiest she could on him. Fascinated, he watched as the mantis was reduced to a ball of crushed limbs and death.

He didn't know when he had resumed walking behind Kali's Child, still absorbed in the scene. Focusing his mind, he could remember tinier details of the event, surprising

even himself. Sighing, he looked at the two scythe-arms of the beast dangling from the bags she carried as a trophy.

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East Lake... Ashirijen was finally at ease, back in her element. Everything felt so great compared to being on land; the sensation of flowing water on her skin, the full-body movement, the smoothness of clear water compared to the ocean, the fish, the radiant beauty of sunlight piercing the surface and enough space to swim freely. How great it felt after days of drying under the sun!

Well, since neither Ashirijen nor Jacques knew how to make a boat from scratch, they still had needed to walk two more days along the lake to find civilization, but at least she could swim at night. But now that the old man was on a boat to cross the lake, she could take her time and relax, only checking the boat's progress occasionally. It was time for some good old deep diving exploration.

Meanwhile, Jacques was left to his own devices aboard the ferry. He could finally observe his appearance with great detail in a mirror, finding that after another week the patch of dark hair had almost doubled in size. There wasn't any other change to observe; at least, for now. He was convinced that his hair changing colour wasn't the last of it. In fact, it was already not the only thing changing: his stamina and general health had shown miraculous improvement over the course of the trip. Alas, he had been forced to leave almost all his laboratory equipment behind and being unable to discover more about his condition right now was ruining his mood.

At least he had the mantis' weaponized forelimbs to examine. Even without his notes and most of his tools, he could still open the things up and take a look inside to see what they were made of. It also distracted him from the map: to get to God's Eye Lake after this ferry, there was another patch of forest to cross and he was trying to find the best way to tell that to the nereid. It would be a shorter walk than the previous one and on a properly maintained road, but that still didn't mean that she'd take it with a smile. In fact, remembering the two fights he had witnessed he found that he would be even more scared if she did.