

# 《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

## 63 Ashes to ashes

From a certain depth onwards and down, light couldn't permeate the water anymore. That was the case at sea and the same went for the lake where its depth was sufficient, but it wouldn't deter Ashirijen from exploring the surroundings of the boat. Her eyes were better at seeing underwater than above it anyway, and she had other senses to rely on if light was absent. At best she'd see in black and white, and at worst she would only need to concentrate on her perception more and decrypt the movements of water and heat around her. The body of a predator had its perks.

It was in these conditions that she was able to find the comfort of her deep-sea cave, where the blinding light of the sun couldn't hurt her eyes anymore. The fact that she had to come up from time to time to check on things up there and ask how much longer the trip would be pissed her off, but also kept her occupied. The nereid was indeed facing incredible boredom at the moment: the fish were scared of her be they Blessed or not (those were more intelligent and tended to run away even faster), the passengers were scared of her, the crew was scared of her, the other boats she swam to were terrified of her.

She had nothing exciting to do besides swim, eat and sleep, but as relaxing as that could get her patience was reaching its limits. No more familiar merfolk to speak to, nothing to fight; the biggest fish she'd hunted in the lake couldn't even put up a struggle, and the fun of seeing humans scrambling around to avoid aggravating her had passed.

The only good point in that situation was Jacques, the strange Child of Time. He wasn't scared of her, so despite the discomfort of staying in the sun she ended up spending more and more time on the deck or in his cabin. But he was still kind of obnoxious, completely absorbed in studying whatever caught his fancy. Currently, that meant her and him. Her, because he never had the occasion to meet a nereid face to face and talk peacefully about things before and was eager to learn more about the whole underwater world. And him, because his obvious reverse-aging was taking up every other waking moment he had.

The first change had been that black lock of hair that continued growing by the day; most of it had got its colour back after the week of navigation. The second had been his energy and general fitness, which was in his own terms "Outrageous! Truly, truly, outrageous!" because he could skip his usual nap to continue examining things instead. He could be considered slightly weak instead of febrile now. And finally, his body: it hadn't started immediately but his face was slowly losing its deep creases, his back

was straightening itself, and his voice regained some power and stopped trembling. The only question was at what point the transformation would stop, as for some baffling reason the old man had been adamantly refusing to try and initiate contact with the God watching over him and was still unable to cast magic.

Scary for scary, they both were alienated by the rest of the people on the boat despite providing them with security, food, and knowledge of healing.

"Your lakes are so boring! I've had time to swim far and wide while your even more boring boat goes on slowly, but there's nothing interesting at all! No shiny stuff, no corals because it's fresh water, and no action either because everything just swims away whenever I get close. Your fish have no backbone at all, even those with a blessing or two... They were the ones to flee the fastest. I need a bank of maw-anglers to pop up to vent, seriously. I want to kill something lively."

Ashirijen huffed in annoyance in Jacque's room under the deck. The alchemical solution covering her skin had stopped working this morning, and she had started sweating a sticky film on her skin again to the dismay of the cleaning crew. She was extremely bored, and even dirtying his bed wasn't enough to cheer her up.

"I already asked you to please use a towel to sit on! And to cover yourself up when you come on the boat, I don't know what'll happen next if I keep getting younger at this pace!" Jacques had his back to her, fiddling with something on a small table on the side. She could see his tweezers poking out of his closed hand, he was obviously too absorbed in cutting up whatever he found (or even himself) to pay any serious attention to her.

"As if you could fall ill anymore now that you're a Child. A humid bed won't kill you in your sleep." She smiled showing her fangs and a clawed hand, despite him not being able to see it: "And what if I decide to tease you anyway? I'm bored and almost twice your size, you oversized shrimp. Try me, I'm sure you'd look stunning splattered on the ceiling."

This kind of banter had gone on for the past few days but would come at an end very soon: land was visible, more boats were passing by than before and the town they were headed to was in plain view.

"Khmn! Khm." Jacques coughed to cover up his embarrassment. Thinking about it, he would have ended up at spear-tip, crushed under her magical pressure for that comment not long before; he wasn't sure that her getting more familiar with him was helping, though. "What are maw-anglers anyway? You keep talking about them but never really described them. Is it a kind of fish I know but under a different name?"

"Hah! I knew you'd ask, finally can't stand it anymore, huh? Took longer than I thought I'll give you that." Ashirijen clapped her hands in glee. Truly, she was relieving her boredom in any way she could. "No, you surely don't know them, they live in the depths where light doesn't shine anymore and the weight of the sea can crush about anything. Mostly deep crevices. Only ones that would rarely come to the surface are the weak ones or the sick ones, so you up there only get the small fry. Maybe you could find some where mountains meet the sea, there's bound to be a trench there. We call them maw-anglers because the biggest thing they have is their mouth, and they can unhinge it to grab onto and eat stuff bigger than themselves. And let me tell you, those teeth are nasty. Size-wise, they go from an arm's length to bigger than me, so there you go. Scales aren't too tough; I can shred them without my spear. Kind of slow swimmers but it makes it harder to sense them coming when you can't rely on your sight. What else is there... Oh, yeah, small ones live in groups and bigger ones go solo, but both can make you disappear in a flash!" She grumbled a bit before finishing: "That's why I lived at the border of a deep trench, they don't come that far up often, they're good sport, and other people didn't come down to bother me either so it was a cool and quiet place."

"And no, I won't catch one for you." She added before he could say anything.

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"C'mon, help me rub your stuff on my back before we get to land so we can get things done."

Ashirijen was looking with impatience at the lakeside city growing into her view, alchemical solution in one hand and pointing at Jacques with the other. Since she couldn't splash around in a tub of the strange concoction like the first time, she had no qualms in asking for help; she was too lazy to bother twisting around blindly and risking missing a spot. It was now or never anyway: they could already make out some details on the buildings and even see people scuttling about on the docks.

"Alright, alright..." Jacques relented. "At least we know it'll last until we reach God's Eye lake, but just in case don't go wiping it off somewhere. I won't be able to make more until I settle down and get some tools back." The blue-purplish nereid really was a slave driver, but she wasn't one you would even try to say 'no' to. Despite her apparent laziness, she had quite the sanguine temperament and was still ready to jump into action at a moment's notice. It had happened only once, but he'd never forget the time where she seemingly forgot his presence and allowed him to surprise her inadvertently by making noise.

He had let a glass fall from his desk by accident, and the shattering noise jump-scared her; Ashirijen had instantly switched from dozing off on his bed to a fighting stance

despite not being quite awake yet. Luckily for him her groggy state meant that she took a fraction of a second more to assess the situation instead of striking instantly, saving his life. The most memorable had been her eyes, fully opened with pupils narrowed into slits, scanning for movement with burning intensity. Next were her bared fangs and extended gills in a display of threat.

At that instant he had not been 'Jacques' in her eyes but something else entirely... prey. The terror he felt as they locked eyes for a second had been a grim reminder of her nature, to say the least. Tension had left her quickly and she had started berating him for his breakage in stride, but Jacques was confident that she was trying to hide her embarrassment at being surprised like this. But he also knew that she probably had raised some walls around her again, and that she would never allow herself such a moment of weakness again. Not that he would voluntarily try to scare her again, mind you; he still had too many things to study to gamble his life away like this.

"What do you mean it'll last enough? That's Ebb, right?" Ashirijen asked with her gaze locked on the city.

"No, it's not. We still have a stretch of forest to cross to reach God's Eye lake, and then a good fifteen to twenty days of navigating again. I thought you were in a good mood despite having to go back on land, but it seems it was misguided." He felt her freeze under his hand, and heard an ominous creaking sound coming from under her feet. Without a word, Jacques sped up his movements. By the time he looked up again after screwing the cap on his reserve of the product, she was nowhere in sight. He could swear he hear a scream from under the water, though.

Jacques found her again soon enough. She had reached the shore at extreme speed, and he was wondering why she'd done that until he saw the first tree fall. Then another, followed by many more, often multiple at once.

She popped back on the deck a few minutes before the ship started docking, scaring everyone a bit more than they already were with a chilling glare and a single hate-filled sentence before going in Jacques' cabin to wait:

"Fuck sand, fuck leaves, and fuck trees."