

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

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Thinking back to the difficulties of negotiating calmly with the other party with a 2.5m tall and intimidating nereid behind you, Ashirijen begrudgingly accepted to remain hidden under the docks until Jacques could find another group to travel through the forest with. Sure, her magic-laced voice could make any discussion a breeze, but it wasn't a good situation to take advantage of it.

Not that they couldn't move by themselves, but the old man truly didn't want to travel alone with her again. She could restrain herself for the group, however once he was left alone with her, he would have to bear her temperament and tantrums. Of course, saying that to her face meant getting his own slapped, and so he wrapped that under the argument that he needed to replenish some necessities for the coming days. Finding another group of travellers would become a "lucky coincidence" she would be unable to refute, and his mind would be at peace.

The nereid in question was looking at the sky, bobbing up and down alongside the small waves under the wooden docks, gripping a pillar with her long and prehensile tail and doing her best to simmer down. She was annoyed already, and the old coot obviously had some kind of plan she wouldn't be able to refute when they separated. He was devious like that.

It wouldn't feel so bad if she could get back at him a little, but since brute force was impossible the leftover options didn't feel satisfying enough compared to the effort. Her best comfort was that Kali was with her almost all the time these days; she hadn't been able to talk with her so often in years, even if the reason this time was the Goddess' curiosity towards Time's new Child. Slowly caressing her coral spear, she waited.

"Bad temper my ass... How would he feel if he was forced to suddenly spend multiple days underwater, huh?"

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Ashirijen had trouble sleeping. The forest was a deeply unsettling environment for her. Water blocked sound and light differently than air, and the rustling of the wind in the leaves kept her on edge. She was also not used to living with a group, and she constantly confounded the other traveller's noises with something hostile. No way she

would ever sleep under a tent in those conditions, blocking her vision.

Still thinking how unpleasant the situation was, she heard Jacques roll over in his sleep and sighed. At least he was quiet like this. Then he rolled over again, and another time and she heard an ominous whimper. Something was wrong. Opening the old man's tent's flap, she saw him struggling against his sleeping gear. Wasn't it supposed to be brand new? How was it possible for him to rip some bits of it off with his meagre strength?

"Wake him up, quickly!" Kali screamed in the nereid's mind. Knowing better than to disobey the Goddess, Ashirijen grabbed the old man and began shaking him, to no avail.

"Use magic!", Kali added, her voice more urgent.

The moment Ashirijen put pressure on the old man's head, he woke up with a start, taking a big breath of air as if he had been drowning. She held him down, looking with rising apprehension as his eyes darted around crazily. Did he finally snap? After what felt like an eternity Jacques finally calmed down and clarity returned to his eyes.

"What the fuck was that, old man..." Ashirijen muttered, and she felt Kali metaphorically shake her head in hers. The bedroll was slowly falling apart under her hands. That was magic, no doubt; and very advanced time magic at that.

The only response she got though, was Jacques curling into a ball and sobbing uncontrollably, before slowly falling back into an agitated sleep. Frozen by shock, she decided that questioning him would be best left for later. Feeling that Kali was pensive too, she knew she wouldn't get answers that night and did her best to get some rest too.

The morning after, Jacques got up without a word, ate a little and started following the others. Compared to the usual curious man looking all around himself, the silent and introverted façade he had now felt worrying to the nereid. What happened to a man of his calibre, to be shaken that badly? He looked exhausted and jumped in fright from the slightest stimulation.

Maybe leaving him alone without pushing for answers had been a bad move. The rejuvenating old man had avoided sleep like children avoided vegetables the whole way to God's Eye Lake, and his state had gone from worrying to pity-inspiring; if there was a contest for the best beggar, he would win it for sure at this moment. Ashirijen had to take care of him all the way, making sure he didn't fall down while walking, and even forcing him to eat. Her growing anxiety and the lack of comments from Kali trumped her annoyance, and she did what she had to do diligently, gently even in order

to avoid breaking the fragile twig in front of her. She could guess at what was happening, but couldn't be sure until she heard it from Jacques' mouth directly.

Three paranoid days in the forest later, Jacques fell asleep from exhaustion the moment they climbed on the boat that would get them to Ebb for good. He didn't have time to enjoy his forced rest however, and he was shortly woken up with a good smack on the head from the frowning nereid at his bedside. She was forced to, as it seemed that the "nightmare" that had chased him all this time made its return as soon as his eyes closed again.

"If you can't sleep, at least talk to me and stop cowering like a reclusive seashell! Did your brain melt from fear? Did you forget who you are, and who I am?" She berated him harshly. "We are Children of the Gods! Did you think it was easy? That it had nothing to do with you, that it's all a coincidence? Well you'd better start writing in your little books, because if you haven't realized by now you really are hopeless."

The old man opened his mouth, but no words would come out. He just looked like a fish held above the water instead, flapping his lips futilely.

"You..!" The nereid stood straight and lifted her arm to give him another smack before shaking slightly and lowering it back down. "The Goddess Kali wishes to speak to you directly. You're a lucky man, so choose your words well." She closed her eyes, and when they opened back, the deep purple of Ashirijen's irises was tinted slightly lighter than usual.

"What did you see?" In his fragile state of mind, there was no resisting the charming voice for Jacques.

"The... The darkness, it came for me." His face paled as he remembered the terrifying visions that tormented him. "I don't know what I've seen. I wish I hadn't. I was in a cold, dark place. Do you know how maddening it is, to open your eyes only to see nothing, your ears to hear nothing, your mouth to scream nothing?"

Kali pushed Ashirijen's hand on his shoulder to stop his violent trembling, and for an instant he felt as if he stood on top of the world, flying over his worries and fear to liberate his mind. "Focus on my voice and answer slowly", she said as she started humming a tune.

"I was alone at first," he continued with a weak, but now stable voice. "But I felt something starting to crawl up my neck, like a hand made of bones beginning to choke me. I don't know how much time went, then I could see it suddenly, like it was always there. Then another hand joined the first on top of my head, and I could see a woman, an elf I think. Something brushed my cheek and I saw a chicken. Then I got hit in the back of the knee, and a fairy was looking me in the eye behind by back. And it went

on, and on, and on... Until you woke me up. I can't count the number of things, people, monsters I saw."

Kali stopped humming, and Jacques released the breath he never knew he held.

"Just as we share the bodies of the Children we choose, so do you mortals share part of you with us. And we remember each and every one of you. Perhaps you've already understood now. The Three are much more powerful than us other Gods. Take this as a warning of sorts from Time... I've said too much already." Her eyes turned their usual shade of purple again and Ashirijen was back, panting slightly from exertion. Like she said before, as marvellous as it sounded, being a Child was not an easy task.

"Now will you stop being stupid? Or do you want me to smack you again?" the nereid said while removing her hand from his shoulder. He was looking at his open palms in wonder, oblivious to her presence.

Reassured that he was in a better frame of mind now, she went above deck and dove into the lake. Such a heavy atmosphere, why did she have to babysit a stubborn old man like this? Pretty fish. She thought he resembled some stupid merfolk kid chewing on toxic algae before showing it off proudly. She felt hungry. It had been a while since she'd laid an egg herself, but she had pretty much abandoned the idea after becoming Kali's Child. She turned her face up and stood still on her back for a moment; letting Kali take control really messed with her head this time, she needed to focus or her head would start hurting.

She knew that Jacques had seen the previous Children of Time in his dream. She hadn't seen Kali's, but her explanation was clear enough. The God had probably had enough of his denying attitude and decided to take him down a peg. Perhaps the old man would be a bit more amenable in the future. But seriously, a Time chicken? She sighed before diving deeper and deeper in the cold water.