

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

Chapter 78 - Summit

Jacques was walking forward calmly, not paying attention to the vegetation parting itself in front of them. Knowing that Talia was a dryad, and Nature's Child to boot, this much control over the surrounding plant life was expected. Ashirijen on the other hand, had a completely different perception of this simple action; she had long been able to feel ambient magic, and was working her way up to manipulating it for her own use. For now water was the most comfortable for her to influence, but a small space of air around her was still doable.

However, even though her accomplishments in that field were enough to put her among the top living beings, she couldn't help but feel stifled by Talia's mastery of her environment. The whole temple felt subtly different to her, like someone else had already taken the place for himself. Maybe it was a natural ability of dryads, but she doubted it could be so strong naturally.

Lost in thoughts, she kept following Jacques in front of her until they arrived to a small clearing at the foot of the gigantic tree. Maybe five of the both of them each wouldn't be enough to circle the stump. The dryad was waiting for them, sitting with her back against her tree. She looked like a carving of a human female, her image only slightly warped by her body made from wood, leaves and mosses.

"You're finally here." Talia greeted Ashirijen and Jacques with a voice too deep to truly be hers. They lost consciousness.

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Jacques had barely begun dissecting the dryad in front of him with his gaze when his vision turned black and he fell head first to the ground. When he came to, he was lounging in a cosy hammock made of woven vines with a giant leaf fanning his face. His current accommodation looked like an emptied out tree with a man-made door in one side. A small desk and a chair pointed their back to the door, and the leftover space was empty except for a small cupboard. Looking closer, the furniture was all made from a single piece of wood, as if the materials had grown into their shapes by themselves. "Magic. Unexpected, but still magic." He thought, and got up energetically. He had a slight headache, but that much was of no concern.

The door gave way to the clearing he had just arrived at before, and judging from the lighting not much time had passed after he'd fainted; half an hour at most, his experience told him. Looking around once more, Talia hadn't moved from her place,

except she seemed unconscious as well. Ashirijen was floating face down in a nearby pond that he didn't remember being there before, also unmoving. He reflexively started running towards her to pull her from the water, until he remembered that drowning a nereid was impossible. If anything, she was more comfortable like this, and he decided to let her head and dorsal fin bob up and down quietly.

Nothing else in his surroundings seemed to warrant his immediate attention, and the man resolved himself to simply wait. Luckily enough, whatever knocked them all out appeared to affect them the same way, because Talia and Ashirijen woke up in a couple of minutes later.

If he was reading their faces correctly, the dryad was exhausted; the nereid on the other hand was fidgety, and kept throwing weird looks between him and herself. The first to speak was their host, Talia.

"It seems like Nature, Time and Kali wished to speak between themselves directly for a bit and took our bodies over for a short while." Since Ashirijen was still looking herself over and Jacques simply listened curiously, she continued: "We won't know what it was about unless they choose to tell us, so let's not dwell on it. I see they have prepared some living space for you to stay, though, and I won't dispute them on that; anything you need during your stay I'll provide, don't worry, and sorry for the poor reception."

That being said, after a round of late presentations, the group was finally able to start discussing the reason of their visit.

"I need your help with the people in Kali's temple. Humans here..." Ashirijen clenched her fist in frustration, remembering the simple trip from the harbour to the temple, "don't look like they're ready to accept me, Child of their Goddess or not. Changes are coming for Kali's worship, and I can't do it alone."

"In this case, I could simply summon them to meet with us here, it's nothing major. Maybe asking for all the higher-ups of the temple at once will rise a few questions among the more stubborn ones, but with reality in front of their eyes there's nothing they can do about it but reform." Talia said, before exclaiming: "Oh! And before that, there's someone you should meet and talk things through with. You may not know, but Kali's chosen successor is here in Ebb right now, along with a couple other interesting personalities."

She could have told the nereid more, but Talia wanted the meeting to keep some surprise to it and see Ashirijen's reaction to Thani, but also and foremost to Oakbud. That encounter should be quite lively. After deflecting a few questions from the nereid

to keep the mystery, Talia concluded on the topic to focus on Jacques' presence instead.

"Just keep in mind that whatever we start here will only be the beginning, and that it'll take years, if not decades, before any real change can be felt. How about you, Jacques?"

"Well... my presence here has mostly been forced upon me by Ashirijen in the hope that it would bring more weight to her arguments. Which is apparently redundantly inefficient compared to your political power here." He shot a side glance at the nereid. "I must say I am still quite bitter about losing my previous accommodations on such short notice, so I would appreciate the opportunity to resume some of my work. A simple mirror would suffice to assuage my immediate concerns, as I feel my body has changed drastically during the short time the Gods spoke between themselves."

When he received a negative response, he immediately made his way to the pond to look himself up however he could, to Talia's surprise and Ashirijen's exasperation. At least he's not playing with tweezers or cutting himself up this time, the nereid thought.

"Don't worry about him, he's always like this", she said while rubbing her temples to chase the last after-effects of Kali's takeover. "He may be Time's Child, but it's barely been a month and it's like he's never known magic before. He was unaware of it too, and even denied it until Time himself put him against a little trial of his. Also, before he asks, how'd you know we were coming?"

"Nothing great would come out of poking at Time's Child anyway, I guess..." Talia sighed. Without a doubt, that man felt weird. She wondered if the lively encounter between the nereid, Thani and Oakbud would still happen, or if this odd person would somehow interrupt it.

"As for why I was awaiting you, my tree's roots extend far enough that I can communicate with the lake." Seeing the nereid's expression change, she knew that the other had met with the lake's incarnation. "In fact, I could follow you easily anywhere in Ebb if I really put my mind to it; it's just that I rarely do so as it's quite taxing on my mind."

They exchanged another glance before waiting quietly for the 'old' man to be back from his sudden obsession with his reflection. Ashirijen picked up her spear and began filing the tip of her claws while the dryad watched with curiosity. She had only begun to do so recently for practical reasons of above-water life. At sea, she could move her whole body freely, and she was a lot less reliant on her extremities' dexterity. On land however, she had to stay balanced on her two legs and use her hands to manipulate things a lot more, and the sharpness of her claws had been the cause of some lamentations multiple times. Flooring, doors, bed sheets...flesh. She was far from feeling guilt about those, it was simply a bit more practical this way; they'd grow

longer again in no time anyway, or she could always sharpen them back herself if the need arose.

"So, how is it now?" Ashirijen asked as Jacques came back mumbling. She was just finishing her second hand.

"I'd say I'm close to my prime again. Somewhere in my early thirties as of now, if my reappearing hairline and disappearing belly flab are any indication. The real question is, 'when' will it stop?" He answered while air quoting the word.

"You know where we are right now, no? Just go to Time's part of the temple and ask, you might get your answers there. Or, you know, stop being stubborn and start learning magic already." The nereid jabbed verbally. "I wonder how insufferable you'd be as a kid again. I'll happily drown you the moment you start crying."

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The rest of the afternoon passed by quickly with Talia dumping loads of information about the city on them. First was the layout of the city so they could go where they needed to without getting lost; of course they could ask passersby or refer to drawn maps, but removing that reliance early was for the best if they were to stay in Ebb for an extended period of time. Second was the precise location of the higher-end blacksmithing and glassblowing workshops: the first to find a utility for the monstrous mantis' scythes taken as a trophy by Ashirijen, the second to placate Jacques' cravings for proper glasswork utilities for his experiments.

And third, a quick summary of recent or interesting events like the day's arena tournament, and a stern reminder to not go to the lower levels of the aforementioned building. Talia knew that the Captain would learn very soon that two Children had just come into the city, and she'd rather spare him the effort of restraining his instincts to fight by making sure they wouldn't give him a chance for that in the first place.

Of course, in order to live their life they'd need money, and Jacques was not a rich man. In fact, what little he had was almost all gone from the trip from his coastal residence to Ebb, and that was with abusing Ashirijen's voice and intimidation factor. He had intended to live quietly in that little town, and as a result didn't prepare sizeable reserves. At least they could count on the temple's hospitality for now, but Ashirijen and Jacques knew better than to abuse it for too long.

Discussing this plight with the dryad, she conferred them with a personal token that would serve as guarantee for them in case they encountered difficulty to find some employ and earn a living or other. With the general hostility against non-humans, this little piece of wood would also brand the nereid as untouchable, and even the city guard would have to report to her before doing anything rash. Best of all, it would let

them keep their status as Children under wraps for as long as they wished.

By the time the three were finished talking, night had fallen and Talia had some food brought to the two travel-weary Children, and they retired to their respective resting places soon after.