

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

Chapter 79 - Summit (2)

To Ashirijen's dismay, breakfast was only composed from fruit, berries, bread and fresh water. Of course, it tasted better and more varied than some of the algae she was used to, but her preferred diet was still closer to carnivorous than what was available. On the one hand it wasn't surprising, Talia being a dryad and all; on the other hand, the dryad in question didn't need to eat, so she could have brought them fish or meat since she wasn't partaking.

A bit disgruntled, the nereid just added another point to her to-do list and decided to bully Jacques to vent.

"So, what are you going to do? Talia already sent a runner to find the people she wants us to meet before summoning the temple guys, and I don't believe for a second that you'll be able to stay here waiting."

"As if you'd stay put yourself!" The man answered. His transformation had continued during the night, and he now looked like someone in their late twenties. That is, if you ignored his old, tattered, dusty clothes and piercing eyes.

"In case you'd forgotten, we're in the middle of a HUMAN city, filled with HUMANS that don't like people that are not HUMAN." She picked up her spear to wave its sharp tip right under his nose. "I might be overwhelmingly strong, but I'm not going anywhere without a capable escort if we don't wanna see blood. Not the best first impression I could give, you know; it's not like that curtain-sized cloak helps much for anyone closer than a couple of metres, and there's also the problem of my voice."

"That's true as well." Lost in thought, Jacques twirled his pair of tweezers absent-mindedly for a bit. "No harm sticking together I suppose. We don't have that many things to do anyway. How about I drop you at one of the smithies while I look for some glassworks nearby? If what Talia said was true, your voice won't be a bother there; anyone who falls under its influence would probably be unable to work with the mantis' scythes anyway. After that I can drop you back here while I go to the central administration to look for a bit of work, unless there's something else you want to do?"

"Yeah, just drop me by the river crossing the city, I'll go and get myself some fresh catch in the lake. There's another thing I want to try there anyway; if it goes well I'll get back here by myself without trouble." No trouble for herself, that is, but she wasn't about to tell him that. "And when do you plan on speaking with your hourglass

fanatics through all that?"

The grimace on the "old" man's face made the start of the day just a bit better.

The streets bustling with people early in the morning made it just a bit worse.

An excessively tall, cloaked, with bumps in the hood, spear-wielding figure was far from inconspicuous, but revealing the nereid's head would be even worse. Still, Ashirijen was ready to explode by the time they made it to the Twin Bellows smithy, the famous rival of the Twin Hammers. The name of the shops had become a running joke over the years of friendly competition between the two artisans. According to Talia, they'd better go to the Hammers to get the mantis' parts worked on, but the other shop was closer. Jacques was glad they didn't follow the dryad's advice this time, because he knew he had very little power to stop his companion if she went on a rampage.

"Welcome to the twin bellows, how may I help you today?" Their gawking among the noise was interrupted by a mundane-looking woman with a thick stature and arms at the counter. Covered hair, heated face, sharp eyes, thick leather apron with scorch marks and metal dust on the rest of the exposed clothes, she looked just like the stereotypical blacksmithing artisan. The more surprising part was her nonplussed reaction to the nereid's appearance up close. "Tourists, huh? Locals don't stare that long the first time. Not human either, but hey, part of the job too."

"Oi, master! I know the youngest isn't there today but greet customers properly!" a voice rang out from the middle of the room.

"Shut up and focus on your hammering, you're going to f.u.c.k up the folding on that piece of crap you're calling a blade!" The woman yelled back before turning back to the newcomers. "Damn apprentice burning himself. Cretin left his tongs on the edge of the lit forge for an hour and picked them up bare-handed. Coulda just told me he was tired if he wanted to skip work... So, hey, I'm Elise, best blacksmith in Ebb, and don't let that copperhead Auri tell you otherwise. No refunds."

--

"I'm surprised that woman could speak with me just fine. She doesn't have any Blessings, right?" Ashirijen asked the ever-present Goddess at the back of her mind. She was currently swimming through the river crossing Ebb towards the lake to relax while Jacques left to the central building in search of a job.

"You can't rise to become a prominent figure in the biggest human settlement without a strong mind."

"... At least I'll get something proper to cut things with in half a week." With the size of the pair of blade-like chitinous limbs from the mantis monster, it was enough to pay with one and use the other for her needs. What was the weapon called again? She didn't care, it was just a long stick with a blade instead of a point. No reason to pick something like a sword since she was used to the spear already. The nereid smirked in the muddy water concealing her from prying eyes above. She could already anticipate how much easier it'd be to mow down trees with a proper cutting tool.

If the water had been clear, going in the water would have been much more troubling. Maybe she'd been wrong after all, Ashirijen thought to herself; maybe the hardest part wasn't done yet. She still had to endure living in that human city for a while.

She was almost at the lake now, having swam in silence for a while.

"Hey".

"..." As if the Goddess in her head would answer to that. She felt extremely proud of being chosen as Kali's Child, and she enjoyed some amazing benefits from that, but the drawbacks were clear as well. She wasn't always 'alone' in her head. Sometimes it was like a sweet whisper behind her ears, sometimes Kali had a proper voice, sometimes her own thoughts would transform to bring her an answer. She wondered what it was like for other Children sometimes, how maddening it would be without a mind and individuality as strong as hers.

"Short lives, irrational actions, sometimes suicide. It's one of the reasons we Gods don't always take sapient species as Children, there's no destructive cohabitation of the mind."

Just another day in the water. Kali was talking to her more often since the start of this adventure, and she was sure that she could read her mind somehow. It was more unsettling than terrifying for Ashirijen though; no point being scared of a God that could kill you with a breath, no point being scared of a God that only wanted you to be your best.

"About that, is there a way for you to stop messing with my mind after taking over?" She felt angry, thinking about the day before. Every time Kali had taken her body over to do something, she'd have no memory of the time, and all sorts of weird stray thoughts and impulses would follow for a while after that.

"Still dishonest with yourself, huh. I've already explained that those are your own

thoughts. When I step back and give you back control, your mind is kind of...reset? It would be a good way of training the mind if it didn't require one being a Child and there wasn't a risk of injuring you each time. So whatever you feel or want deeply, instinctively or not, will surface more strongly."

"WHAT THE... YOU! I..! F.u.c.k!" Luckily her angry shout was muffled by the lake she just reached.

"Come on, just look at the guy, he's completely smitten by you too. Your attitude and teasing didn't help, but he's not as immune to exposure to your voice as he thinks he is either."

"I. Am. A. Nereid. One of the most fearsome sea-dwelling predators in the world! I'm YOUR CHILD! And you're saying I'm the one who wants to push down that old bag of bones?"

"Absolutely. But so what? In my time, I did it with a dragon."