

The Curious Dryad

By Gracee Gill

In the high mountains, there was a small village. This isolated village was surrounded by roaming woods as far as the eye could see. The villagers never left their village as there were stories told from the elders of monsters and witches melting from trees and forming from water.

For Delta, these were less of stories and more her reality.

She ran through the woods, her green feet hitting the floor as she dashed between branches. She had spent her day running from the human children, attempting to evade their eyes. Her mother had instilled into her to not be seen by them, as the villagers would come after them bearing their torches to burn down the forests. She had always obeyed her mother, but she had become bored. She toyed with the idea of talking to the children who always had sharp laughter and rosy faces.

She paused, catching her breath from the shade of a fir tree. The children ran past her, chasing a small rabbit down the hill. She smiled, wishing to join them.

She didn't think they were much different from each other. They both had brown eyes and yellow hair. They both enjoyed swimming and running through the woods, exploring new places. Why should they be apart? All because of where they live and who they are?

A hand clasped her shoulder from behind. She jumped, turning around to meet her mother's eyes. Her mother was a tall woman with cold dark eyes and the same green skin as Delta. Her nails dug into Delta's shoulder, sharp pine needles resting on Delta's shoulder.

"Hello mother," Delta greeted her unsurely. She was positive she was going to be scolded for being too close to the children.

Her mother glared at her, "You know you are too close to the village, child. Think of their flames and how it destroys our homes."

Delta winced at the thought. She thought of the summers of her early years where the east side of the forest was burned, hundreds of friends killed. Their bodies stood there till, devoid of color and scorched to ashes.

She looked down in shame, "Yes mother, I understand. I am sorry. I just wish to have a friend."

Her mother's gaze softened in understanding, "I know, I felt the same

loneliness too. You will find a friend eventually Delta, the time will come.”

She gave her a hug. Delta smiled slightly, returning the hug. Her mother was never very affectionate. Moments like these were rare.

Her mother released her, waving her off, “Go now, child. Be back before dusk. I don’t want you out late with the monsters and hunters.”

Her mother turned, melting into a tree. Delta sighed, trudging deeper into the woods away from the village.

She walked by herself, running her hands through the tall grass. She came to a stop as she reached a small meadow next to a river. It was silent here, not a living thing in sight.

Delta knew better than this. She knew the living creatures hid in the branches of the trees and in the gurgling streams. She touched the water slightly, looking for anything sentient beneath the waters.

Her hand caught on something solid floating downstream. She grabbed it, pulling up from the waters.

A girl rose from the water, her face scowling. “What do you want?” she asked.

Delta stumbled back in surprise, letting go of the girl's hair.

The girl stood up from the water, brushing her white dress off. Her hair was long and made of flowing water. Her skin was light blue and Delta could swear she saw her reflection in it.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!”

The girl grimaced, running her hands through her hair to fix it. Delta saw no point in this seeing as her hair was perfect already.

“Do you need anything?” the girl asked, staring longingly at the river.

Delta paused for a moment in thought, “What’s your name?”

“Hali,” she replied, crossing her arms. “What’s it to you?”

Delta shrugged, “Just wondering, I’ve never met a naiad before...”

Hali narrowed her eyes at her, “Well, if that’s all you needed, I’ll be on my way now.” Delta reached out as Hali turned away. “Wait, don’t go yet. What are you doing tonight?”

Hali shrugged, “Just going downstream. I have to stay away from the lake tonight. There’s rumors tonight is a swimming night for the humans,” she shuddered at the thought. “Dreadful creatures they are. Always throwing trash in the water and stirring up mud.”

Delta shrugged, “I like them. I think they are kind of funny.”

“Enough of that now. What’s your name? I don’t think I caught it.”

“Oh!,” Delta exclaimed. “Mine name is Delta.”

Hali seemed to think about this, staring at Delta. She stepped out of the water and touched her hair.

“I always liked dryads. I wish my hair could have flowers in it,” she said wistfully. Delta ran her hands through her hair, catching a flower in it. She held it up for Hali to take.

She grabbed it graciously with a smile, tucking it behind her ear.

Delta turned, seeing the eye setting in the sky. Her eyes widened in shock.

“Oh my goodness! It’s almost dusk! I’m sorry Hali but if I don’t leave right now my mom will kill me.

The girl shrugged, “That’s ok. I think I’ll head downstream and meet my family. Who knows where they are now...”

Hali waved as she walked back into the river, her body relaxing into the water. In a blink of an eye, she was gone.

Delta smiled, turning from the river and walking back into the woods. She had practically made a friend, she knew she could.

She walked back to the village edge as the Hesperides painted the sky with orange and red. By the time she had made it to her tree, the moon was rising and she could spot the glow of human torches by the lake, just as Hali had said.

She sat on the ground, exhausted from a long day of exploring. Her calves ached and her eyes stung from the bright sun. She turned around as she heard a crunch from the leaves behind her.

Her mother walked forward, a grim expression on her face. She sat down next to Delta. “You’re late.”

“I was busy,” Delta replied simply.

“With what? Chasing humans and picking flowers?”

Delta didn’t reply. She figured trying to argue would only cause her more trouble. “You need to be more careful Delta,” her mother paused, seemingly at a loss for words.

“The villagers... they are becoming more brave. Tonight they overtook the lake and surrounded it with their torches and children. The dryads have already been evacuated in case of a fire.”

Delta hung her head in shame, “I’m sorry Mother. I didn’t mean to worry you. I met a naiad at the river to the North. She warned me of the lake tonight.”

"I assume she must have been heading down to the creeks. The naiads had been evacuating all day in case of the villagers swimming in the lake. They are worried for their waters, may garbage be thrown in or their resources depleted."

Delta nodded, thinking of her new friend. Would she come back? Would she find another stream?

Her mother left her with that thought, leaving to rest for the new day. Delta sat for a moment, watching the swirling smoke float through the air and listening to the laughter of the people. She followed her mother's example, retiring for the night.

She rose in the morning with the rising of the sun. The air was chilled and dew drops hung off her lashes. She wiped them away and stretched, standing up from off the damp grass. Smoke hung in the air like a heavy cloud, invading her nose. She coughed, shocked by the strong stench.

"Mother?" she called out. Her mother always seem to awake before her and scope out the village to make sure of the dryad's safety. No one responded.

Delta tiptoed through the woods, reaching the edge of the forest. She saw a few humans milling about, sleepy from their late night of swimming and talking. Nothing seemed to be off with the village.

She continued walking on the edge towards the lake. She had reached the edge of a creek that flowed into the lake. She squinted at the water. It almost look like there was a hand...

She yelped, being pulled into the water. She swam up immediately, coughing out the remnants of the water in her lungs. Hali's head popped up from in front of her. She had a smirk on her face.

"I got you back."

Delta wrung out her soaked pink chiffon dress, "I can see that."

Hali's smile turned into a frown as she glanced at the lake, "Did you hear what happened last night at the lake?"

Delta leaned forward, intrigued, "What happened?"

"One of their torches fell, caught some dead brush on fire. The naiads had to help put it out."

"Oh my!" Delta exclaimed. She looked around for a sight of her mother. "I need to tell my mother right now, she'll have to inform the council."

"They're already in a meeting about it. I heard some rumors that we may

move somewhere more remote, out of the villagers' reach. It'll be safer there."

Delta frowned, "But we kind of need them. They help control the wolves and clear the dead brush."

Hali shrugged, "They're scared of what could happen."

Delta thought on this. Should they leave just because of a maybe? Shouldn't they protect their land and stay at home?

The two of them waited for the council meeting to end, sitting by the river. They hid in a bush as the village children ran by as they threw a ball for a large dog. Delta smiled slightly.

"Don't you wish you could run with them? To be able to not worry about being seen and just be free?"

Hali shifted uncomfortably, "I've never really thought about it. I usually just hide in a stream and watch them."

Delta sighed, "I wonder what it would be like to be one of them. Their biggest worry is if they win their weekly games in the town square."

"That would be nice," Hali smiled slightly, reminiscing about a memory that had not yet happened.

Hali and Delta sat there in silence. They watched as nervous nymphs formed into flowers and bushes. The meeting must have been over.

The two of them walked over to a small clearing where the meetings were usually held. Still there was Delta's mother, looking conflicted. She looked up to see her daughter watching her.

"Delta, what are you doing here? You know to stay at home when I'm gone." "Sorry Mother. Is it true we are moving? Shouldn't we stay at home and protect the forest?"

Her mother's gaze hardened, "You are too young to understand these hardships. The choice of where we will go is up to the elders." Her focus shifted to Hali beside her. "Your sisters have decided for you to leave. They are sending you to the sea down South to live with your cousins."

Even despite Hali's annoyance for humans, this proclamation made her upset. However she made no fuss about it.

Her mother left, going to speak to an older nymph. Delta sighed, turning to Hali with a sympathetic look.

"I'm sorry you have to leave. Maybe the sea will be better?"

She shook her head, "It's simply not possible. I can't abandon my home just because my sisters want me to leave. I won't let them."

Delta nodded in agreement. They needed to stay and repair their home.

They made a plan, quietly whispering to each other about it. It was risky and highly frowned upon, but it was their last resort. The elders didn't like changing their mind. Only something big that would catch their eye could change their decision.

The pair stomped through the woods, determined to stay at their home. They hovered at the borderline of the woods and the village. There was a silent agreement between them. They would try their best to help each other stay.

Delta walked forward, approaching the village. She knew she was being reckless, but someone needed to stand up and take initiative. She took a deep breath and headed to the elegant looking building before her. She knew the leader of the village lived here. It was evident, seeing his children always had the finest clothes and the best fed.

She walked up to the door, pulling her moss cloak further up. She could feel stairs piercing her back from the villagers. She glanced back at the woods to see Hali standing unsurely. She nodded at her then knocked on the door.

A woman answered the door with hair like corn silk and dark eyes. She shrieked, almost slamming the door in Delta's face. She grabbed the closest thing to her, a fire poker, and held it up.

"Stand back, don't come any closer." She said this as a question, as if she wasn't sure what she was seeing.

Delta held her hands up in surrender, "I do not come to bring any harm. I would like to speak with your leader, in peace. I wish no blood to fall today."

The woman looked at her unsurely. Delta spotted a young child from behind the woman, peeking from behind her mother's skirt. Delta smiled, knowing how to calm the lady. She closed her eyes and cupped her hands, a flower blooming in her palm. She plucked it and handed it to the young girl.

The woman smiled tentatively at Delta, still unsure. "Are there... more of you?"

Delta nodded, motioning for Hali to come forth. Her friend walked over, hunching over. Delta thought the human was going to collapse from shock.

The woman took a shaky breath, regaining her composure. She smiled, "Come in, I'll grab my husband."

The two followed the human inside, looking at the house in wonder. It smelled of warm bread and spices. It was all quite unusual, filled with metals and dark furs rather than the greens and wood of the forests.

It was pleasantly different from Delta's home. She liked the warmth and the safe feeling the house gave her.

The woman led them to a small room with a fireplace and chairs. Delta and Hali sat down next to each other with the young child sitting on the floor next to Delta. The young girl was entranced by her dress, carefully pulling off the leaves and watching them regrow.

The woman looked at her child hesitantly before smiling at the two girls, "I'll go grab him now, please make yourself comfortable."

She left the room, hurrying off down the hall. Delta and Hali glanced at each other quickly. They hadn't thought their plan through this far.

Delta glanced at the young girl sitting by her. She was the spitting image of her mother with blonde hair and brown eyes. Delta could see the resemblance to her and a young boy who occupied the woods frequently. She wondered if they were siblings.

"What's your name?" the young girl asked, attempting to braid the sea plants on Hali's dress.

"I'm Delta and this is my friend Hali. What's yours?" "Phoebe," the girl answered, still focusing on Hali's dress. "Have you always lived here?"

Phoebe nodded, "My family has never left here. My brothers and sisters are always exploring. My mommy says it's too dangerous for me."

Delta nodded. Phoebe confirmed her suspicions about the girl's siblings. She understood why the girl's parents hadn't let her in the woods. Despite the humans fear of the nature spirits, wolves and bears were frequent visitors that caused the humans to stay in their town.

"What are your siblings' names?" Hali asked her curiously. Hali never saw the village much, this was all so new to her.

Phoebe perked up, "My oldest sister is Danae, and then there's the twins Colin and Jason..." Phoebe trailed off, her face became solemn.

"What's wrong?" Hali asked.

"My brother, Anthony, disappeared in the woods. We thought..." she looked down at her hands, blushing, "Well, we thought the nature spirits took him."

Delta gave the young girl a puzzled look. The nymphs and naiads would never steal a child, it simply would do no good for them. She patted Phoebe on the back comfortingly.

"We never took him, but we can try our hardest to try and find your

brother,” Delta reassured her.

Phoebe’s eyes widened, “Oh really? Please help us!

A man cleared his throat from behind them. They turned to see a man in about his thirties standing next to the woman from earlier. His hair was dark and his eyes the color of brooks.

Phoebe rushed forward, grabbing the man's leg and hugging it. He looked down at her, smiling slightly.

The family walked over, taking a seat on the chairs across from Hali and Delta. The woman shifted uncomfortably.

Delta took a breath, “I assume you are wondering why we have come today.”

“Yes,” the man paused for a moment, thinking of what to say. “It was unexpected, to say the least. Before today, spirits were purely rumors.”

Delta nodded, “We came to talk about the fires and garbage in the forests. I know it may not seem like the biggest issue for the town. But that’s *our* home. I know you all wouldn’t greatly appreciate it if we covered the town in moss and rusted the door hinges.”

The man nodded, “We understand. However, children have been going missing from our village. We thought if we tried to send a message that we are not helpless maybe it would stop. I assume now that you are not the reason for our missing people?”

Hali responded, “You are correct. We had nothing to do with the missing children nor would we have any reason to. We just wish simply to be able to stay in our home. The older spirits are not as... understanding as us. They wish to leave.”

“It would be devastating if we left!” Delta told the family. “Crops wouldn’t grow, the soil would become dull, the water would dry up...”

The man and woman looked at the girls in shock, as if they never knew of this outcome.

How could they know? Spirits and humans didn’t interact.

“I have a proposition,” Delta announced. “If we help find the missing children, could you restore the lake back to its natural state? We shouldn’t live in fear of one another, we need to embrace each other and live side by side.”

The man nodded in agreement, “I think it would be very beneficial for the both of us for this to happen. We never meant to ruin your homes,” He bowed his head shamefully, “We’re sorry.”

“And we are sorry too for the missing children,” Hali told them.

The group had come to an understanding. Hali and Delta left, letting the

elders know of the agreement. They strongly disagreed with the idea, but went through with it nevertheless.

The humans held up their bargain also, cleaning the waters and clearing dead brush to prevent fires. Eventually, the missing children had been found. The spirits returned them safely as the village welcomed them with open arms. The spirits and humans lived together in harmony, nymphs and children playing tag in the woods while naiads watered crops when humans gave them cloth. They have found a steady rhythm with one another and lived peacefully.

Delta ran with the children through the woods, her longtime fantasy becoming her reality.

She grinned ear to ear at her new friends. The world seemed at peace.

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