

# *A Raftman in the River of Time\**

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**O**n a hot day, the raftman, a young man named Benito, who occasionally fished to enjoy broiled white meat, decided to swim in the River of Time. He took off his shirt and placed this alongside his sandals and his wide-brimmed *buri* hat. As he began to roll up his pants, he heard a voice calling out, “Help me please.”

Benito turned and tried to figure out where the voice was coming from. He looked toward the mouth of the river and walked briskly toward where he believed the voice was coming from. He arrived at a junction where the waters cascaded copiously over a mound, the white froth rushing, weaving in and out of the small waves.

“Help!” again the voice came, only it was clearer and louder now. The young man raised his hand over his eyes, and he saw movement a few feet away from where he stood. Tiny, yellowish fins between two small, mossy rocks were moving in the water. Then he saw what looked like a crowned head bobbing up and down above the moss.

“A seahorse!” whispered Benito. He could hardly believe he was looking at a seahorse over a foot tall, its body as big as a medium-sized cup. It was trapped between the rocks and it seemed to be weakening. It looked like it was dying. It must have strayed into the river’s mouth in search of plankton and crustaceans when its body got caught among the grasses wedged between the rocks. Its head nodded several times urgently to beckon the young man to come and free it. Benito rushed

toward the mossy rocks where the water was knee-deep. The seahorse was turning white. Its eyes seemed to pop and recede in their sockets every second.

The young man Benito rushed and bent over the rocks in the water. He stretched his arms to try to free the seahorse from the rocky wedge. This time the seahorse's eyes didn't seem to move as much, but it began to open its mouth to speak. "Please be careful. You might break my fins or step on my tail."

But Benito hardly heard the seahorse's weakened voice as he tried to pry open the rocks.

"This is difficult. I'll try my best to free you," Benito said. Benito, drifter, born loser, thought this must all be a joke. He had heard many stories about the creatures of the river, but he hadn't seen a seahorse in his life. He could smell the sea in the air, and a sudden thought crossed his mind, which wasn't often, for he did things instinctively. "This must be an omen," he said to himself again, raising a heavy foot deeper into the water.

"Stay alert," he instructed the seahorse who, at one heave from the young man, wriggled out of the rocks and landed in the frothy waters.

"Where are you?"

The seahorse moved, stretching its neck. It tried to curl up its tail but its end couldn't turn as fast as the seahorse wanted it to. The seahorse straightened its body and spoke to the young man.

"Thank you for helping me. Ask me anything you want from the sea and I will try to give it to you." Benito stood up straight himself.

"I don't want anything. I came here to cool myself."

"Surely you'll not refuse me if I invite you to my kingdom."

"And where's your kingdom?" The young man laughed a little.

The seahorse snorted and before Benito could do anything, he was on the seahorse's back. In the deep, the seahorse grew into a giant being. It was Benito's turn to gape. He had become as small as a medium-sized cup. Again, with a snort, the seahorse pulled him deeper into the waters.

Down, down, down they swam, the seahorse expertly steering, bringing him through the waters, avoiding a whirlpool where a large python was said to dwell—an ancient story, but he didn't realize that the creatures of the deep believed it. Getting more confused, the young man could

do nothing but hold on to the seahorse's wavy back, occasionally feeling its roughness in the water.

They passed through tall sea grasses. They swam higher, at eye level, now and then diving to avoid a sleeping sea cow, and a sunken boat overrun by fish of all shapes and sizes.

The kaleidoscope of colors almost blinded Benito. There was a small kingdom of corals ruled by the King of Shrimps. Starfish conveyors moved lazily close to them. Their passengers of squid, tiny fish, and shrimps lay back on sofas of sea grass, ignoring the pair. Benito, who you already know wasn't much of a thinker, did not care to even define for himself such an impossibility. He and the seahorse moved swiftly from side to side like fish, but more often they moved abruptly through the current until they arrived at an opening of a large cave. The seahorse stopped and said to the young man, "Here we are. This is my home." It pointed with its snout towards a golden front porch with stairs encrusted with precious stones.

"My Father and Mother already know about your good deed and they have prepared a feast for you. My brothers and sisters will provide entertainment."

When Benito realized where he was at the moment, he was surprised to discover that he was still alive and that this wasn't a dream at all. His limited perception of his surroundings assured him he hadn't drowned. He hadn't died. All this was real. As he stood on the white sand, he felt something heavy behind his ears, so he raised his right hand to his ear and brushed it from behind. He felt something that was never there before.

"What's happening to me?" he asked, because he felt three layers of soft tissue behind his ear.

He felt for the other ear too, and the same soft tissue was likewise attached to his skin.

"Your gills," said the seahorse matter-of-factly.

"Gills? How? I'm turning into a merman?" he asked, alarmed.

"Don't worry. It is a precaution. It is temporary. If you don't want to stay with us, I'll bring you back to the earth's surface," the seahorse solemnly said. "But, first, I'll take you to the treasure room for your reward, as all humans who have something to deserve it are given. Don't touch anything until you have made up your mind about what treasure you want

from there. Then I'll present you to my parents," the seahorse said, giving Benito a toothless grin.

The young man weighed in his mind what these treasures could be. He thought of owning some, and he thought about his home with as much thinking as he had never done before. This was too good to be true. He became thoughtful for a moment and then he decided to get only diamonds if there were any in the treasure room. "If there are diamonds," he said, "I'll choose the biggest ones," and he smiled because he knew if he had the precious stones he would become rich—the richest man on earth. He would live in the biggest house instead of a small one. He would have all the servants to cater to his every whim. He would not ever need to fish again.

Both came before a large, dry place where the sand turned darker, moist, and gooey, as if some liquid was oozing from somewhere underneath. Although Benito could feel the moistened sand with his bare feet, the glitter from the gems and golden objects that lighted the large room drew him towards the open-shelved cabinets. The young man's eyes moved greedily up and down, and from side to side. The seahorse was observing him closely and said, "Don't rush. Pick only what your heart desires but, I must warn you, get only what you need, or you will die."

The young man didn't seem to hear the seahorse. He stared without blinking at the many precious gems: rubies, pearls, emeralds, and diamonds, and golden goblets, swords, daggers, shields, small golden boats, and chests strewn about before him. One side of a shelf was weighed down by necklaces, bracelets, and rings of precious stones. There were bright red corals fashioned into brooches, chokers, and bracelets. Benito had never seen such treasures in his life.

He moved quickly towards this shelf and, forgetting what the seahorse had said, he grabbed the necklaces, bracelets, and rings of precious stones and stuffed them into his pockets. When he looked up again, his attention was caught by a small raft made of solid gold, flashing yellow beams from the shelf. On its floor were oars of pure gold. Forgetting the jewelry bursting in his pockets, he snatched the golden raft with the golden oars, and in his hurry, broke the raft instead. All of a sudden, its golden tint turned white, and when he looked at these in his hands, the golden raft had turned into broken corals. The seahorse shook its head from side to side in disgust.

“You mortals are the same. But because you showed me kindness, for you saved my life without giving it much thought, I will bring you back to earth. You will have no memory of my sea world. Back on earth you will no longer hanker for your kin or home. You will never go hungry, nor will you ever get sick. You will become the tireless raftman, ferrying men and women between worlds and the underworld. You will serve the river *diwata* until the young woman arrives who is destined to cross to the great beyond to claim her destiny. Then you must ferry her across the River successfully.

Benito was only half listening to the seahorse. He didn't realize the consequences of the choices he had made while he was underwater. Then he found himself again by the riverbank. His rolled-up pants were as dry as the day was hot.