

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

10 The Tears of a Goddess

"This is an incredible story that will shake the entire known continent" Thani was reading the scroll Harp wrote with Oakbud perched on her head, sitting on the fountain's edge. Everyone else was sitting in a semi-circle around her. "My family will spread this under my name so you don't need to fear being pursued and can lead normal lives. Thank you for bringing this to me first. But, this is not my immediate concern : Karj told me a powerful undead should have appeared in town, even coming in the temple. Do you know anything about it?"

"I knew this was a bad idea from the start..." Mark shook his head and raised a hand to attract attention. "Yes, it is related to us. But there's no undead, at least not in the usual sense. Oakbud here is a spirit somehow, and possessed the corpse of a goblin we killed."

"I didn't notice it was awake when dealing the last blow, I'm sorry. We all thought it was knocked out." Aldo apologized personally, and continued "The corpse has been laid to rest behind the temple before we came here. You will not be troubled again."

"Then I need to thank you a second time in the name in the Blood family."

Oakbud was getting restless up on Thani's head, looking at the statue and extending his arms towards it, but not willing to get down from his comfortable "seat". He could feel the same kind of power the God-Tree had from it, even if it was a bit different and faint.

Curious about this new creature, Thani grabbed him in her palms and brought him in front of her face. "Even if you were made anew, you inherited the power of the dying God-Tree, and we can guess the sadness you don't show. What are you getting restless for? I can help you, and even tell you where the God-Child of Nature is."

Oakbud looked towards her, but he was staring at the statue behind through her head. "He's behaving weirdly, usually he would become livelier at the mention of the Three." Maya was frowning. She had gotten really attached to the little critter in the two weeks or so they spent together, and couldn't help but worry.

At this moment, Oakbud jump from Thani's hands back on her head, then into the water before she could catch him, taken by surprise. He swam to the base of the statue

and tried to climb it.

"This temple is where every one of Kali's worshippers in Pilgrim Woods come. Are you interested in it?" To everyone's surprise, Oakbud stopped, turned around and nodded, seemingly waiting for more. "When we pray and are ready to dedicate ourselves further, receiving a blessing, people would gather, everyone offering a bit of blood to Kali in the fountain. The candidate would then make a cut on his arms, and plunge them in the water. Results may vary, but a sincere person has yet to fail. The more blessings the candidate already has, the stronger the manifestation of power happens with the statue." Her bell-like voice had everyone pay undivided attention.

"So the rumour is true, then? The statue moved when you got your fourth blessing, mistress Thani?" Aldo was familiar with the local stories. "But wouldn't this be too strong of a manifestation? Four shouldn't be enough to attract the God's direct attention."

"And it didn't. Her consciousness did not manifest. But the statue's wings trembled, rattling the great chains above. I can feel your honesty, but please do not spread this : my body was blessed first, and enhanced with every next blessing, gifting me incredible healing capabilities. A lost limb would probably heal in a few hours. This power is what may have attracted a bit of divinity to our object of worship."

Hearing this, Oakbud understood he may be able to do something interesting, and resumed climbing the statue. He nestled on the statue's sculpted robe's hem, her head right above him. The half-closed diamond eyes were framed by the detailed stone hair, like jewels at the bottom of a well.

This was a shocking revelation, only Karj knew of this before. Maya pointed at Thani with an unsure hand "But your scars... they are so painful to even watch."

"It is my will for my scars of prayer to never heal. It is part of how I devote myself to our Lady of Pain. Otherwise they would be gone in a flash."

The little spirit put both his arms on the statue's belly in front of him and poured power into it, releasing a little squeak that made everyone look at him and stop talking. He was trying to rouse the trace of divinity in the statue, wanting to know more about this Goddess of Men, desiring to meet a divine being other than his "Dad-Tree", filling his empty little heart.

"What incredible magic... But he is still so pure and naive, no blessing is needed to know what he feels and wants right now." With a shaky voice, Aldo told them about the time after their meeting, when the desolate little Spirit led him between the

God-Tree roots, planting an ordinary seed to bury his pain.

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She woke up, her mind hazy, her senses dull and her vision blurry. Her position was a familiar one, as she would never forget the moment of her ascension. But this wasn't the body of her Child. She could feel the power of the Three, did they call her? Focusing, she used her eyes.

She was in what looked like a temple, with six people in front of her. She could feel the blessings she had granted on two of them, but the divine power didn't come from them. Right below her was a strange spirit, looking at her through the holes in a piece of tree bark.

When she saw it, she knew. Her predecessor was no more, and she could feel the longing for affection from this newborn creature.

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The stone effigy began trembling under Oakbud's efforts, and he stopped, meeting the statue's eyes. He could feel her, look at her, he knew she was there for him. The eyes never left him, and the stone eyelids batted once, fissuring the diamonds, and two tears of blood formed. The drops fell on Oakbud's head, and he absorbed them. As he did, he understood. She could not meet him directly now, but she gifted him something anyway. She knew of his pain and gave him the warmth he longed for, infinite comfort and understanding.

Then everything stood still again.

When he looked back, Oakbud saw Thani and Karj bent on their knees, while Maya, Kilb, Mark and Aldo stood frozen, looking at the statue with wide eyes. He jumped back into the basin, and climbed on the fountain's edge.

Kilb pulled Maya back, and Mark and Aldo followed. "Let us not meddle with the affairs between gods. Oakbud, thank you for your help and company during our journey, thank you for blessing Maya. But this is where she and I will part with you."

Aldo and Mark looked at each other then Mark spoke : "I'll be blunt, little one. We fear you and the gods. Aldo and I will stay and continue with our previous lives. Thank you for your company. Take this as a parting gift, a piece of advice : stop revealing your uncommon capacities so easily, it will hurt you some day."

"Me understand. You all nice, me remember." Oakbud still could not speak, but Kali's gift enabled him to transmit his thoughts to people now. He would no longer be

restrained by the lack of a speech-capable body.

Thani and Karj stood up. "We understand your concerns. I will take it from here. Thank you again for the information you brought. Karj, please accompany them back, I need to speak with Oakbud alone for a bit."

"Alright. Let's go back to the city's temple, I will also reward you for your service."

No more than a minute later, only Oakbud and Thani were left face to face in the temple. The Gods and the power of divinity had instantly created an unbridgeable rift between the group's members.

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"Alright, now that it's just us two, let us talk about what you need! I feel your interaction with Kali when you managed to rouse her divinity in the statue relieved you a lot, but there are some other things you want, right? What are you going to do now? Do you need help?" Thani had dropped her aloof appearance, and spoke animatedly to Oakbud, bombarding him with questions. This was the difference in image between the head of the family and the person itself.

"Me need...Me want to meet Dad-tree's friends!" Oakbud was still on the fountain's edge, facing the now sitting Thani.

"The Children of the Gods, is that it? But there should be eleven of them you know, do you want to meet them all? This would be an incredible task!" She tilted her head, wondering what this godly creature might want to do.

"Dad-tree said to meet Nature, Time and Elements Gods, say goodbye. But me curious with other gods too!"

"Then let me tell you a bit about the whereabouts of the Three first. The God of Time possesses an undead known as the Mad King, and his current location is unknown. He was last seen in the Undercity on the Jagged Heights, but that was a few centuries ago so he might have moved. The God of the Elements... The only sure thing is that his Child is not human, we don't know his name, and it is also unknown where he is. But for the God of Nature it is easy, its current Child is a Dryad named Talia, and she resides in the central temple of the Three in Ebb, a bit further north along the Lake's shores."

"How does me thank you for help? Thank you! Thank you!"

"How about letting me tag along?" Her proposition was surprising. How could a family's head doubling as town's protector so easily leave her function? "I want to see

more of the world, and following you means a chance to meet my Goddess' Child too. Don't underestimate the value of such a meeting for me. I've been stuck here for years!"

"But town in danger. Me not like being alone. If you go, people here alone, not good."

She shook her head in denial, a grin on her face. "Hah! Me going doesn't mean the rest are bad, I'm just outshining them by a lot. That fourth blessing of mine really is something, you know?" Realising something, she frowned. "Also... On Harp's scroll, he said you had trouble communicating, but was it a lie?"

"No! Kali help, me no need body to speak now! me speak better too!"

"So it wasn't only a manifestation... incredible! Now I want to come along even more!" Thani looked more like an over-excited adolescent than a 34-year-old woman right now. She had lived in Pilgrim Woods her whole life, and stayed inside the temple since she obtained her last blessing at twenty, almost freezing her body in time with its fourth overlapping enhancement. The repressed thirst for first-hand experience and travel was now bursting out from her. "You need a guide anyway, right? I'll take you to Ebb, and even farther! Staying here in the temple is really boring you know! I don't even need to do anything... I just stay here and meditate." Her smile had turned sad by the end of her last sentence, showing how much change she needed in her life.

"Can't even meet boys, they're all so scared of me here..." That last part was left unsaid, but was thought nonetheless.