

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

18 Arrival at Ebb

Thani took until midday until she could walk again, and began recovering her magic around evening. A full day of delay could seem like much, but it really wasn't since food and water were plentiful. They had no constraint of time either. Thani used her recovery time to explore her new knowledge a bit more, and found that she really had only scratched the surface. No wonder she didn't make any progress in fourteen years staying in the same place. She also asked Oakbud to search their aggressors' stuff, and what exactly happened for him to win against the backline.

Her regeneration is passive from the beginning, and she only fueled it with magic to accelerate it sometimes. However, she was now able to control her whole body, and not only its healing, meaning she would be stronger and more agile, could prevent wounds from bleeding, and could do dangerous things like accelerating her circulatory system to bring in more oxygen and overclock her performances.

She discovered that her emotion sensing blessing was boosted during a previous ceremony, and she hadn't known it. In addition to feeling the state of people around her, she could work the link in reverse in order to mess with them (she would still need to feel the emotion in question herself). Her magic of injury transfer hadn't changed. Originally it was meant to "steal" the injuries of others to relieve them, and heal it oneself with the incredible regeneration, but she had already discovered its flip side to copy her own wounds on others, even though the cost was high.

Finally, her understanding of Blood Animation was barely superficial before, and she could only use her tattoos as crude tools, changing their forms actively. Kali's method was way more refined in comparison, linking her mind to the heart tattoo, making it a control hub to synchronize any blood tattoo she had and would add in the future and enabling them to act on her instinct.

This method was also almost costless magic-wise, and the following morning she started using her tattoos on her legs to augment her step, effectively doubling her traveling speed. Wild birds and animals along the lake shore could thus take in the comical sight of a robed white-haired woman happily skipping a meter into the air, carrying a clinking bag as big as herself on her back and dragging a giant fish carcass.

"And pop! ♪ gooooes the baaaaandit ♪! Hey Oakbud, I know my head is comfortable, but could you stop your arms from swinging in front of my eyes at every step?"

The offender was sitting upon Thani's head, his arms bobbing up and down in her field of vision each time she bounced back on the ground. He had ditched his piece of bark and replaced it with a looted kneepad during the previous day of travel, making him look like an iron nut. His arms couldn't pierce through, so they were squashed towards the front and bothered Thani.

"Arms in the back are not good to hold on to things! Are we there yet? The trail is larger and we have met five people."

"Yeah. In the end we made up for lost time with my tattoos. It's normal to meet people around here too, look around, there are fields a bit further. We should see Ebb in a few hours. Let's stop for a bit, I'm getting hungry from the walk."

"Why not run like before? Thani fly!"

"It's not flying... I guess I could try making wings later, but I'm going to need to bleed some for that. Can't be sure they'll do much either. And to answer the question, goofing around is fun but showing off is bad. Just think about what happened three days ago : if they knew my powers I'd be in those guys' place now."

"Wings are nice! Thani fairy ♪!"

The first thing they saw of the city was its wall, ten meters high, vertical, raspy and colored a tarnished sand-beige. On top of it were guard towers rising further into the sky and patrolling militia. A heavy sluice gate stood at the end of the trail they were on, and Thani joined the queue to enter the city of Ebb, and began explaining the social structure hereto Oakbud.

"Sorry for this, but if anyone asks you are my pet, a young nature spirit. Let me speak to others and limit yourself to plant growth, okay?"

"Me understand. Friend Mark said before me too strange, have to hide." So he said, but his excitement was hard contained, and having his freedom restricted felt bad to him, even if it was for his own good.

"Don't get too sad, okay? We can still have plenty of fun here, and I'll show you around to meet followers of other gods."

Thani's words were enough to lift Oakbud's spirits, and she couldn't help but think he really was nothing but a child trying to wield a greatsword... "New friends, say hello!"

The city itself was built by areas, sporting a residential area, a commerce district, one for craftsmen, one for temples and other religious businesses, and a fifth for entertainment. Finally at the center of it all stood the command center of the city's defense force, undeniably the lifeline of its activity. It housed the defense force and the administrative functions such as taxes. The guards handled general defense over and inside the walls, but the rest was left to the people themselves, and the place was free for them to drop requests for others to take.

Losing yourself was as easy as finding where you were again, since by walking alone the transition between areas was clearly visible. The residential area took up the most space, almost a fourth of the whole place, and was filled with small-scale housing. Here and there you could find bigger buildings made out of hard stone instead of basic materials like mortar and wood, that usually indicated some sort of status and strength. Those were owned by bigger families like Thani's Blood family in Pilgrim Woods.

The commercial district was full of all kinds of shops, from the usual foodstores, restaurants and inns, to the more peculiar herbalists, doctors and potions shops. This was one part of the city which never slept, and also boasted the second best security with the most guards patrolling it.

The artisanal district was small, but possessed his own particular atmosphere. It smelled of wood chips, failed magical experiments and steel dust, with a hint of leather to top it off.

The religious part was the safest of all despite having no guards in it, since the fear of the Gods' retribution was real and well-ingrained. Some of them were known for their pettiness, particularly Time, Nyx, Oberon and Liezel, and even the bravest criminal wouldn't dare set foot in there.

Another part of the city never stopped, and that would be the entertainment block. High-end and fancy bars, both public and inside stages for performances, brothels, gambling dens, auction houses, diverse addicts, criminals and rich folk ensured it would stay forever noisy and animated.

Finally, the administrative square at the city center served as the heart linking them all, watching over public order and redistributing taxes through general interest works. People could volunteer or be condemned to these works. The army was lead by the city council, which was made of big families' heads and district representatives, and organised in units by the God they follow if they have one. This way, they could make up efficient teams through the multitude of blessings received, and even had definite healing and support squads.

"Alright, we're in! Let's find some lodgings first, then try and resell all that dirty looted stuff, and I'll be able to bring you to the temple of the Three afterwards! That bag is getting heavy."

Still playing the shining knight with his kneepad, Oakbud asked Thani who had to leave the fish carcass outside. "Thani no visit the temple of Kali here?"

"Nope! Met them once, they're boring old men. I don't really need to pray anymore either, do I? I know how blessings work now, and only need to appropriate what I learned to progress. Guess I still haven't thanked you properly for that divine help either."

She kept walking towards the residential district bordering the lake, having entered from the commercial one at the south gate. Thani needed to show some elbow to open a path through the disorderly mob of people clustering the roads, hurryingly finishing their business before nightfall.

"Me wants to visit anyway! Try all temples after meeting Dad-tree's friend Nature God."

"Alright alright... but that's for tomorrow. Night's beginning to fall, so let me settle down and sort our things out for now. Got to separate all the weapons, gold and armor parts then clean them all up if I want to get some coin out of it."

She finally arrived and quickly chose the closest Inn to step in, the Coughing Pony. Its exterior was plain, with only its original signboard of a sick horse head to announce it was there. She was greeted by bad interior lighting and a scent of alcohol. It definitely wasn't the cleanest of the lot but it would do for a first night. Walking towards the counter between the wobbly chairs and mouldy tables, she threw a silver coin and extended her hand, expecting change. "Single room, one night, no food, no questions."

"That's 50 copper for the room, 20 for its key and 10 for the discretion." The gruff innkeeper answered her at the same time he caught the coin with practiced movements. His face was oily with grease and sweat, and the only visible thing under his bandana was a tuft of black hair, his eyes and flattened nose.

"That's 50 for the room and its key, you swindler. And the 10 if you don't want me to call a guard."

"Not a tourist, eh? You win girlie, here's the change and your key. Find it yourself on the second floor with the engraved pattern on it." He threw back the key and a little pouch attached to it, full of copper coins. "And I want that back tomorrow before noon."

The room wasn't very big, the bed taking up most of the space, with a chair and table at its end. The window only had its shutter to block the air and light. Thani locked the door behind her, shut the window, and put her bag down. She set her own mat over the straw mattress to make it more comfortable, and used the inn's blanket to complete the sleeping gear.

"Alright, good night Bud'. See you tomorrow for our little program, and this time wake me up if someone comes."