

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

19 Meeting Nature's Child

The following morning at sunrise, a peculiar silhouette could be found roaming the streets of Ebb. It was just another hooded person protecting herself from the cold, except her head was moving by itself and annoyed grumblings could be heard to who listened closely. The person was walking briskly towards the religious quarter, sometimes even hitting her own head.

"Temple temple, meet dad-tree friend! ♪"

"Aaaaaaaah have mercy on me! Stop!"

"Temple temple, meet dad-tree friend! ♪ Friend!!"

Thani hit Oakbud who was hiding on top of her head again. He had been harping her since she woke up, even during breakfast, like an impossible to turn off 6 o'clock alarm. She was forced to abandon any plan she had of selling their loot in favour of rushing to the Temple of the Three as fast as she could.

"You'll drive me insane! I said stop! I swear I'm going to turn around and leave you alone here if you hum that stupid line one more time!"

"Thani already insane, no? Temple temple ♪"

"You little bastard, you're lucky I owe you a big one!"

She was whining in a low tone, giving the impression she was talking to herself. Plugging her ears was useless as Oakbud talked directly through her mind, but her talking back with the hood on gave the impression of a deranged madman talking to himself.

The transition between the two districts was flagrant, the flux of people dwindling a lot this early in the morning, and the architecture changing style. The haphazardly houses made from a mix of mortar, wood and stone were replaced with clear-cut roads and polished stone decorated buildings, with decorative gardens strewn every here and there. They could easily be differentiated through the emblems carved over the doors, and variety was a good word to describe the panel of styles present.

Liezel's shrine was almost bare, resembling a roadside shrine of any other deity, with only a little statue under a wooden roof. Even with the fear people held for Gods this wasn't considered strange in the biggest city of the Primal continent : Liezel advocated freedom over all and couldn't be bothered to pass guidelines through his Child for his followers. On the opposite side of the spectrum stood the temple dedicated to Nyx. The Goddess of the Arts came in person through her Child every odd dozen years, and couldn't help but change things in accordance to her current tastes ; the result was a mix of almost every technique and materials possible, from sculpting to painting and mosaïques, hard to make sense of but full of hidden tiny masterpieces.

The temple of the Three was in the middle, both geographically and in the fashion sense. Its form was a big circular room, built with sober grey polished stone. Its interior was open and its roof made of tainted glass, only two-thirds closed off. The first third was tainted black, and under it laid the statue of an hourglass on a sand bed, circled by carved stone benches. The second part was covered with multicolored glass, and further divided into areas on floor level with multiple floor carvings : a blue drop, a red spark, a green tornado, a brown pebble, golden lightning, and a white crystal. A seventh element was legendary and had only been touched by the Children of the God, standing at the apex of the world's confection, and thus wasn't represented.

However Thani hadn't brought Oakbud here for these two today, but for the third side of the temple. It was open-roofed and invaded by overgrowing plants, an enormous tree growing in the middle of it, reaching to the clouds. It stood even higher than the central administrative building of the city, and also served as both a landmark and a deterrent. Adding to it the presence of the God-Child Talia the dryad, this temple created the safest heaven for all animal races in this world ; if an intelligent creature was hunted and managed to reach the city it would be safe as long as it restrained its aggressivity, however cruel it could be otherwise.

"Alright, here it goes, I hope you know what you wish to talk about. Also I'll get to show off a bit of my practice from when you didn't look, ahah." She sighed in relief after crossing the threshold of the temple, since Oakbud was too busy looking around in silent wonder to continue his maddening chant.

Thani had uncovered head and was now making a path through the overgrowth towards the tree, taking care not to stomp on anything by accident, using her tattoos to gently part the man-sized plants and vines before her. She finally arrived in front of the tree, and found there was a circle of free space all around it, close to three meters in length.

"Hooooooo... I'm nervous you know. I'm going to meet one of the Three somehow. Never been that close to any God before, that little tryst during our travel really was exceptional. Wonder what a Child is like, two minds in a single body seems a bit creepy." Taking a few deep breaths, Thani used her newfound control to push droplets

of blood through her palms, and spread it on the humongous trunk in front of her and spoke.

"Thani of the Blood, blessed four times and granted Wisdom by the Goddess Kali, seeks an audience with the God-Child Talia."

After saying her piece, she stepped back and kneeled sitting on her heels, and waited with her gaze lowered. Oakbud was looking up into the sky, waiting in silence.

After a few minutes, Oakbud started lowering his gaze slowly, following the carved lines of bark and growth knots along the tree. When he looked straight in front of him again, a visage started appearing on the side of the trunk facing Thani and him. He watched as the head, then shoulders and torso, and finally a pair of legs emerged.

Talia was a dryad, and looked like an extreme version of female Aldo, with green skin and eyes, long translucent leaves as hair, and extremities turning to wooden feet or forearms. Her figure half-covered in leaves was a bit alien compared to humans, but she was still beautiful in her own manner, and the magical power she exuded left no doubt as to her identity.

"You don't seem troubled, what can I do for you, worshipper of Kali? Is it related to the strange creature on your head?"

"Yes. But Oakbud here will speak for himself, I only brought him here to you." She only lifted her head to answer after being spoken to, her calm and respect very unusual for the exuberant Thani. She lifted a hand to nudge her companion, waking him up from his reverie. "Your turn Bud', now's not the time to stare you know?". She continued to stay unmoving after that, fading her presence to let the two nature freaks talk without restraint.

"Are you dad-tree's friend?"

Oakbud's question was full of innocence and longing. When she heard it, Talia knew even without sensing his magic that he was related to the Stalwart Oak. The God of Nature had gone back to sleep, but she had still pried bits of information about what happened before that. She flashed a helpless smile, knowing full well she had to kill his immediate hopes.

"... This is both correct and not. I am Nature's Child, not the God itself, so I can't help you. He woke up when the Stalwart Oak died and gave birth to you, but he has left me again since. I have no way to wake him up either, and I guess I'm not the one you wanted to meet the most..."

"Dad-tree's friend not here?..." Oakbud's eyes dimmed, and for the first time he felt truly lost.

Talia sat down crossed-legged, her back against the tree's trunk, leveling her head to his. "I'm truly sorry I can't help you. Can you tell me what you wanted? I will transmit the message to him when he's up again."

"Dad-tree said find his friends, say... goodbye..."

Unknowingly, he hadn't stopped speaking into Thani's mind when Talia began discussing with him, and she could doubly feel his pain and grief through her blessing and his words. She realized she had been more than a travel companion for him, so young, alone and lost he was.

"I'm really sorry... let me tell you a bit more about how Gods live through us in this world, so don't be so dejected and you will understand. They are somehow both asleep and awake most of the time, the difference being the focus of their awareness.

Usually it is spread out everywhere, following people's calls, their own whims and granting seeds of power to those who worship them. When they connect to lives this way they can glean information on what is happening to whatever they connect to.

Being a Child is a bit different, as they focus their presence into us, and so they can take form, talk to us, grant us knowledge and much, much more. From my life since he chose me, I understand that Nature enjoys the world without favoritism and only selected a Child to have a more direct means of communication with his creations, whereas for example, Nyx or Kali revel in the mortal life, and Time is almost completely disinterested.

But right now Nature is in the other state, meaning completely asleep and unaware. It can stay like this for a few hours or a few days in general, but it's already been weeks now... which is why I can't help you. If it may be of any comfort for you, he might be grieving his loss too."

Because she had been explaining aloud, Thani profited greatly too, and had a bit of difficulty processing all this high-level information. Only god-candidates preparing for ascension, having found their own original path, would usually get to know such things. What would happen when she reached the limit of her own path? She couldn't tell, and she decided not to worry about it either.

Having made peace with her decision and future, Thani remembered the wild night and Harp's report : Oakbud had been able to call Gods and focus their attention, and could even discharge magic to grant blessings independently from Gods.

"Sorry for interrupting, but... Oakbud, maybe you could try to... touch Talia? Like you touched Harp and the little Maya? If it is true that the God of Nature woke up for the God-Tree's death, maybe your magic can jolt him awake?"