

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

20 Dad-Tree's Friend I

Magic at the level of the Gods was something Thani could not understand, but the experience of living with the little Spirit told her it might be possible. Still sitting, Talia was looking at her with a look of wonder, supporting her chin with one hand. Oakbud was looking from one to the other, happy to have a new idea to try and waiting for Talia to decide. They could feel his burning passion, trembling like an overcompressed spring ready to release, following his mood's ups and downs.

"He's not the Stalwart Oak, but it just-" Talia had just begun speaking her mind when she was cut off by a furious mental storm coming from the little one in front of her.

"Me want to try! try now!"

She sighed, and finished her sentence. "Calm down will you? Your outburst started wilting the plantlife around us... And I was going to say that it's alright to try."

She smiled and extended a hand towards Oakbud. "Now, come here and transfer me some of your power."

"Every second of life you steal, I will take back in full, Jack. You already burnt yourself, and now re-ignite the embers with your own scorched soul." Time's voice echoed in the skeleton's mind, a mortal reminder of his Child's folly.

"And I will continue to steal time from every single plant and creature I come across. You tied me to the stake and gave me the torch to lit my own pyre! And now after this, if I must still go out, then I will make that pyre burst, and set everything I can ablaze." Jack didn't have flesh on his body and remained bare bones wrapped in a robe, however he had gotten his magic back and used it to steal life away around him, gaining his capacity to think, move and speak normally back through it. Grass was dying under each of his steps, trees turned gray and lifeless showering him with crunchy leaves, and low-flying birds fell out of the sky never to take off again when passing over him in a strange trail of death.

"And you will understand that I, that Time, doesn't need or care about you... What blaze, what pyre, would you even expect a spark from a wet candlewick unable to even give smoke? Everything you try to do since I made you fail the first time is inconsequential. The clock is ticking, Jack, and when I stop its hand, you will be

erased from history."

"..." Not answering the God's ultimatum, Jack marched on. He arrived at the place known as the Cliff of Abandon on the Jagged Heights, a hundreds of meters tall, vertical and slick cliff that dove deep into the sea. "We're not playing on the same scale, Time. You don't care and me neither. And that's why you keep me undead. Because you want me to care and I want you to care too. You want to win but I'm flipping the board. And when it's finally done you will simply fix it, and find the next player."

Facing the sky, Jack took a step forward onto the air. Before the Anger that fragmented the earth and set it apart, there once was a mountain here. And he would cross it to the Primal in the current time.

"Nature met it."

"Met what, Ole' Elements?" The dragon woke up from his semi-sleeping flight towards the Primal, back to normal but still groggy from his little whirl as an earth drake.

"Little Oak's creation. You don't need to go to the forest anymore Nidhögran, but to the human city called Ebb."

He yawned a little hail tornado then dove into the sea to wake himself up. Splashing water into the air as he took flight again after the dip, Nidhögran took his time before answering.

"It's so unlike you to tell me this. You really care about it that much it seems. But I'm still going to check out the God-Tree before finding it. We should see the coast tonight at worst anyway, it won't be much farther."

Thani was watching as Oakbud stood on Talia's cupped hands, and she felt the torrent of pure magical force he poured out from a few meters away. It was making her white hair sway, and even the plants around the clearing were bending backwards.

Then Talia changed. Her appearance stayed the exact same, but her mannerism shifted, and her eyes were aflame with raw power. As every plant in the temple trembled, cheering in joy at the arrival of their creator, Thani felt the dryad disappear from her

blessing's senses, and her chest tightened. It felt as if a predator had set its sight on her, and she couldn't spot it... She felt vulnerable, and knew her idea had worked. She was in the presence of a God of Creation.

"Is that you my Old friend? Did you not leave the world in the end?" The possessed dryad's eyes were still unfocused from the change, and the God took a second to clear her mind and take over cleanly.

Ignoring the two creatures in front of him for now, he lifted a hand in front of his face to focus his vision and learn where was. This simple gesture was a terrifying picture of perfection, moving not too fast nor slow at a meticulously even speed.

"Aaaaah... Talia my Child, how and why did you find such a way of waking me up, I wonder?"

The dryad's voice hadn't changed, and the gap it created between her previous and current state would make any spectator ill-at-ease. Her elocution also had followed her movements and slowed down.

After his round of introspection, Nature finally took time to observe his surroundings. He was in the temple of the Three, his back against the giant tree representing himself. Facing him were... A human follower of Kali, he could recognise her deeply set marks in this one, and... An unknown creature standing in the hand he hadn't lifted. Had Elements created something new in the short while he was away for? What woke him up from deep slumber was Little Oak's power again, but none of his brothers or himself could replicate it alone.

"Let me look at you, children of Our world... I will know, there is no need to say a word..." Talia's voice this time was tinged with power, and seemed to be spoken by all the plants in the temple at the same time in the background. With but a thought and a glance, Nature learned everything about both of them, from their name and age to their experiences and strengths.

The God used Talia's free hand to pat Oakbud's head with a smile, before addressing the human kneeling before him with his slow and even voice. "Thank you Thani, favoured daughter of Kali, for bringing the last endeavor of my friend to me. My grace will forever follow you and those who helped. Little Oak may not have been one of us Three, but his existence was dear to us nonetheless."

She felt nothing, but knew that something happened ; she would know one day, maybe in a time of need. With this Thani knew her role had ended, and decided to wait in order to learn of Oakbud's next move.

Talia focused back on Oakbud in her palm.

"Little seedling, little sprout, little sapling, already you shine...

You left the forest, little one, got out of his shrine,

You are his thanks and last goodbye,

brought to me under my eye,

his life and key to be freed,

the lone bearer of his seed...

Thank you for coming, for stopping my grieving."

Oakbud was trembling faintly, back to his state from before he ate the God-Tree's leaf. Facing Nature, he was the newborn little Spirit again, only knowing one thing and living to accomplish it. Now in front of the first of his Dad-Tree's friends, he could only say one word.

"Goodbye"