

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

24 Daily life in Ebb 3

He bashed away the heavy sword of his competitor with his medium round shield. As he decided his action, the world bent to his will, and no amount of force would move him away. He could feel some resistance, the disciple of the Warrior God facing him definitely had some magic nullification as his blessing. Still, that was an easy matchup for Fabrice. Crow was surprised that his full-power blow could be deflected effortlessly, and could not protect himself in time, eating an axe blow to his open left side.

Cheers resounded in the arena all around Fabrice, who lifted his weapon-wielding arm to the sky in victory. "Damn, he's definitely using some fate magic. Monte is a scary God ; when he has his mind to something, it will happen. A frontal clash is the easiest matchup, I wonder how I can fare against that if we meet up for the finals." Thani had her brows scrunched in wonder, sharing her worries with Oakbud besides her. The fight was very straightforward, but she could see there was a difference in number of blessings at work. Fabrice must have at least three.

"Thani fairy has tattoos! Attack three times at once, one goes through."

She sighed before answering. "No, it's not that simple. It's going to be a battle of attrition, but his own attacks are equally devastating so it's pretty even. That's the difference between Eludia's and Monte's Fate magic. Eludia changes the world around her to bring about opportunities, while Monte bends the world to follow his actions and bring about their success. And don't forget you'll meet him next round if you win this one."

"Me make magic from the Gods, little fate is no problem!" This comment got him a light punch in his golem's shoulder in return.

"Yeah right, why do I even worry about you?"

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For his second match, Oakbud was facing Ellen, the water elemental. This would be a tough matchup for him, because water magic would render his earth one almost useless. There was no rock around to use, only dust and dirt that would get muddy and washed away.

When the start signal was given, he made his golem rush forward while Ellen crushed

two water crystals. The quantity of water was around a cubic meter per crystal, which was very impressive. That scale was used to determine the level of elementalists, since there were no blessings to this path, and Ellen was a high-levelled one.

She made her first wave run around herself in a cycle, ready to deflect projectiles and carrying her around the arena, while the second was hurled repeatedly at Oakbud's golem. He managed to dodge some and block the others with mixed walls of dirt and vines, enough to close in. Lifting a fore paw, Oakbud aggregated an earthen sphere on it before crashing down on Ellen and making a quick wall behind her.

However, she used her second wave to push the aggregate to the side and fled to the other. Oakbud tried to bind her, but she had seen his previous fight and was able to escape. Since her first wave carried her around, both her arms and legs were free to struggle and freedom was just a second away.

Failing to get her, Oakbud decided to change tactics, and blew up a dust storm to cut her vision. Free from harassment for a second, he linked his golem to the ground to have better access through magic. By the time Ellen calmed the storm down by sticking the dust with water to the ground, she was pursued ceaselessly by rising walls, spikes and vines all around, dodging with difficulty. He had succeeded in pushing her to the limits of her capacities.

Ellen needed both her waves to carry her in order to stay safe now, and this would only exhaust her magic faster. In frustration, she broke a third crystal and got back on the offensive! This time, Oakbud who was entrenched had nowhere to dodge and bore the brunt of the attacks. His vines had trouble holding his melting golem together, and the earth he conjured to reinforce it was washed away faster than he could create. Even his soul scream lost its effectiveness with distance ; since her water carried her, it wasn't great on Ellen to start with.

Oakbud was defeated when his golem finished melting, revealing the little spirit underneath. The judge stopped the fight following the rule set for the golem, and Ellen was declared the victor.

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"Ahahahahah, you got booted earlier than I thought! Serves you right! 'A little blessing is no problem', you said! Ouhouhou, this is too good." Thani was laughing her ass off in the stands, mocking the disappointed Oakbud cheerfully. He was curled into a ball on her right, sulking.

"Eheh... Okay, let's stop... Heh. Heh. Sorry." She had a hard time reigning herself in,

still wearing a smile up to her ears. Watching a Godly creature get his ass kicked was a premium distraction for sure. "So... did you get some insight from this?"

"Hmph!"

"Come on, tell me! I'll tell you what I saw too." She poked Oakbud with a finger repeatedly, pushing him to act. "Cmon! Cmon!"

"She was too fast. Me couldn't make walls quick enough to trap her."

"My exact thoughts! You have unlimited power but aren't good at big scale things yet. Got to practice more! Alright, my turn, watch me bash than Roman to the ground!"

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"Third match of round 2, Blood Angel versus Roman! Start!"

"Here we goooo! I hope you're less boring than the Fairy before and let me hit you to my heart's content!" Thani let herself free, boosting forward with her tattoos applied to the legs.

"All you're going to hit is my shield! What are you going to do then? Bleed on me?" Roman opened his arms in response, inviting her to strike before taking a stance.

"My thoughts exactly!" Thani was flying straight to the shield at an incredible speed. She pulled her tattoos from her legs to her hands, and used her newly learnt magic structure lessons to make her joined hands into a hard mace.

"[Fortress]!" Roman activated magic of his own at the moment of collision. With a resounding BANG!, Thani hit the shield dead center ; this would usually break down anything non-enchanted, but Oberon's magic made it as sturdy as a mountain. She had the sensation of hurling herself into a wall full speed, numbing her all over.

Still shocked from the impact, she was unable to dodge the mace strike coming for her waist. Thani still had enough time to move a tattoo. She made it into an armor plate at the hit's location, preventing most harm, while her other tattoo grabbed the edge of the shield in front of her.

The strenght of the hit swept her off her feet, and taking advantage of her unstable posture, Roman used his shield as an anchor point to swing Thani around through the tattoo. She was thrown five meters into the sky, proving he received a blessing of strength.

Roman prepared himself to hit her while she was down after the incoming rough

landing, when Thani made surprising movements. She used her tattoos to slice her arms, and forced blood to flow. "Here's the reason for my nickname, so watch and learn!" Using her blessing, she shaped her blood into a pair of wings over her arms. With a first flap, she took distance, and used a second to land softly on the ground, effectively saving herself from a heavy blow.

"Could have made them on the back, but that's wayyyy too tiring. Oh well, had to cut myself somehow, wouldn't happen otherwise with the mace in your hand, you know?"

Roman was sweating heavily facing that smiling madwoman. What in Oberon's name is that monster? Instant regeneration, blood manipulation to the point of flying, and what's with those strange tattoos? His only hope was to run her out of magic, but he doubted he could hold long enough. Her offensive power was extremely strong, and he would definitely exhaust himself very quickly when parrying that kind of strike. Even if he managed to counter her, she could just step back to heal in seconds, because he knew holding her down was suicidal at best.

While he was considering his options, Thani was working her magic. She combined her tattoos and her blood at the shoulders to make herself another pair of flexible and magical arms. More blood was made to flow from her fists to elbows, and on her lower legs. She didn't stop her bleeding, because her regeneration was enough to cover the loss for free ; instead it would give her more blood to 'work' with, making her stronger as the fight went. She decided to keep her emotion transfer a secret for the coming fights, just in case.

"Alright, ready to dance? This is the finale!"

This time, Roman had no viable answer for her charge. In a last ditch effort he managed to push her back, but he was soon overpowered by the multi-limbed Thani. Her two blood arms held onto Roman's mace and shield, leaving Thani free to pummel him with her boosted stony legs and fists. She even shaped her hand augmentations into of shivs, wounding Roman quickly.

Even his infinite stamina couldn't save him from the beating, and he ended up fainting with a leg and several ribs broken, and severe puncture wounds on his arms and body. The flashy fight received a standing ovation from the audience and worried gazes from the remaining competitors.

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The last match of the round was Alice, the follower of Liezel, against Bone-Crusher the Warrior apostle. This was once again the shortest match, but the intensity this time was unmatched.

Alice disappeared again, only to be found by a ground-wave made by the warrior crushing the ground with magic. Seeing her invisibility was useless, Alice engaged in high-speed close combat with Bone-Crusher. The contest was decided quickly, but at a terrible price : she took a hard hit, breaking her left arm, but in exchange was able to rest her dagger on Bone-Crusher's neck, signaling his defeat.

Alice had a high-risk high-reward fighting style, supplemented by her stealth and intelligence. However she was dragged into a dogfight this time, making her pay the price. She would need to go on with the broken arm ; it would be considered cheating otherwise, as some would take injuries on purpose to get an advantage by receiving healing.

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"Aaaaand onto the third round! Remember to place your bets ladies and gentlemen! Fights will resume after half an hour!" The emcee's calls to place bets were not out of the goodness of his heart. The arena itself was the banker for the bets, and was the one deciding the rates ; since only twenty three people registered for the fights, they had to make up the difference of gold with the prize back, and that was such an occasion.

The fight between Fabrice and Ellen started full swing, with three water crystals crushed immediately. Two waves were crashing towards Fabrice while the third one was used to carry Ellen around like before. Each time water barreled down on him, Fabrice only stepped lightly aside, and the whole attack would miss, and his pursuit was almost unhindered. Even when stepping on the wet ground, he wouldn't slip, and his feet left dry imprints behind him.

Ellen switched to close combat quickly, pushing walls of water at her opponent to push him back. It had little effect however, as Fabrice used recognisable magic for the first time in the competition.

"FALL!" With his shout, all of Ellen's water was knocked to the ground out of her control, and she herself was sent tumbling because she wasn't carried anymore. She didn't have enough time to collect her bearings and crush a new crystal before an axe stopped its blade in front of her face.

In the stands, Thani was shocked. "This isn't simple fate magic! He's got four blessings at least, like me! He's not strong, he's not fast, but it doesn't matter... This is him applying his will onto the world, not just 'favourable outcomes'." Her hands were fidgeting in worry. "This is a terrible opponent for anyone."

"Thani fairy has four arms! Attack everywhere at once, no problem!"

She shook her head at Oakbud, a strained smile on her face. "It's not that simple. He

can just step back and avoid everything, or worse, imprint will to disturb my all-out attack and create a fatal opening. He's seen my fights before, he knows what to expect. I'll have to bet on my emotions blessing to make him lose focus at the right moment, and stall before that to understand how this works. I'm the only one who can with my regeneration. Damn this is tense!"

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"I forfeit the match!"

Those anticlimactic words came out of Alice's mouth when she got back down to the arena to face Thani. The injury she got in the previous match made her unable to fight properly, and she knew she stood no chance against the Blood Angel in this state.

"Ladies and gentlemen, contestant Alice gives up due to her broken arm and inability to fight! All stakes placed on this match will be refunded!" The emcee couldn't force her to fight, and thus the final match would happen earlier than anticipated.

Thani and Fabrice stood face to face at the center of the arena, her with her new leather armour and bare-handed, him with light armour too and his axe and shield. They were staring at each other, trying to pry the other's mental state before the fight. Any edge they could get was welcome, as they both knew the fight wouldn't be easy by any means.

"So, was that will imposition I saw you use against Ellen? Four blessings, right? That's bullying the competition you know?" Thani was the one to start the mental offense.

"Right back at you, or am I mistaken?" Fabrice wasn't shaken, and replied with a quiet smile. "You're no beginner either, your abilities are a real threat to me."

"That's all I needed to know! Shall we start now?" Saying this, she cut the exposed underside of her arms again with the tattoos, along with the nape of her neck. She formed her two blood arms and crystallized some blood over her hands and feet in preparation.

"No holding back now." He answered and took a fighting stance.

The blessings Fabrice had received were Steady, Fate, Magic and Will in that order. The first and third are self-explicit, letting him keep a cool head in any situation and control his magic consciously. Fate let him influence or reinforce his actions, making them [the best] at the time (which is why Auri is such a good blacksmith!); Will was a much stronger version of that, and he could overwrite the circumstances around him. For example, using his will to [pierce] and touching Thani with his finger would land a critical blow, or he could [push down] like he did against Ellen before. What he set his

mind on would be, and the combination of Fate and Will could bring about terrifying effects.

When the signal was given, Fabrice was the one to rush ahead first, axe up high and ready to fall. Thani prepared the blood arms to receive the coming blow and started a kick of her own, that should connect with his waist after she grabbed the shield with her hands. Having four upper limbs really was a cheat in a duel situation, and she intended exploit that as much as she could.

[HOLD!] As Thani's hands were a hair away from the shield, Fabrice imposed his will for her not to move. Immobilized, she could only take the hit passively ; the axe fell perfectly on the articulation between the collarbone and the arm bone, aiming to sever it.

"Umph!" With a groan, she was released from the magic hold and stepped back while Fabrice reset his stance. Her shoulder hurt like hell, and even though it was far from her own standards of pain, her left arm now dangled at her side.

"I wanted to cut that off... Chicken!" Fabrice was charging at her again, but his own speed was no match for Thani with her blessed body.

"I've had worse!" The little chase gave her enough time to fix her shoulder, but her movements were still stiff. Luckily the crystallized blood in addition to the armour made it so her shoulder was dislocated instead of cut.

She wasn't only setting back her shoulder, but also thinking at the same time. "Strange, he could have cut my arm cleanly there... That must be the limit on his will. He can only force one at a time, and it must cost him stupid amounts of magic! If he released me and willed to [sever] I could have moved out of the way or finished my kick to bounce him back."

Now that she understood the gist of his power, Thani could devise a battle plan. "He can't hurt me enough if he holds me down, so I can just focus on blood armaments to attack. Must do several at once to force him to use up his magic or trade injury."

After the short interlude, the fight resumed full swing. Neither used big moves again, as they focused on getting a better feeling of the other's style. Thani was obviously extremely aggressive and aimed for mutual destruction, relying on her absurd healing capabilities to be the last one standing. Fabrice was more reserved, and focused on efficiency not to get overwhelmed ; his positioning was exquisite, and his grasp of the flow of the fight allowed him to stay unhurt after a few minutes of non-stop trades. However he was not able to get past Thani's defense provided by the blood arms and the crystallized armour either. This was the textbook example of the master fighting his knife-wielding apprentice with a simple stone.

"Alright, we don't have all day! How about we end things now?" Even after more than twenty exchanges, all they got were light bruises at worst, and this rhythm would take days to reach a conclusion. Thani was frustrated because she couldn't take the advantage despite her efforts, and was the first to release her full capabilities.

The Blood angel made a return, as bloody wings appeared on Thani's back. With a powerful flap, she threw herself at Fabrice and got her four arms ready to disarm him. In a repeat of the first blow, Fabrice had a stance behind his shield with his axe to the sky.

[CRUSH!] Except he didn't use his axe but a shield bash this time. Thani was bounced back with an arm and three ribs broken, and couldn't grab onto his weapons ; however she traded that for the opportunity to throw blood shivs at him, and sharing the pain with him at the same time. As Fabrice's face contorted under the intense pain of having torso bones broken, the shivs landed clean hits on his axe-wielding arm, penetrating his leather bracer and the flesh underneath. The flip side of sensing emotions was not well-known and considered perverse, and since his mood was always as calm as a lake he hadn't bothered to hide it.

Thani stood up slowly, in pain and dizzy from the collision. She braced her broken arm like she did her leg against the bandits, and forced her healing to maximum speed. "You can't heal. It's the end. I'll be fine in a minute, and you won't catch me in time to bash my head in again. Even if you could, I still have three arms. I didn't faint here, it's your loss."

Fabrice knew it as well. It would only be a question of time before he'd run out of magic solely defending. He'd been had, and could only delay his defeat now. What he willed would be, but what was couldn't be changed, breaking his spell through a paradox. His will to [win] in a last effort would have no effect due to his inability to fight.

"And the winner is the Blood Angel! Congratulations on winning the biiiiiig 50 goooooold!"

As lacking as the end felt, the fight wasn't to the death, so things wouldn't escalate further to desperate suicidal trades. "Hey, Fabrice?"

"Yes?" Under the deafening clapping, Thani spoke to her adversary.

"That was the best fight I've ever had ; want to split the reward?"

In the end, by the time they left the arena, Thani was healed and 40 gold richer. She had given 10 coins to Fabrice, who refused to split equally and was being healed.

"Alright Bud! I'm hungry! Let's eat then have some fun!"