

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

25 Last night in Ebb

Thani didn't drag Oakbud very far, her destination was in the same city quarter. What do people do when they have money? Savings? Settling down? Boring! Enjoyment and fun, those were her favourite choices, closely followed by helping her people. That's why she stayed duty-bound in Pilgrim Woods, and why she was stagnating until she left that cocoon.

And what better choice than a casino to make coins flow? Still with Oakbud on her head, Thani crashed the doors of the nearest one to go on a streak to finish the hectic day. She set twenty gold aside, and changed 10 into chips at the counter. 8 more were reserved for everyday purchases, and the last two spent to get alcohol.

As it turned out, Oakbud was unable to understand the pun between him being a spirit, and spirits as a drink. Even though he couldn't eat or drink, the intoxicated Thani gave him a glass of alcohol to share. Unexpectedly, the vapours were enough to send Oakbud's senses haywire.

Screaming mentally at everyone and stealing chips from Thani to bet in a haphazard manner, the evening passed in a flash. Thani was half-drunkenly watching the little spirit who went out of control, sitting back and drinking while Oakbud rolled around on a roulette table, collecting amazed gazes from other gamblers while losing all his chips. Even though he ended up lucky a few times, it only prolonged Thani's purse's agony for a bit.

When the euphoria went away, Oakbud felt 'shame' for the first time. He really felt like he lost himself there, and got scared at what could happen. He jumped back on Thani's head and refused to get down again, grabbing onto her with his wriggly arms on the return trip.

"Come on, get down and get to the hotel room! I want to meet Fabrice again, I got his address after the match." She was pulling on him and scolding him, but his death grip shifted from the top of her head to her neck, and she was stuck.

"Me no leave Thani! Me follow fairy!" The little spirit was insisting on sticking to her, having no good reason to leave her alone. After all, they had never left each other's company since they met. The only parting he had was with Maya and Aldo's group.

"Argh, you want a reason? It's personal! I'm not going for the same kind of 'dance' we did in the arena! Why do you have to be such an ignorant blockhead sometimes? This

is humiliating to say you know!" Thani was blushing furiously, and she covered her mouth when she realised she had shouted just now. Did neighbours hear that? "Urgh, you stay here please, okay? I'll be back soon enough..."

"But me no sleep... Me wait all alone?" Defeated, Oakbud released her and jumped down on the room's bed. When she closed the door behind her after changing into a dress, Thani sighed heavily. When had they gotten so attached to each other? Leaving him alone for the night left her free but also a bit empty.

Nidhögran had changed his size when he began flying over the continent ; he was now the size of a big eagle, with around 4 meters of wing-span. His normal size would create too big of a commotion, and being pursued everywhere by greedy adventurers was definitely more tiresome than changing himself with magic. His laziness wouldn't let him bother himself with anything else than his curiosity, hunger and sleepiness.

His current appearance was just the right size, and Nidhögran landed on the crown of the God-Tree. Poking it a few times with a claw, he found its branches dry and brittle (author note : according to his own standard of strength!). It died two months before, after all. But for such an existence, that very fact was troubling ; how could its corpse degrade so quickly?

"Hey, Ole'Elements, wake up... we're here." The Stalwart Oak reminded him of his own false immortality, and his tone lacked the usual arrogance. Even after twenty minutes however, the dragon had had no answer from the God. He knew he was definitely watching though ; he would not turn a blind eye to his late friend.

"It's that bad, huh... Tell me when you're ready to leave. I'll wait for you."

Like a strange bird of prey, Nidhögran curled himself up on a high branch, eyes open and looking down at the Tree and the rest of the forest.

Her first date in fifteen years had left her satisfied and happy ; Fabrice was a strong fighter, and an interesting man behind that. He was the most surprised of the two though, finding her barging in his lodging to take him out ; the gap between her bloodthirsty smirk in the arena and the sunny personality in a dress outside of it was too much to wrap his head around immediately.

Finally finding someone who wasn't scared of her was a relief, and having lost the

scars everywhere on her body certainly helped, leaving behind a figure Nyx could be jealous of - even though she was reluctant to admit it-. But stronger than that was still the call of adventure and travel. Following Oakbud on his journey to meet the Gods was incredible, and she would regret not participating her whole life if she stopped.

Thani got back to the inn a bit before dawn, and jumped straight to the second floor's window. She hadn't realized how much Oakbud dreaded loneliness. He had made a golem in her effigy sitting in the bed, using a bedsheet he ripped in strips to mimic her hair. The little spirit was curled in a ball, snuggling the golem's torso in its crossed arms. She could feel her heart break a little at that moment.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I didn't know... I'm sorry..." She rushed at Bud' to pick him up, feeling tears welling up her eyes. His glowing white eyes were as empty as usual, but she felt like it was their first meeting ; he radiated emotional pain. "I'm sorry..." She continued repeating the words in a soothing tone, patting his head at the same time. She completely lost track of time, comforting the depressed little spirit. She understood now ; his father died to birth him, and now she left him for someone they met for an hour.

During breakfast in the common room below, Thani still felt guilty even though she was forgiven ; Oakbud was also almost lifeless. The somber mood stayed until they checked out of the inn. For their last day in the city, the task list was little. Thani decided to say goodbye to the smith Auri, and bought food supplies on the way to the artisanal quarter. Once that was done, they decided to return to the religious district. They tried to meet Talia again to bid farewell, but this time the dryad didn't answer their calls ; Nature had instructed her not to, because their fate meeting was already done, and no more links were needed.

"Hey, before we leave for good, let me pass by the temple of Kali quickly. I need to send back the money I made in the arena to Pilgrim Woods. Hide for a bit, will you? Don't want to make a ruckus, I don't like the old men here.". She couldn't stand the old fogeys who were focused on 'spreading faith' and cooped themselves in the temple for the sake of appearing more devoted. Since her indirect meeting with Kali, she knew how wrong that was, and wasn't surprised when the highest ranked person to greet them only had two blessings. She left a proper letter and the bag of 20 gold she reserved before to be sent back to her hometown ; that amount would be enough for Karj to run the temple and the family for a year at least.

Using the time they spent inside the temple, Thani and Oakbud decided on their next destination : God's Eye Island on the lake across Ebb. It would take two days of walking and one of sailing, or three of sailing directly. They chose to walk first, because the life on a cruise boat was bound to be pretty boring for them. The island would be their first and last stop before aiming further east, to the Ocean's Guard mountain range. Something in the name made them think of Oberon, the God of

Protection, and because they had no lead anyway, it would do fine as a goal for now. The little city at the mountain's foot by the same name would serve as a rest stop after the next 10 days of travel.

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A surprise was waiting for Thani and Oakbud at the temple's exit, in the form of Alice. Her speed and shadow magic had left a strong impression on them, and they wondered what she was doing at the temple of Kali ; Liezel's shrine was tiny and decrepit, but she hadn't come to visit, right?

She was wearing traveling clothes and had a bag slung over her shoulder. Her pants were loose, only cinched at the ankles by her boots, and the shirt she wore wasn't form-fitting either. The last visible piece of clothing was a worn brown cloak with the hood hanging behind her head. She still had bandages around the arm that was broken the day before.

Alice had a rather petite stature at Thani's shoulder height and an innocent face, giving the impression of an adolescent girl. Her piercing eyes were surprisingly purple, a strange and unnatural color ; her hair was black, but the roots were a sandy blonde, showing that she colored them herself. Overall, she was unassuming in appearance, not plain but not beautiful either, but looking closer would break the 'innocent next-door-girl' look.

"Hey, Blood Angel? Or should I call you Thani?" This was definitely no mistake, as she waved in her direction at the same time.

"Uh, yes? Alice, right? What can I do for you?" This wasn't Pilgrim Woods where she had responsibilities, so people approaching her was puzzling.

"I got curious after watching your fights yesterday, both about you and the creature with you. Isn't that 'Oakbud' with you today? You seemed rather close."

"Me's here!" Hearing his name being called, the little spirit popped his head from Thani's collar. "Alice friend, say hello?" It looked like the new meeting managed to distract him from his low mood.

"Woah, you can even speak! Incredible! Now I've managed to meet the three monsters of the tournament, haha." Alice seemed genuinely happy to meet them, and clinched her fist in victory.

"Oh, you met Fabrice too? He's crazy good indeed."

"You'd know about that, right? I followed you starting yesterday night, by the way."

Alice shot Thani a knowing smile that made her blush furiously.

"*Cough* S-so, how can we help?" Thani wanted to bury herself to hide but couldn't, and tried to center the conversation back.

The embarrassed angel was fun to see, but that wasn't her goal today. "I'm traveling to see the world and gather experience. You both looked like an interesting potential companion, so I'd like to tag along for a bit if it doesn't bother you. I'm not imposing on something important, right?" She was a bit afraid of the answer, because none of the other contestants from the tournament were free. Her talents permitted her to travel alone without danger, but having no company was tiring and didn't help growing either.

"New friend! Come come! Find Gods, say hello!" Oakbud was getting fired up. He was happiest with the first group he met, so having more than one companion again was a joyous occasion for him. Still guilt-tripped, and because it wasn't a bad idea to break monotony, Thani agreed readily too.

"Important? Not particularly ; I'd rather say incredible. I guess I'll tell you over lunch before leaving, we've got all the time in the world..."