

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

38 Thunder break

Oakbud had impersonated one before, but this time, facing him stood the real deal. Undead. Flaming blue eyes, tinged with black at their center, bringing light to the decomposed human skull under the old shredded hood he wore. His garbs, which seemed as old as his death and were as decrepit as the body itself, still had some golden inlays visible despite their terrible state, and gave the wearer some kind of grandeur from times past. He was unmoving, as if asleep, or waiting for something.

He had appeared suddenly on their path, simply unveiling himself to their sight where nothing stood before. They hadn't, and couldn't see him until they got close, as if he had been here all along. It wasn't the first time for Thani to meet an undead creature, but what she could feel from this one gave her the creeps. For her, these beings radiated the pain from their death, however gruesome it was ; but this one let her feel nothing. Was it that her blessing had mutated? Probably. But she still couldn't get the creeping fear out of her mind. Silently, she motioned her hand to tell Alice and Oakbud's golem to walk around him on the path.

Undead were generally not very open, and avoidance was the rule of thumb when it came to them ; unless one had business with the undead in question, it was best to not get in the path of their lingering attachments. Eerily, the path and the skeleton were still right in front of them ; and this, even after multiple tries of avoidance. That was no good.

He was the one who had business with them.

"Kakakaka... That won't do, that won't do at all, simply not enough, not enough... Isn't time a precious thing, very precious?" The undead nodded his bony head a few times. As the unsettling feeling began giving rise to fear, the group decided to turn back completely, and leave far enough away, before taking a longer way around. However they were interrupted by the undead's scornful laughter, in front of them. That was no good.

Step. Step. Step. Step.

"Have we met before? Last week, or was it tomorrow? Tomorrow's tomorrow? After your death maybe? Was it before the birth? Why not make it... now?"
KkkakKAKAkakkaka"

Step. Step. Step. Step.

"An ant, a little girl playing God, and the successor of the God-Tree. It's time to set the record straight. [Freeze]." His last word unleashed a colossal torrent of magic, and the whole world turned dull. The sky lost its colors, the grass stopped waving, the wind became silent, and life became a statue under Jack's spell. From a dessicated corpse that was barely standing, the undead became an eternal king, surrounded by a pulsating cloud of magic.

"I... Won't... Let you... Kill... Us... Without a fight!" Thani was surprisingly still moving, and was reaching for her precious blood-forged dagger with firm intention of retaliating.

"Oh? You have some divinity in you protecting you from harm? Interesting, Kkakkaka. But what will you do once you have spent it all, all alone? No matter. [I banish you from this Time!]. You're not quite there yet, little girl. Come back in a few hundred years."

Step. Step.

With his bony hand, Jack pushed Thani a step back, and made her fall back into a strange engraved mirror behind her. She went through without even a ripple. Passing the threshold somehow freed her from the first spell, and Thani channelled her blood magic at full power, infusing her dagger and boosting her offense to the maximum to break through the banishment. But whatever she did couldn't even nick the mirror from the other side. She was trapped. To her horror, her dagger's magical engravings were slowly dimming, as if tens of years were passing in the blink of an eye. The little divinity she possessed protected her from time's merciless withering, but that still wasn't enough... Thani could feel it, little by little, her energy was waning, her magical reserves dissipating, her blood wings evaporating. If this went on, she would no doubt die as a decomposed corpse.

Understanding that there was nothing she could do, Thani reversed her approach, and did everything she could to prevent the erosion of her magic and life, waiting to be freed. She wasn't the only one with divinity. Oakbud could help her... right?

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As soon as Jack had started speaking, Oakbud had been gripped by a powerful sense of foreboding. In his eyes, the skeleton's appearance had completely changed. Before he could respond or do anything, the first spell had already been cast, and his mind was frozen.

When he met Kali, he felt curiosity and awe. When he was facing Nature, all he felt was reverence, joy, and sadness. When he was facing the dragon, he experienced frustration. And now that he met that undead, he learned of fear. Dread, horror, terror, aversion, nightmare. Death.

He couldn't move, couldn't think. Unable to help Thani, unable to even check if Alice was alright. All he saw was Jack, whose eyes had never left him, appearing larger than life itself in front of him. He was surrounded by a swirling maelstrom of death, from all the lives that he had wasted and stolen, haunting his already dead body and soul until he breathed his last.

Oakbud was created by the God-Tree, and possessed a bit of Nature's divinity. So much death, so much rancor, so much hatred and pain... That undead was his nemesis. He was shaken profoundly, never imagining it was even possible for such a being to exist.

"That's right, don't move, don't speak, don't think. You have no need for my name, in the same way I don't need yours... the only thing you need to know, is that I am here to kill you."

Step. Step. Step. Step.

Jack was now standing in arm's reach of the little spirit, and he picked it up carefully with his old dessicated hands. His voice was barely a whisper, but it was full of warmth and conviction, like a dying man in a desert finding an oasis. His words infiltrated Oakbud's mind, agitating a primordial instinct to live in him, to no avail. His life was in the palm of his hand.

"Now now. I don't hate you, I don't even care about you. I came to see you and not. Am I that scary?" He had won. Won against a God, one of the Three. You could hear the smile he couldn't show to the world.

"..."

"Can't even answer, hmmm." Jack pondered. "That ends up being less interesting than I thought it would be. Oh well. [Wither]."

Oakbud was still unmoving in his palm, petrified by fear, when the skeleton pointed a finger at him.

"Hm? [Wither]! [Wither]! Why... why? Why don't you die? DIE! [Banish]! [Wither]![Consume Time]! Why! Why! WHY!"

The undead was frantically casting his most powerful lethal spells, again and again.

And again. All to no avail. Against a totally defenseless Oakbud, he could do nothing. His smile was gone, his calm was thrown to the wind, leaving only rage. Clutching his hand, stomping, stabbing, everything went through the little spirit without harm. Time magic did nothing to him. And when he was on the verge of losing his mind, Time took his body over to speak :

"Did you think you could harm a creature blessed by me and my two brothers? With our own powers at that? All that extra time really was wasted on your brain it seems... Why even call it a game, if you didn't even understand how to win to start with? I had told you before, didn't I? That I would stop you. Just. like. Before."

With a wave of the hand, time resumed its course, freeing Alice from its prison. From her point of view, nothing had happened between the spell-cast and its interruption. All she knew was that the skeleton was an enemy. Looking around, she saw Thani, sitting eyes closed behind a floating mirror. Her hair had begun drying, her hands were trembling. Even with the strength and vitality of her body, Alice could make out wrinkles on her once-perfect face.

"Don't move, little one. No harm will come to you."

It was not the same voice as before. What happened? The majesty of the new raspy, timeworn voice prevented her from trying anything. He called her an ant earlier, and an ant she was indeed ; even if she tried, what could she do?

With a second wave of his bony hand, Time broke the time mirror holding Thani prisoner, freeing her from the terrible spell. And with a third, its effects on her started to reverse, rewinding her time to before she was ever hit by the spell. Even the divinity she lost was restored. All the while, Jack's soul was howling with unwillingness, trapped in his own body and condemned to watch everything he worked for disappear to nothingness... For the second time.

"I hope you guessed who I am... Until we meet again, little one, if and when you find my next Child!"

And upon those final parting words, the trio of Alice, Thani and Oakbud watched silently as the undead's body started crumbling to dust, quietly swept away by the wind. In his final moments, Jack's eyes were pure blue, free of the darkness. After a few seconds, nothing was left of that fateful encounter but their memories of it. They never even learned his name.