

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

39 Aftermath

With Jack now laid to rest, Time couldn't stay in the mortal world anymore, and his consciousness was pulled back to his world above, where his two brothers laid as well. They had no body here, and were completely intangible ; only their minds resided here, sustaining on the world they made. He couldn't help but sigh. Humans were Nature' and his most prized creation, made towards the end. They were all Time could wish for : rather short, but fulfilling and incredibly diverse life, and most of all intelligence. Rise, stand, fall, all in a continuous circle of life. That Child had been peculiar to say the least ; he was the most interesting he could find at the time, but disappointment was what waited for him in the end.

After preventing the fool from wrecking the order he had painstakingly established, Time had given Jack another chance, that he didn't take. From the moment of his second awakening when the God-Tree died, Time knew that he could only give up on this one. The little hide and seek was nothing more than a pastime for him, hence the interaction and limits he set for it. What jailer, what torturer? That was just joining useful to pleasant. He hadn't made this world on his own, so why would his powers be able to break it on their own either? It was only expected that the little Oakbud, owning the Three's divinity, would be fine. Jack would have understood that another school of magic could hurt him in a flash, but emotion had taken over him, and Time wasn't in the mood to let him loose anymore. It was good enough to have met the little one.

Thinking back to the fright the little spirit was given, Time couldn't help but chuckle, giving rise to a mildly curious thought from his two brothers. He had to burn up Jack's time, collapsing him completely in the process, to intervene with his own powers and restore the harm he did to Oakbud's party. Not like that would be the first time he consumed a Child.

Who knew what he would have become, how he would have grown, the next time they met? Time would tell. He laughed again at his own joke, and began looking for the next most interesting Child again. Undead? Living? Human? Beast? Elf, like his first? A half-breed perhaps? So much to look at.

The undead time mage's outburst that froze time itself was short, and unnoticeable to the majority. To the ones that could feel it however, old recluses, God-candidates, Saints, it spread unrest. Was this the prelude to another disaster? Unless the Gods told

their Children what happened, and gave their approval for them to spread the event, it would only stay known to the few participants. A manifestation of power on that scale, especially related to the vengeful Time, was a death flag for whoever dared to investigate his motives too much. It should have been something interesting, worth visiting at least.

In the Ocean's Guard mountains, close to the top of a peak in the center of the chain, a steep, snow-covered cliff started to tremble, before crumbling... upwards. As the snow fell, it revealed the brownish rock that was sinking back into the mountain. Behind that strange cliff, stood more rock, but paler in color, closer to grey marble. The part that was revealed shifted a bit to the left, then right, before peering straight through another peak to the south-west and to the horizon.

After a few minutes, wind howled through the whole mountain chain, the brown rock cliff fell back over the white one, and all movement stopped. The phenomenon was too close for comfort.

Pilgrim Woods.

Karj was pacing restlessly in front of Kali's statue in the temple. He looked like he had aged ten years in barely a few day. His eyes boasted huge shadows, his cheeks were drooping slightly, and his eyes were streaked with bulging red sanguine vessels. As he wiped sweat off his forehead, he couldn't help but feel like he'd gotten some new wrinkles too.

The cause of the disastrous state he got in despite his body's self-healing was the statue ; or, more precisely, what the dragon Nidhögran had done to it with his spell. No one understood his purpose, but one thing was clear : it was now impossible to sacrifice blood anywhere in the temple. After the "visit", when he tried, he had been slapped and thrown out of the temple. Since then, multiple days had passed, and he had tried everywhere. In the fountain, behind it, before it, on the sides, behind a pillar, at the door even. But it still wouldn't let him.

Still, that meant that other people couldn't either, and he hadn't been the only one to get rebuffed, sparing the little dignity he had left. The beast must have had its reasons, but they were unknown to them. Would they need to find Kali's Child? Probably. How would they do that? No idea. Since the death of the God-Tree, a lot less people came to Pilgrim Woods, and as such they lacked proper communications.

But in their mind of habit, how could they worship the Goddess if not with blood, their

proof of suffering?

The barren plain where the fight took place left its place to bushes and sparse trees as Oakbud, Thani and Alice got closer and closer to the mountain range.

From the distance, the town bearing the name of the mountains was almost invisible. The only telltale sign was a few crops being cultivated at the edge of the natural elevation. The residents were not many, and survived on tree farms, fishing, hunting, and excavating. The little plantations they had provided cereals and basic staple food, and the fruit trees brought both food and shade to the houses.

Fishing needed time, because the village wasn't that close to the ocean. The bountiful sea was still the one to bring the most food home despite the dangers there : the coast was a broken cliff, and most could only throw a line and hope for the best ; diving and having a boat were certainly suicidal and reserved to the strongest of all due to the marine beasts habitating the region.

Excavating was more straightforward : find a nice place, make yourself a pickaxe or two, then dig. The Ocean's Guard was rich with rare minerals and jewels, only waiting for the fortunate to bring to the air. It was intricately tied to the hunting part of survival in the forested and snowy peaks. Not everything that lived on them was hostile and dangerous, but whatever failed to kill you once would surely try again.

Rabbits, birds, deers, boars, foxes...wolves, blessed beasts, drakes, blessed drakes... and the Granites. The latter weren't dangerous, and were a sentient race of rock-people, like golems with true life. People had learned the hard way to not provoke them however ; they were the guardians of the mountains, just like the mountains guarded the land.

Ocean's Guard itself was not large, and hosted around a hundred people. The community was solidly welded together, supportive, and well organized. Hunters and fishermen would relinquish part of their catch, while the excavators did the same, all in teams and changing regularly. It made for robust people able to do anything and fight when was necessary. The opportunity to get extraordinary and exotic materials or riches was compensated by the risks of the profession.

"Hey!"

Such was the lackluster greeting they received on arrival, early in the afternoon. The man who spoke was busy tanning some leather on a rack, and had barely turned his head to look at them before going back to his task.

"New blood? Third house on the right, get Harod to introduce you to how things work. Booze offered for first-nighters and first catch. After that if you want it, you brew it!"

"Uhhh. Thanks, I guess?" Alice answered, a bit unsure of how to react. All she got from the man was another grunt and a wave of the hand to chase them away. After exchanging a glance, the girls simply followed the man's direction, not wasting either of their time.

Like the man said, they looked for houses, but all that existed were caves dug out from the mountain wall, closed by planks and curtains, and excavated earth mounds hidden between the trees. They could even spot a few treehouses along the way. Still a bit stumped by the rudimentary lifestyle, Thani knocked on the third plank door.

"It's open! Come on in!"

Contrary to their expectations, the interior of the troglodyte house was well furnished and even had a chimney duct. The single occupant was a young man with sandy blonde hair and strange matching eyes. He had a rather heroic visage and well-defined features, but the rest of his body didn't match the first impression he gave. His voice was rather high-pitched for a grown man, and he was wearing dark green robes. He was sitting in front of the fire in his pit, reading a book.

Only when he turned around did they realise the robe was bundled and tied at his left shoulder.

"Don't stare so hard, it won't make it re-grow, you know?" His light chuckle embarrassed the trio who had been staring, but he seemed used to it. "Before you say anything, I'm Harod, welcome to Ocean's Guard, and I can still defend myself with one arm thank you."

Harod snapped his fingers, and with a flash in his eyes embers came from the fire to dance around him, before going back to burning wood.

"..."

"I really don't bite. I guess you need a run-down of the place? Since I got injured it's been my role to coordinate people and the overall effort. Hunting is good and all, but you can't do it from your home."

After recovering from the initial shock, the trio engaged in conversation with Harod happily. Finally meeting another human face after their ordeals felt like a breath of fresh air for a drowning man. When they left Harod's house at sunset, they had directions to a free grotto, planks to close it, and an invitation to feast that night in honor of their arrival. It was a good occasion to settle down and get to know people

more. The next day was free, but they were expected to contribute quickly to the common effort on a task or another.

Even Oakbud, usually so passionate about things, was colder now, and didn't try to rush things to continue travelling. With their bellies and minds full, having a place to call home for the few days or weeks to come was good for reflection. On the second day, Oakbud chose to help on the tree farms with his golem-making ; this left him free to think while the construct did the heavy work. Alice informed Harod on the fourth day that she would join a hunting team and help with reconnaissance. Finally, Thani stayed behind closed doors for a whole week before choosing to go and dig the frost-hardened rock high up the mountain.