

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

40 Ocean's Guard 1

Her breath was even, trying to concentrate and not tremble. Her torso was held straight, shoulders pulled back, head cocked to the left and her eyes on her target. Her body weight was sitting strongly on her waistbone and her feet planted to the ground, effectively maintaining the elementary shooting posture.

She checked again that her hand holding the bow had the elbow rotated and wouldn't get in the way of the string when it's released. The flesh of her arm under her sleeve bore painful reminders, accumulated during the last few days. Finally, she nocked her arrow on the center mark of her string, two fingers right under it, and pulled.

The bow itself was as big as herself, a masterpiece of work made for killing huge game, but that didn't prevent her from pulling it ; the trick was to not pull with the arm, but with the shoulder. The great part was consistency : she knew for sure that once her shoulderblades joined, when she released the string the arrow would fly straight to the target unless she misjudged distance and placed her fingers too high or too low on the string.

thunk

Without a cry, the arrow struck true and the deer she'd been watching fell. As the manacle holding her bow to her left wrist did its job and the weapon swung down freely in a beautiful arc from her still extended arm, the tension in her body, perpendicular to her line of fire, finally relaxed, and the breath she held during the last second was breathed out.

"Nice one kid. Next time we'll try with a live one, huh?" said a gruff voice behind her. The man was, surprisingly, the one that "greeted" them when they arrived. When she joined a band of hunters, she quickly discovered that he was simply always grumpy. Seeing him smile was pretty rare, and mainly reserved for his wife and kids.

Yet, he was sporting one now when addressing the woman. She had striking violet eyes, blond-ish hair dyed to black and cut to the neck, a reasonably cute face, and a short size and rather petite figure. Equipped for the hunt and forest life, she was wearing solid boots with her loose pants tucked in, and wore a tight chest leather piece. A hood and cloak were draped over her right shoulder, ready for use in case the weather turned bad.

"Tempra, could you call me Alice already? It's been weeks now." This wasn't the first

time that particular exchange took place. She was eager to learn, and he happy to teach, but he also loved teasing the new blood in the camp. In a remarkably short time, he'd managed to plant the basics of archery in her head and had her practice in the evening when he didn't have use for his bow anymore. As for why? Her previous experiences had definitely triggered a bit of long-term fear in her, and she had decided that in the end, stabbing things was cool and gave a nice rush of adrenaline, but that sticking'em with the pointy end from a safe distance was just as great.

"I have a wife and kids, am almost 40, and bring back the biggest game out of everyone in Ocean's Guard. You're around 19 or 20 and haven't even fucked yet. No way I'm calling you something else than kid."

While Alice was standing there gobsmacked at the bluntness of the reply, one of the other two hunters, who were preparing the camp for the night, came to her rescue and diverted the topic of conversation : "Stop teasing her and come prepare the deer instead! It's not going to gut itself!" While Tembra was dragging his feet towards the carcass, Alice removed the bowstring and ended her session. She'd need to make her own bow soon, and luckily she was learning from the best. That man was not following any God, but was still able to hit in-flight birds without any kind of magic augmentation, truly the pinnacle of marmanship. In that sense, it was good she was forbidden to use hers until she had solid knowledge and practice. Future augmentations would only bring more power to her technique.

Tonight was the last day of an expedition, and everyone but her would need to carry their own weight in prey. Her responsibility was roaming the land around them and on the path to make sure they wouldn't get dropped on by a predator, and thus couldn't afford to be weighted down.

Truly, the period of calm allowed her to find a direction to work towards, and to incorporate what she learned anew into her own style. She was pretty eager to spar again with the people of the village ; not being at the bottom of the barrel anymore felt great, and she had even won a slight reputation.

"HAHAHA! AGAIN!!" She rushed straight at the Granite in front of her once more, blood trickling from her mouth, which was distorted into a crooked smile. She had been immersed in battle for hours now, and the insane look in her eyes was not even close to fading, only intensifying as injuries piled up.

Even as the sun set, the fight raged on. It had all started when the smell from her lunch had attracted a small pack of wolves. It wasn't the first time that happened, and she knew it was her fault for grilling meat anyway, but it still annoyed her. Picking up her weapon, she had dispatched the beasts quickly, and resumed her meal.

The woman seating quietly on a broken stump was tall, had waist-long straight white hair, and eery empty eyes. Her full figure and painting-like beauty was enough to make Nyx jealous, and her light dress did nothing to hide it. Overall, she didn't resemble anyone who would be found near the peak of a mountain, amongst sharp rocks and glaciers, and alone at that.

The cold did nothing to prevent the smell of blood from spreading, and before she could leave to resume her digging, it managed to attract a drake. It was twice as tall as her, looked incredibly heavy, and boasted formidable defense in the form of thick scales. His offensive capabilities included his sheer weight, maw, claws, tail, and basic earth magic.

The first mistake she made was to parry a claw strike to gauge the drake's strength ; she was sent flying, had dropped her weapon, and received a serious injury at the very start of the fight. She had to spend quite a bit of time dodging closely to give some time to her regeneration to kick in fully, get back to a fighting state and pick her weapon back up.

The second mistake was to not use magic straight away, and trying to fight conventionally by targetting weak spots on his natural armor, such as the eyes, belly, and underside of the limbs. The roars of the beast, as time passed, had managed attracted the beast's mate, putting her in an incredibly deadly situation. A single drake was enough work for a trained platoon of four people already.

The third mistake was underestimating the beast's intelligence. Once his mate was there, the couple of drakes proved their developed intelligence and didn't attack recklessly, rather working together as a main attacker and support. Earth magic, even at a basic level, when used as support for a fight in the mountains, was definitely a table-turner ; footing wasn't assured anymore, and rocks popping up to trip you at every step or projectiles were extremely efficient at breakig focus and creating opportunities.

At that moment, Thani finally had enough, and burst out with the full extent of her capabilities. The last bout with Time's Child was an eye-opener for her, and let her grasp the divinity hosted inside of her. Finding the right feeling again, she began circulating it without using it as fuel. During her week of meditation, Thani had discovered multiple uses for it. It could serve as fuel for magic, and allowed for incredible power and scale ; Sorrow's pass, which cleaved the Jagged Height's in two on the map, was definitely divine work. Divinity could also boost one's affinity to

magic passively, and be circulated to reinforce physical capabilities in a flashy manner. This last option still led to a backlash afterwards and didn't help in the way of defense, as mortal bodies weren't enough to fully support such power.

Thani, however, did precisely that. Her insane regeneration and self-healing capabilities let her endure the damage for extended periods of time and fight whole-heartedly. In order to get on even ground, she formed her blood wings and took to the sky ; they were now fully formed, majestic, and were a towering ten-meters span. Luckily, the trees around had long been reduced to shreds by the beasts' rampage. Her dagger was quickly coated with crystallized blood, doubling its reach and introducing a terrific magic-induced sharpness thanks to the smith Auri's masterful work. The ability to double up on magic casts with the weapon let her free to manipulate the blood spread all around for general purpose, such as cutting vision, defending, and moving by using it as ropes.

Her newfound agility and capability to slash the sturdy scales let her take the upper hand in the fight again. However, it still took her close to four hours to finally bring down the beasts, and left her with multiple broken bones and a severed arm. Despite their looks, the drakes were not slow and had overwhelming vitality.

Soon after the fight, tension finally left her battered body, leaving her to recuperate while almost entirely coated in crystallized blood braces and her bountiful chest heaving heavily. She didn't faint this time, as the pain from over-using divinity wracked her mind, and she experienced the full brunt of it while her arm reconnecting brought its own share of suffering.

Alas, the global devastation the fight had brought to the frozen summit had finally attracted the wrath of a Granite living in the area. The earth was broken, gaping fissures could swallow anything coming too close, trees were but a fleeting souvenir and flying sawdust. Granites were not aggressive, but were keepers of the mountains. And she had thoroughly pissed this one off.

Back to the present time, Thani popped her dislocated shoulder back in place, and called her divinity once again to rampage through her veins. The first collision had let her understand that the thing was unbelievably hard. Even with the blood-infused dagger, she could barely leave light nicks in the rocky body of the 10 meters tall Granite. Even worse, said marks were healed instantly, and even though it understood human speech it wasn't open to dialogue in its fury.

The Granite's shape was pretty human like, with two arms, two legs, and an upright posture. The main differences were the variable size, from a pebble to the mountain-like one Thani was facing, and the head located in front of the torso rather than atop it. Liquid gems flowed in its carved eyes, and its mouth only served for intimidation and fighting purposes ; "feeding" consisted in aggregating more and more

rocks to form their body through time and magic.

Rock dust flew from each of its movement, blinding Thani enough to get a square hit on her for the third time with its enormous fist. She had met her worst match this time, and would have died multiple times over if not for her regeneration.

In the end, too exhausted to continue, she had no choice but to take a risky decision, leave her loot behind and flee through the darkness, followed by the unwilling roar of the Granite.