

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

42 Ocean's Guard 3

"Anyone tries anything like that again, I swear they won't see the sun. If there's ever a second time like this for me or Alice, you can look forward to a God-Candidate's rampage, and Granites and beast tides will be the last of your problems."

Harod could only keep his strained smile on the chair he was sitting on. Thani was easy to get along with, but very hard to deal with at the same time. Her eyes, void of pupils, were cold. She was truly angered this time. It had taken him all he had to stop her from making a public show of executing the culprits. Even with her lasting wounds, she was adamant about getting her personal revenge, and since the would-be assaulters were in worse shape than her, he finally managed to calm her down by promising a few things.

"Now, about the fight I got in. It's only been two days; I doubt anything up there went and ate the two drake carcasses already. And because the Granite was huge too, no wild beast would dare come close for a bit. If you hope to get anything out of an expedition, you'll need to start right now."

Thani was sitting on her bed facing him, elbows on her knees and hands under her chin. She was still not in fighting shape when it came to beasts but kicking a few people down would be alright as long as she didn't need to call upon her divinity. Her hard gaze was riveted to Harod's eyes, waiting for a convincing answer following the arrangement they just concluded.

"Best we can send right now is a small team of seven, barely enough to bring back the most valuable parts. Normally, since they're your kills, you'd get 50% because you need help bringing it all back. Right now you can't help recover the loot so you'd get less, but because of the incident we'll still keep the 50%, adding first pick on the materials collected. If you want to make anything with what you collect though, that's on you."

The poker face in front of him finally cracked, her mouth curling up a bit, and Harod let out a sigh of relief. Things wouldn't go back to what they were before, but at least the tension was broken for good this time.

"You know, it's fun meeting a second person named Harod. The first was a Time mage in Ebb, not very good in the arena though. Seeing you here weaving fire delicately is a nice change. That and you being open-hearted in the discussion."

Harod immediately took the opportunity to change the current heavy atmosphere: "Speaking of fire, it's going to be time to eat soon, why don't we go to the bonfires place now?"

Thinking for a second, Thani nodded and got up. There were no traces of injury on her anymore, only exhaustion. She still made a point of bringing her dagger sheathed to her hip, though, before following the chief outside and closing the door behind her.

Right beside the fire pits, stood the sparring circle. When they arrived, it was being used by Oakbud and another hunter. While still messy, his barrage of elemental magic had still gained form over time, as he left the state of reaction to true action and prediction. At least, he was able to manipulate both water and earth at the same time now, but that was all; combining elemental magic with his own original abilities like the soul shock and ordering one or more golem at the same time was out of reach for now.

Facing him stood Facta, a senior hunter, proud owner of three Blessings from the God of Warriors Theomars. He was strong, fast, and had some degree of resistance to magic, overall a good counter to Oakbud's abilities. His bulging muscles above the waist were exposed to the midday sun, and currently working on dismantling the latest rock wall set up by his little opponent. Over the last few days, he had sparred with the little spirit regularly, and come to know that his magical reserves were pretty much infinite. Against a control-type foe, he thought his physical prowess would allow him to outlast Oakbud, but that wasn't the case, and so he fought using a more direct approach now.

The vines entwined around his ankles were pulled out easily as he took a step forward. Fighting him was like fighting a beast, who relied on his overbearing natural endowments. However, he also had a high level of intelligence and decision making.

"Gotcha again!"

Facta had used Oakbud's spells against him, ignoring the minor spells and using the bigger earthen materializations as footholds to get closer. The variations the little spirit was able to pull off thanks to Nature's teachings were threatening, but still not enough; his vines were not strong enough, his rock not solid enough, his water not weaved sufficiently. Facta's bare hand picked his opponent off the ground before he could defend himself, putting an end to the round.

"Your coordination's getting better, but your spells are lacking power and timing.

Basic elemental magic is only good as a support I'm afraid. Your magic can't catch me, your golems can't either, or your shock, although good, prevents you from doing anything at the same time so it's a bit niche. Still, you're learning fast! At this speed, in a week I'm going to need to bring a weapon."

"Facta's too strong! You're a bully!" Oakbud was voicing his disagreement, but on a playful tone. He understood that being forced down like this would make him progress faster. "Me try one more time!"

--

After lunch, Thani picked Oakbud up and returned home. Her recovery had forced her to stay still, and thus she had a bit more time and calm to think about things. Her latest discovery was relevant to her, Oakbud, and concerned divinity.

"I think you'll be able to make your own body."

After dropping the bomb, Thani began her explanations in earnest, as Oakbud listened religiously.

"Do you remember the dragon and his shapeshifting? I think I've found how we can do that too. Look:" As she spoke, she showed her index and middle fingers to Oakbud, and stuck them together. Under his incredulous eyes, they began to fuse together, until only one larger finger was left. "See that?" Focusing once more, she returned her hand to its normal five-fingered state.

"Fuuaah. It's a weird feeling, and it also hurts. The whole point being, what is shapeshifting in the first place? It's remodelling your own body. With what? That's the good question. When someone breaks his hips badly for example, it might heal in a crooked way and cripple the person. That's where learning to shapeshift comes in handy. With it, you'd be able to remodel yourself to your 'healed' state."

The coldness held in her eyes when she was speaking with Harod was nowhere to be found, replaced by excitement. Shapeshifting, mastering one's own body... that was definitely a pre-requisite to ascension, and a big step on its path.

"But it's not free, far from it. First, you need a good image of what you want, and unbreakable focus. Imagine changing, getting distracted, and maybe killing yourself by accident in the process... I'm honestly terrified by that, that's why I only tried it with my fingers: even if I fail, I can just cut them apart again forcefully. Second, you need divinity: it's what allows you to create the shape safely, and to protect the integrity of the body's functionality in the process. Third, is the materials; for my fingers, it was the fingers themselves, opening the side, sticking them together, and stitching the muscle and vessels and skin together again. But what if you could bring

an outside source for it?

That's why, you may be able to make a body for yourself. I think it also relates to your current state: if I'm not wrong, you're already doing it subconsciously. You're able to possess dead bodies, and are invulnerable to physical hits; isn't that simply because you're just a soul and divinity shapeshifting itself? However, having one of your own will bring drawbacks with it, mainly being able to get hurt since it will [be] you, or having to sustain it with energy like we humans do by eating. The possession, despite relying on finding the right body and being unable to heal it, only brings advantages in comparison.

And fourth... tolerance to pain, and magic capacity. Just morphing two of my fingers was already extremely painful and took a huge effort. I can't imagine what Nidhögran went through to change himself from a dragon to a pixie, then back to a dragon... He's a monster amongst monsters."

Thani and Oakbud looked in each other's eyes for a moment, insisting on the importance of what was just discussed. This opened a whole lot of doors to progress further on the path of magic and life in general. If she knew how they worked, Thani could even give herself gills and go breathe underwater following this principle. Oakbud could create a body of his own, and maybe even new life one day thanks to the divinity of the Three he owned. But all that would still need plenty of time, research, and experimentation.

"Thani Fairy's so smart!"

--

Later that night, Alice's group came back surrounded by cheers. Tembra's expeditions always brought back plenty of game, and this one was no exception. Leaving Oakbud to his magical ruminations since he didn't need to eat or sleep, Thani brought Alice out to the fire pits, and sat close to Harod before exchanging stories of what happened while they weren't together.

"Oh, Tembra said it's time for you to get your own bow? That's good, we'll pick some nice bones and tendons from the drakes to make one. Let's also get some leather, scales and claws to make some armor. We have plenty of time for that, none of three really want to go back running around right now."

One her side, Alice's face was alternating between green and white. What the hell happened here while she was gone? What if it was her then? Seeing this, Thani stopped talking and got up, giving Harod a meaningful look. By now, everyone knew what transpired two nights before, and her action made her the center of attention. Just what she wanted at the moment.

"I think everyone's up to speed about what happened two days ago. I only have one thing to say regarding that." Her voice was neutral, and she took time to slowly gaze at everyone around the fires. "There will be no next time. That is, kill without mercy. And for anyone thinking himself smart, that stands for Alice with me too. You want to fuck me? Come fight me and we'll see if you're worthy."

After her little discourse, she sat back down and picked up a bottle of alcohol, chugging a few mouthfuls at once. Most people didn't know Oakbud was with them so the worst would never come to pass anyway, but she might as well spare him the effort. The attention shifted from her to Harod at her side. He simply nodded his head, giving his approval.

The sour mood was soon lifted as people got back to their plates and glasses, and no one took Thani up on her offer either. Alice was thoughtful, wondering how shameless and exuberant her companion was to speak such bold statements in front of so many people. She almost spit what she was eating when she heard her get close to Harod over the general noisy rabble and tease him. "Looks like Fabrice number two", she thought. "Poor guy, she's got her sights on him now".

"When I said you were open-hearted, I really meant it. You don't have the same gaze some others do; I can feel it. I'm tired... Truly tired, and I need some distraction right now. Sleep with me tonight? Or does lacking a left arm make you feel inadequate?"