

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

44 Granite hunt 1

The following week, while the new equipment was being made by commissioned artisans, none of Alice, Thani and Oakbud left Ocean's Guard. The latter two were absorbed in research on shapeshifting, while Liezel's follower was training to fight with a short bow.

The precision of her shots let much room for improvement, but her reflexive shooting still got a passing grade from Tembra at a five meters distance. It should let her defend reasonably in close quarters, enough to get her daggers out. Long distance shooting on the other end, was more complicated: the short bow replica she was handed by her grumpy instructor, like he told her before, didn't allow for the basic shooting pose to be used. As such, the usual marks weren't there to guarantee good aim and consistency. It couldn't be pulled all the way until her shoulder blades touched, locking the head towards the target didn't matter as much, and the other ones for hand position around her face were also less reliable.

All in all, it was much more flexible in its use than a longbow thanks to its short size, but it also meant re-learning a good part of what she'd already acquire as technique. Basic teaching could only get her so far, and because she was making a personal weapon, she was the one who would create the handling techniques going with it too. Still, she would not rush to add magic into her shots, following Tembra's advice to get a solid foundation first.

Coming back to the house after an exhausting day of practice, she almost didn't recognise Thani when she opened the door. Some success had been achieved with the transformation techniques, and Thani had pulled the poor little spirit into pranking Alice. She was a head shorter than usual, a chest twice its usual size, but most of all... her eyes were entirely black, and her mouth was sewn shut in a picture of terror.

"Boo!"

The cheeks expanded in a hum like a frog's belly, scaring Alice who had asked for nothing, standing there petrified with wide eyes in the doorway. Half a beat later, she was weapon in hand and two steps back.

"WHAT IN LIEZEL'S NAME IS THAT!"

Thani dodged the thrown dagger by hiding behind the door, and Oakbud was the one to come forward to explain things and calm Alice down. After more and more practice, the pain of transformation wasn't as excruciating anymore, so Thani had been adventurous enough to change her body on a larger scale.

"Thani Fairy put the height she lost around her chest! Then gave colour to her eyes! Then did like with her fingers but on the face too! Me can't change me yet, but me can make better golems!"

While Thani was changing back and laughing at Alice's reaction, Oakbud got busy making a demonstration of his new golem-making technique. First, he extended one of his wriggly arms to Alice, and used a pulse of magic and divinity to 'scan' her. Then, with that knowledge, he used divinity as a mould to speed-compress magic power and form an earth elemental core and began aggregating materials from the earth. In a matter of minutes, a perfect copy of Alice's body was standing in front of its original.

"If me touches things, me can use divine magic to make it again! Golems move better like this too!"

As incredible as that sounded and as practical as it was, the original model had a frown on her face.

"Why does it have to be naked, though?"

Pranks aside, that wasn't all they learned. After slight losses and accidental consumption of divinity on their part, their mastery over its use had skyrocketed. If it didn't leave their body or lose their touch, it could be compared to manipulating heavy and gelatinous water. The simple idea of putting the sensation into words let them exchange impressions easier and progress faster with its handling.

Thani was in better shape than ever (after recovering her usual appearance of course), and Oakbud had learned the basics of fire magic from Harod. Earth magic was like using hands to sculpt clay, water magic could be described as siphoning power, and fire had its own aspect, friction. He had to excite his magic power, fold it upon itself and rub it together to create heat until he could ignite something; the something in question could be a combustible material or simply more magic.

Also, since divinity had to be manipulated separately from magic, it made it easier for Oakbud to multitask; he had the idea of using dust explosions by combining his earth and fire magic. The drawback was him being unable to set them off elsewhere than around him because of his divinity's short reach. He had effectively turned himself into an invulnerable suicide bomber in close quarters. His enhanced golem creation

also used both water and earth magic to make nicer shapes and bring a bit of flexibility to the results.

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"Now that your bow is ready, it's time to hunt. Let's take the Granite that picked me off down!" Thani was humming as she donned her new armour. This one even had a helmet! The slick scales over the leather were scraped a bit and tinted black so it wouldn't shine off too much light, same as Alice's, but that's where the similarities stopped. The latter had true, full-cover custom-fit pieces from head to toe, with almost no wiggle room. If not for her demeanour, she could be confused for a man quite easily while wearing it.

Thani, because of her blood magic and generally more provocative character, boasted a bit less protection. The focus of her own armour was her joints: knees, ankles, elbows, wrists, shoulders, hips. She preferred the rest to be more open, because she'd need to spill blood in order to fully exploit her main attack power. Her self-healing could cover almost any wound extremely quickly but getting injured on a critical spot for mobility would be more troubling; in the end, the underside of her arms was uncovered from palm to armpit, as was a spot on the interior of the thighs. Those were the points that would allow her both easy access and good location for her spells (The blood wings could be grown from the neck or arms, as getting injured on the back was a delicate affair). And contrary to Alice, her own enchanting figure left no doubt about her gender. To top everything off, she had managed to make herself a teeth necklace for style, and had indeed strapped horn tips to her gauntlets.

"Do you even know where it went, or where to strike to kill it? I'm betting no." Alice was quick to put cold water on her brilliant mood. "Also, doesn't your chest piece hurt? It really looks awfully tight..."

"Oh, that? No problem, I just bulked up my arms a bit with boob thanks to shapeshifting, hehe. It's as comfortable as I want it to be, and even gives a bit of edge in strength. Still hurts to do though, but I'm used to pain worse than that; it's more like getting cramps than being cut up or breaking something."

"Me knows how to kill a Granite! Me asked Facta during training. Me need to find the part where lifegem flows and break it. Thani fairy said it had red eyes, that is lifegem flowing!" Both girls turned towards the little spirit, feeling surprised. When did he get so proactive? But he wasn't done yet: "Me knows Thani fairy hates losing, so me asked. Harod said Thani is a bit thick-headed too."

"... He what?"

Alice was already holding her sides laughing, making it too awkward for Thani to

show too much anger. After all, he was right. She hated losing, hated being forced to do things, and had a pronounced distaste for shady characters and anything too close to vegetables. The years she spent cooped up in the temple in Pilgrim Woods did nothing to help those sides of her, instead having her face them every day to hold up her image. The worst was, despite Alice being sarcastic and a bit paranoid, Thani felt she was positive and meant well through her blessing; that's just how she was and lashing at her for that would leave a bitter aftertaste.

"Okay... We'll have a talk when we get back. Shouldn't be more than a two-day trip up there. I really need something to bash to vent a bit now. Everything's ready?"

"Houhou... Ready." Alice was still red-faced from the laughter and was quickly followed by Oakbud's enthusiastic response: "Me's ready too!"

"Let's go first light tomorrow then."