

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

45 Granite hunt 2

"Why'd you bring your short bow, Alice? I thought you couldn't shoot well enough with it for now?"

The group was reviewing their packs a last time before departure, making sure they didn't lack anything, be it food, drink, camping gear, and a change of clothes. The point was to make a short trip up the mountain to hunt the Granite that crushed Thani single-handedly, so Alice bringing a weapon she wasn't familiar with was not the wisest choice.

"Even if I'm not good with it, I still need to get familiar with its weight and global handling. It's not like you have to stab and kill something every time you grab your dagger either, right?" Alice shrugged, and placed it on her back. It was about half her size at 80 cm, letting her carry it easily without dismounting the arms of the bow. She had nocked one end of the string, and the other one was left free for now; the bow was brand new, but even for regular use in the future leaving a bowstring taut was bad practice and would damage it in the long run. "And I still have these two darlings right here if need be. Aren't you the front liner though? I shouldn't need to draw them."

"Uh, you clearly overestimate my ability to care when I fight... The more blood the better for me, remember?"

Oakbud was watching the two girls bickering with interest while they were donning their protective gear, which was the last step before setting out. They managed to go at sunrise before the whole town got up for breakfast; since the little spirit didn't need sleep, he made for a very efficient alarm clock and night watch. The sky was only half-lit still, providing diffuse light to climb the mountain path.

By the time they reached Thani's previous camp, it was early afternoon and they were starving. They hoped to make it before lunch time, but they found themselves surrounded by a pack of wolves halfway and had spent much time fending the beasts off. Luckily, the leader of the pack was a blessed beast and had some measure of intelligence; the assault was that much harder to defend from because the pack was able to implement tactics, but also much shorter once the leader found they were not good preys and brought the rest back after a long howl.

During the fight, Thani acted as the main target, not caring for what came at her and gleefully punching the wolves in return with her brand-new weaponized gloves. The drake horns had been filed short and cleverly sewn onto the top part of the gauntlets,

peeking 4 centimetres from the seam in-between the scales. It was enough to make two painful puncture wounds with each punch, and she even managed to kill a wolf outright when a full-force punch landed directly on its head. She didn't have the occasion to use blood magic because she took no injury, but a bit of divinity to reinforce her body did wonders to send the beast tide flying.

Alice had stringed her bow as soon as she noticed they had been marked as prey and took a few shots before putting it down. The melee got too chaotic, and she needed both hands to navigate the terrain agilely. She adopted guerrilla tactics, confusing the wolves by going in and out of sight with the trees around and shadow magic. Her trusty steel daggers got their share of kills too before the retreat was sounded.

Oakbud acted as a support with his earth, nature, water and fire magic, funnelling the pack of wolf and blocking its path alternatively so Thani and Alice wouldn't be overwhelmed by the onslaught. The greatest advantage brought by the variety of his attacks was the ability to keep the blessed wolf in the back surprised and suspicious. Walls, vines, fireballs were made in rapid succession to break the formation of wolves.

Nothing much was left of the camp, not even a trace of fire pit because even that was trampled during the Granite's rampage. Broken trees were sprawled everywhere, and the two drake's carcasses were still there, albeit different from before: after the week, the meat was stripped completely clean, and even the bones had been chewed on. There was even a worrying mark of a giant maw taking a bite of the skeleton directly, with bones broken and teeth mark left on what was left intact. They concluded it had to be either from a blessed beast, or maybe even the furious Granite to vent after Thani fled. Being made from rocks didn't mean their mouth was useless.

"Damn, you really fought two of these alone? I imagined them a lot smaller." Said Alice while poking a body with a dagger. "Hard as rock too. How in Liezel's name did you manage to even hurt them?"

"Used divinity at full throttle with my little pretty here." The cat was out of the bag since a long time ago, so Alice was one of the very few people Thani didn't mind telling, even making a show of kissing her dagger. "It helps a lot with attack but not at all for defence. If I had the armour we're wearing now at the time, I wouldn't have ended up in such a bad state. The injuries were mostly internal and caused by the divinity itself rather than the hits I took; I actually healed a good part of those during my flight back."

"So, what's the plan now? How do we find the Granite, and even more important how do we fight it? You said yourself you were unable to hurt it." Alice raised the biggest question she held about this operation. How do you hunt something you can't kill?

"Oh, that's not my part anymore. As much as I hate the idea of being unable to do it myself, the one to fight the Granite will be Oakbud. Right, little guy?"

"Me's strong now! Help Thani fairy, fight the Granite!"

Alice raised a brow while watching the other two's antics, him on her head and her trying to have him come down so he could get to work. "So? It still doesn't answer the question. How?"

"C'mon Buddy, get down and do your thing or she won't stop bugging us." With a last tug on her hair, the little spirit relented and jumped to the ground, preparing to use magic.

It had been a while since he last used his ability to commune with the surrounding nature, so he got surprised at how easier it was for him now. The speed, range, and clarity of information he got back from the plant life was so much higher! At least three times! He had the impression he could see and hear across the whole mountain, and it gave him an incredible sensation. Joy, power, but also comfort and a sense of peace; he was born from the God-Tree, after all. In this condition, it was extremely easy for him to follow the traces of destruction and heavy steps left by the Granite. He was done in a few minutes and informed the girls that they could meet it before the sun began to set if they walked a bit quicker.

"Let's get moving!" Thani was grinning at the news, happy that her revenge could come sooner than later.

"Please... tell me already: how?" Alice had abandoned the struggle and was just moaning now. It's like the other two purposely teamed up to make a fool of her. Even when Oakbud was searching, Thani kept changing subjects as soon as she brought it up again, frustrating her to no end. But as fate willed it, she could finally get her answer.

"Remember last night when Oakbud made a golem-clone of you? We're going to try and do the same with the Granite to fight it on equal grounds. I say equal grounds, but Buddy can cast magic on top of that since a good core will make it semi-autonomous, so he'll have a huge advantage in the end."

"And how will Oakbud get close? I remember he had to touch me directly to make that creepy mannequin."

"Me's golem isn't creepy! Golems are good!"

"Yes, it is, don't go making such realistic and moving statues of naked people." Alice

still had a hard time accepting the event. Seeing a perfect copy of oneself, able to move independently at that, was really disturbing; especially when Oakbud only copied the body and not the accessory... such as clothes.

"Isn't it creepy just because it's you, though?"

"You!"

Thani's little jab was the drop breaking the dam, and the laughing culprit started running on the path Oakbud indicated, pursued by Alice who wanted nothing more than make her ass eat her shoes. The little spirit was following quietly, still not understanding the intricacies of humour and human feelings.

--

Thani and Alice were currently hidden close to the Granite's place, a beautiful meadow in the forest. This part of the mountain was a bit cliffy, and this place was the plateau on top of one. The open area let the sun through, projecting the foliage's shadow on its borders and illuminating a small pond closer to the upwards slope. At the centre laid the Granite, curled on itself; it was probably sleeping.

Oakbud was sent in reconnaissance, because he was a spirit; he was unlikely to be viewed with hostility by the old Granite, who had seen his fair share of humans and learned from experience.

In fact, what were its eyes with its flowing lifegem peeking through opened as soon as the little spirit stepped in the clearing, making a few pebbles fall from its head with the movement. The debris, animated by magic, rolled back on the ground and along its legs and torso before making it back to their original spot. The bet paid off, and the creature was curiously friendly: it took the initiative to shade Oakbud with one hand and lowered his other palm to the ground so he could climb up.

Oakbud was confused. The bloodthirsty, rampaging beast described by Thani was nowhere to be found. He could feel its good intentions and care towards him. What was this? Did he really have to fight it? Why? But... He'd been with Thani for so long now. She was in the right, wasn't she? Thani fairy was beautiful, smart and gentle with him; she wouldn't do bad things, right?

Feeling conflicted, he initiated his pulse of divinity to scan the Granite from its lowered palm, and an identical golem started to rise up at the edge of the clearing.