

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

47 Granite hunt 4

As the last of the Granite's lifegem flowed to the ground, it had almost become black, like lava cooling down.

[My child is dead.]

Crushing pressure manifested around the corpse, Oakbud, Alice, and Thani. Facing Jack, they had learned what "being an ant" was already, but the feeling was different. In front of the undead, they had been frozen in time, something that could be considered an attack spell and could thus be resisted through magic power all the same. This pressure was different: a whole mountain was bearing down on their body and mind, making their legs weak and spirit on the brink of collapsing. It was raw strength and weight, that nothing could bar from its path.

[You killed him.]

The voice was heard in their mind only. If the Granite truly moved to speak, unimaginable damage would be dealt to nature around it.

[I am Repose, the Ancestor of Granites.]

It spoke slowly but with no voice, each word imprinting itself into their mind. It was a very weird feeling, as if information popped into their head and forced their thoughts to focus on it.

[You killed my child, who only lived quietly in his meadow, for pointless revenge.]

[You, little spirit, don't know your worth. You are blessed by the Three, a tiny piece of the world that houses us, while we were born under the watch of the Elements of Earth, Fire and Water.]

[You, the World, rejected my descendant.]

They were unable to move, unable to think, only taking in what Repose said through their mind; in the jaw of the beast that the mountain range itself had become. Oakbud was faring the best out of the three and began to remember the look in the Granite's eyes. The pain and sadness it seemed to feel were in fact betrayal; in its eyes, the

world that gave it life was rejecting it. Its fighting style hadn't changed; it was only fighting half-heartedly, succumbing to despair. The granite-golem was chosen over him by what was the world in its eyes.

[Now learn the consequences of your thoughtless intervention.]

The dried-up lifegem close to them was brought back to life under Repose's ministrations, flowing anew and shining like red-hot iron.

[Just like you killed my innocent child, I will punish an innocent too, a lesson for you all to learn of causality cycles and future tolerance.]

The lifegem had condensed to a fist-sized ball of burning lava and was now floating towards Alice. Her eyes were wide with terror, but no voice could escape her lips. Thani and Oakbud were just as powerless, only able to carve the scene into their eyes without a sound.

The ball of lifegem entered her mouth, and the world turned dark in the fading light of the day. "Not that I could do anything before either", she thought.

After all that happened, she thought she had finally found her path. That she had become stronger. And yet, it all came crashing down once again. She could see the fear and regret in Thani's eyes, feel Oakbud's anguish. But she couldn't share the sentiment; all she felt was a tug in her heart, whispering the same question over and over. Then it all turned black.

"Why me?" she asked in the dark world.

[Why not?], it answered.

"I did nothing!"

[My child didn't either.]

"Will you kill me?"

[I have learned tolerance before humans came to be.]

"Then why? Why do you wish to hurt me?"

[Do I?]

"Don't you?"

[I don't.]

"What will you do to me then?"

[Nothing.]

"Then why go through all this setup, if it is for nothing?"

[Is it truly for nothing?]

"Will you hurt Thani and Oakbud?"

[Only themselves can do that now.]

"Why? How?"

[Fear of loss, pardon, and remembrance. For the future.]

"Where is this?"

[Don't you know?]

"I don't."

[Wake up.]

And Alice woke up. She coughed once; the lifegem that entered her was spit back out accompanied by blood. The glowing liquid had continued to shrink, barely the size of a nail now. She didn't know what happened, but seemingly no time had passed at all, according to the falling night sky. All she knew was that she was fine.

The pressure was still there, clamping on their body and almost freezing their thoughts. Under their eyes, the globe of lifegem drank Alice's spilt blood before coming back towards her, slithering in the trampled grass. It wound loosely around her neck, leaving behind a thin necklace with a lump of crystal-clear red gem hanging from it.

[The cycle is broken, and a new one emerges. Will you repeat it, or choose otherwise?]

Suddenly, the necklace contracted inwards and phased through Alice's skin painlessly, leaving only the gem protruding a bit from in-between her collarbones.

[A token, to remember this encounter by. One day it will birth a new Granite, following your experiences. What will it become; I wonder? The choice... is yours.]

--

"Let's leave. I think we got food for thought to mull over while we walk back to the camp."

After the pressure disappeared, releasing them from its embrace, no one was hurt. However, the air had become awkward between everyone; Alice was the one to break the silence, once again being the voice of reason. They each had a very different experience during the encounter, depending on their own thoughts and maturity.

Alice's had been the most straightforward, speaking directly to the Ancestor of Granites. She still had trouble sorting everything out, but from what she understood, Repose didn't have bad intentions and truly wanted to teach them a lesson in life. Oakbud represented so much in his eyes, did he maybe hope for something? He hadn't even addressed Thani, the main perpetrator of the hunt. Also, there was this lifegem stuck to her now; it was a bit weird to feel it there, but it wasn't uncomfortable. She wondered what the parting words of the Granite meant. How would what she experienced be able to change the birth of the Granite? By the time they made it back to the forest camp, she had decided to worry about it later and simply observe if anything happened to it instead.

On her side, Thani was exceptionally quiet, not even trying to poke fun at Alice on the way back. Alice had told her and Oakbud her conversation with Repose and combined with what he had said before, was building a larger picture of the situation, seeing the opposite side of the story. It was true, the Granite was only living quietly, and because it did his part as a protector, he had been hunted in revenge. But at the same time, Repose also admitted that cycle was somewhat natural, since he spoke of it being broken and renewed; he forgave them, halting it momentarily, enough to give it a new direction. To her, the message was clear as day: [You are too wilful for someone in your position, think before you act.]. He was right. She had been letting everything out since she'd left Pilgrim Woods but hadn't really reigned in her exuberance either since she had realized her status as a God-candidate. If becoming a God was a personal path, in the end it still couldn't be done without the recognition of the people. What image would she project, what would she give others to believe in?

Oakbud was more troubled than ever. When the Child of Time had attacked him with the intention to kill and destroy, he had been dismayed. When he met the Granite and saw it being friendly, he doubted. When he gave it the coup de grace, he wavered. [We're not as good as you think, not even me!], Thani said. Now it seemed that he was no different. Repose's intervention had sown a seed in him, a seed of doubt to grow his mind. He didn't know enough to always make his own decision, and he was learning constantly. Travelling with Thani, a God-candidate, Alice, a regular follower of Liezel, and encountering Gods, Children and old Undyings had all given him plenty of new knowledge; but it was too much at once. He received one thing, only to need another

the following day, not leaving enough time to consolidate everything and forge his own character and opinions. What would have happened if he did not hesitate, and had made his own decision on the matter? Could he have stood up to Thani and told her: "This is wrong"? Or would he come to the same conclusion as her and want payback for his friend? He hadn't questioned anything until it was too late.

There was also the problem of [what he was] roaming among his thoughts. At first, he was nothing, a simple mass of instinct until he ate the leaf of the Stalwart Oak. Then, he had received a name, Oakbud; the new growth of the Oak. Then, he found companions he could call friends, and learned more about the world, magic, and what his self-attributed mission meant. By this time, his mind had grown tremendously already, enough to think back on past experiences. And then, he met Nidhögran, and shortly after the Child of Time, whose name he didn't even know. He finally had to face adversity straight-on, and extract wisdom from the fateful encounter. During his stay in Ocean's Guard, he finally had time to reflect upon himself and try new things. He was attached to his companions, and they had taken a growing spot in his little heart of mind. And finally, this day, he stood before the facts: he had learnt, but not truly grown.

His priorities needed a change. Look for the Gods? Yes, of course; he wouldn't let that goal fade away. The problem was how. He had only been following behind people he asked for help. It wasn't bad, because they knew more than him; but could he not do more? Continue learning, ask, listen, decide, learn more, reconsider.

"Thani fairy and Alice sleep good. Me will watch the forest for you."

Maybe he had done something bad today. It wasn't good at least; but he had done worse before, killing people during the trip to Ebb and crippling three others just a week earlier. He also had done good, helping people close to him, the fairy on the lake, or even Ocean's Guard residents. The problem was the conflicting elements between the both. Everything was clicking together, forming a true incentive to act for himself.

And the first act towards that, was telling this to the girls before they told him they would go to bed and asked him if he would keep watch for them like always.