

# 《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

## 53 Leaving the mountains

Oakbud, Alice and Thani knew a good half of the road this time, but it didn't make the road any easier: they would still need to make their way back to Ebb, before either following the road or the river towards the sea. The trip back wasn't anything impossible, all the more since they didn't have a murderous Child after them anymore, but it would still bring up various memories in everyone (for better or worse).

Preparations would happen over a couple of days, enough time to say goodbye to everyone in Ocean's Guard and gather provisions. The first step though, would be pulling Thani out of bed, cocooned in her quilt after the previous night's alcohol fuelled brawling.

Buried under her bedding, the sun filtering through the door sides of the house they were granted did nothing to pull her out of her sleep. Unable to release her death grip on the quilt, Oakbud gave up and decided he'd rather talk to Alice first and get some help; she should be about to finish her morning exercise with the bow.

In the end the trio could only hold a true conversation after lunch, when everyone else picked up their work again.

"So, you were serious yesterday then? We're leaving Ocean's Guard. I guess we already made sure we wouldn't meet up with a Child here. Also got plenty of nice and expensive trinkets for a bit of blood, worth it." Still a bit groggy and with wild hair, Thani took the reminder in stride.

"Not as much blood on me as you, Thani, but I agree it's a great place overall if you don't mind hard work." On her side, Alice had begun packing her own stuff, sorting through the clothes and utilities she'd wear and the ones she'd put in a bag. "As soon as I'm done, I'll go and speak with Harod and Tembra. No need to wait until last minute to tell them, and maybe they have a few tips that could save us some time. I'd rather not walk all the way back again if possible, but I don't know if you're okay with waiting for the next merchant group to come by and join them either."

"Me thinks me can make some new golems to walk!"

The prospect of sleeping more and walking less roused Thani's interest, her head peeking through the shirt she was putting on: "Really? Could you mimic something like a horse or make a big wolf to pull a cart maybe?"

"Me can copy a beast but it won't move as fast. If golem moves quickly, materials decay rapidly and magic too."

"Well, if there's one thing you don't lack it's magic for sure!" said Alice from the back of the room where she kept her less important possessions. "The problem is you having to maintain the spells to regenerate the golems but also guide them all the while, right?"

"Me has magic for a very big golem or two big enough to carry Thani Fairy and Alice, but me can't do anything else then. Me still wants to practice magic and play."

"Sooooo... Do we just go up the mountain and beat down a drake or two to carry us instead?"

"Ugh, you just go back to sleep instead of saying stupid things. By the way, aren't you worried about things with all that you do?"

"What things? I can barely get drunk with how fast my body eliminates alcohol! And, well, you know how fast I heal for the rest."

"I mean your literal fucking around!"

"Oh, that! Blood and Life now, and four blessings before, remember? If I couldn't manage my body by now, I'd really be the dumbest woman in the world. That's how worried I am about this; do I seriously look like someone ready for kids?"

Seeing that the usual banter made its return, Oakbud decided to get back to his own affairs; there was still a last plot of the orchard that needed weeding, after all. He couldn't help the two women pack their stuff anyway.

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"So, you will go walking in the end?" Asked Harod at the border of the forest.

"Yes, Oakbud can't make completely autonomous golems yet, and at best they'd be as fast as our walking speed anyway, so it's not worth it. We're not trained to take care of mounts either, so it's for the best. We'll make do on the spot." Replied Alice, shrugging. "You know better than others here how freakish our little group is."

The man could only smile wryly, a little laugh escaping his lips. "That I do, I do indeed..." He'd remember the yelling he got from Thani when they got back from their Granite hunt for a long time. Who told her that he called her thick-headed anyway?

Oakbud was even less forgettable, a never seen before spirit. Maybe not a spirit, since he could apparently move around freely, but what else could he be?

The people in Ocean's Guard they had gotten closer to had all given them a little something to remember them by: Harod had engraved a little medallion with the image of the peak of Repose, the local landmark, unaware of the underlying feelings; Tembura had given Alice a few bottles of home-brewed alcohol, making her blush by saying she'd have an easier time getting a man with half a bottle of that in the stomach; the people working at the orchards gifted Oakbud an assortment of fruits and seeds for him to grow; a band of hunters they sparred with regularly surprised them by refurbishing their camping gear with brand new pelts; and Facta had manufactured a brain teaser for Oakbud so he could work on his coordination on the road.

The one person they hadn't said goodbye to had already left its 'gift' between Alice's collarbones; it had been quite some time now, but nothing had happened to the lifegem core embedded in her body by Repose. None of the three knew what to make of that yet. Maybe some change would manifest once they left Ocean's Guard vicinity? The father of all Granites had told them nothing.

With one last heavy look towards the tallest mountain between them and the ocean, Thani, Alice and Oakbud started their journey back to Ebb, on their way to the ocean west of the Primal.

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"Why do we need a detour? We're so close to East Lake on the map already!"

After following the river for days, dragging Jacques along with a small boat, Ashirijen wasn't taking the news well. She'd seen the damn piece of paper, and the legend for 'river' clearly indicated that it connected directly to the lake. What was the human trying to pull off this time?

It was calm at first, when the old man was still bemoaning the loss of his house and all his leftover experiments. A few days later, he made a fuss over some kind of plants they came across she didn't know, insisting she stopped so he could pluck some of them for whatever recipe he couldn't create up until now. After this he had finally started to walk instead of staying depressed on the boat, and her load got lighter.

At least she didn't have to listen to him marvelling over flora he hadn't met before since then and could just swim against the current at the bottom of the riverbed without worrying about splashing him. The artificial 'second skin' he invented for her back in the town was still holding well even with her staying in the water most of the time, and the jar of the leftover stuff hadn't been needed to re-do any place yet. It had dried a bit, becoming a bit more rigid, but that was all.

Back to current time, her tail was slamming the river's surface, expressing her annoyance. Ashirijen rested face down, head on her crossed arms on the riverbank. The little boat was anchored in arm's reach, ready to be dragged along further, but its main occupant was busy cooking himself some breakfast in the rising sun. He also had the map.

"It's just a general map, not a topographical map. That's why you can't see it on here, but we can't follow the river further up or it'd take even longer to get to the lake afterwards."

"A topo-what? At least tell me things I can understand, it's morning and you're pissing me off already." Over the days, the nereid's temper tantrums had become common for the old Jacques, and he learned to work around them. Ashirijen was surprisingly easy to get along with once you got to know her. Well, as long as you followed her whims that is; she was unwavering in her decisions and persuading her was impossible. Unless you could bring solid arguments to convince her, she wasn't afraid to use her monstrous strength to strong-arm you into doing what she wanted.

"A topographical map represents terrain elevation in addition to locations, but they're less practical because adding anything else quickly clusters the paper, so you usually bring both types of map. The part further along the new stretch of forest is very close to the mountains, so you won't be able to swim and drag the boat over rapids and waterfalls anyway. The last stretch is actually a tall cliff. That's why the best way is to follow the plain along the forest, because the way isn't so impractical. Sure, it's longer on the map, but there's no steep cliff to scale and no jagged paths to follow so in the end it should be even faster." Sighing, Jacques took the time to explain everything to the nereid facing him. "Also, I don't think I'd fare well on dangerous mountain paths."

"Booo~~~ring. By the way, why don't you cut that lock of black hair? Isn't it better when it's all white and gray? Your clothes are already old and shabby, might as well get one thing right."

"Wait, black hair? Are you sure? Where!" Jacques stood up immediately in shock, almost knocking his food over in the process. "I haven't had those in years!"

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"What, you've gone senile as well now? Ugh. Right over your right temple, look at yourself in the water." Her tone was laced with regret now. She was torn between her dislike of land dwellers, and her current wish to have another human to keep the old coot in check. She puffed up her cheeks, eyeing Jacques's unsupervised food, before letting go of the idea and closing her eyes; she'd have to move to get it.

"No no no! You don't get it, it's a miracle! Am I really a Child after all? Nothing weird has happened in the last week besides having more energy overall!" Jacques' weak voice was trembling with excitement. This was a first! He had to...no, needed to study this!

"You being a Child is old news, act like it already. If you wanted weird, there you have it."

"It's like... Am I growing younger maybe?" The old man was looking at his reflection doubtfully, looking for signs of rejuvenation on his wrinkled face. Pulling his skin taut under different angles, he couldn't find a difference. "But shouldn't that be impossible?"

Everything clicked in Ashirijen's head. Dear Kali, the crazy old man was the Child of Time! No wonder her Goddess was mocking her for being so dense and not figuring it out all the while. What God besides Time and his unusual view on things would tolerate that insufferable human? And she treated him pretty rudely all this while. Time was known for bearing grudges... But was he even watching? Should she be a bit more careful?

"Like I care. Maybe you'll walk faster like this?" She decided not to change anything; after all, what could be worse than forcibly dragging him along and evicting him from his home already? "Guess the boat can stay here for good then. Swimming was easy, but you'll be carrying your own stuff now. Finish eating so we can go, you can play with your hair and run your little experiments all you want on the way."

Grunting in acknowledgment, Jacques got back to his plate while Ashirijen stood up to unload the boat. It would stay anchored here for a future lucky traveller to find, maybe. Perhaps getting young again wasn't so bad, he thought while hydrating his suddenly parched throat. The alchemical second skin was holding well, but she still refused to wear clothes after all.

If you could forget the dangerous voice, fatal venom, claws, teeth and horns that could rip you to shreds in seconds, eerie eyes, scales, webbed fingers and feet, she was beautiful. Some traits like the tail and skin colour or scales weren't that uncommon with Nature's, Nyx's or even Theomars' followers so he had seen his fair share, but seeing her back for a moment he almost forgot that she was a dangerous predator close to twice his own size.

He quickly focused himself, making a list of everything he'd need to check about his own body if his own clock had indeed begun ticking in reverse. Despite his obsessive personality which abhorred losing time and inefficiency, he was still a very passionate researcher; his hands almost itched to cut himself apart already, and he couldn't wait

for them to reach the lake to get on another boat. The week of walking there would feel excruciatingly long.