

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

54 Smoke on the water

"..."

Thani's soft declaration was met with silence, her two companions numbed by the monotonous walking. Nothing much ever happened on the plains between dawn and sunset. The scenery was the same flat grass, dried ground and bushes. The rare animal life made itself scarce under the sun, which hammered its rays unceasingly on the weary travellers. The nights didn't see much action either; distractions were lacking, and the few creatures who approached the little group were quickly sent back whining with a good kick.

During the dozen days they needed to get back to God's Eye Lake, the only interesting encounter they made was one with another group of travellers that were camping at a crossroad between larger paths. It was a full-fledged merchant caravan with businessmen and their goods, regular travellers and hired guards, totalling 17 people; the leader, a lucky follower of Eludia, had made his business from scratch after he'd tamed a strong blessed beast by healing it in its time of need. It was strong enough to give the drakes in Ocean's Guard a run for their money, but it followed its master like a puppy and happily carried a heavy load.

It was the occasion for both groups to spend a very welcome refreshing moment, and they shared stories and dreams for the future around the fire that night. But after that one night, the groups parted again and Thani, Alice and Oakbud headed south on the dirt road while the caravan followed the road they came from towards the east. They had reached the lake now and would find a harbour this day or the next to ferry them to Ebb, finally meeting civilization again.

"I think I found how my power to sense emotions is evolving. Or rather, regressing." She spoke louder this time, enough to pull the other two from their numb-legged stupor. "It's linked to both blood and life, maybe more accurately instinct. Whereas I could feel intricate fluctuations in people's emotions before, to the point of seeing through lies sometimes, it's become rawer now. More basic and stronger, like hunger, loathing, fear, lust, anger. I'm not sure how I feel about it yet, I don't even know how and why it's changing like that."

"Is Thani fairy scared?" The fact that she shared her discovery showed it was important to her, as she didn't usually want to burden her companions with her troubles. Both Alice and Oakbud could feel her hesitation.

"No... Yes. Maybe. I'm not sure anymore. The events that happened after the visit to Ebb have set some things in motion, things I can't truly understand or control yet. It's a very strange sensation. I'm not scared of the change; I'm scared of the lack of control. I'm losing everything I've been and what I believed in. There's no way I can make peace with that in a month or two."

"Still, you've only gotten stronger and more confident with your powers, right? It's not all bad from what I see. You've gotten so far after falling so low."

"Thank you, Alice." The few words of Liezel's follower managed to comfort her a little. Nidhögran had broken her spirit before giving her the thread to mend it himself, telling her to face Kali to get her answers. At the time it seemed reasonable, but in truth, by the time she could do that she would probably be a different person already. "It's simply going too fast. Now it's this, but what's next?"

None of them had an answer to that.

When he wasn't animating disposable golems to carry his companions, Oakbud was resting on one of their heads, thinking about his own path in magic. He had innate knowledge of nature magic, able to enter communion with plant and animal life to the point of taking their bodies for himself, and had begun dabbling in the elements of earth, water and more recently fire. After more experiments, he had also determined that the soul shock was an ability bestowed by the divinity he owned, using it to jolt foes down to their unprotected core. His growing mastery over the manipulation of divinity made this type of attack exponentially more powerful.

But it seemed like everyone constantly told him that he had powers of the Three, not only two of them. However, he didn't have the slightest clue on the magic of Time. Perhaps he'd even used it unknowingly or mixed it with another already. Seeing Alice growing on her path and Thani beginning hers anew made him think. He was still following his Dad-tree's last wish, but he was also growing into his own identity; the problem was defining that identity when he didn't even know what he could do.

The rest of the day was spent in silence, and even Alice's exercises when they stopped to camp that night had become part of their routine. Oakbud lit a fire and grew some fresh food with the grains he was given before taking night watch, Thani used her blood magic to make herself a plethora of arms and make camp quickly, and Alice cooked then picked up her weapons to exercise.

Having two blessings was not weak by any means, but Alice was feeling a strong pressure to get stronger just by accompanying Thani and Oakbud. Training was both a way to improve, getting closer to a third blessing, and a way to relieve boredom.

Before starting her travels, she had a hobby of carving some wood, but Oakbud refused to grow some pieces only to have her hack them to splinters right after or to let her cut grown trees for base material. She could only look for poor deadwood or a store. That and the urge to improve hadn't let Alice take her carving tools out since she met him and Thani.

She wasn't sure she would have enough space on the boat, so for this last night on land she made a complete check, almost exhausting herself to sleep: endurance training, flexibility training, weapon handling, archery, breathing, stretching, and finished with magic. She fell asleep soon after a quick dip in the lake to rinse off the sweat she worked out, leaving Oakbud alone with his thoughts for the rest of the night.

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When they entered the settlement the morning after, they learned that there were indeed ferries to Ebb passing through here. However, it had left a few hours earlier, and the next one was at least five days away. In that case, they would need to find someone and pay him full price to get them there instead of sharing the costs with other people.

The upside was that they wouldn't lack space and wouldn't be bothered by other passengers. The downside on the other hand was that the price of the ride just changed from silver to gold coins on top of a bonus fee for the sailor who'd drive them for a good week instead of fishing like usual.

Facing the harbour master in his office, Alice blanched when she opened her purse to check on the state of things. The ride was twelve gold, enough to live comfortably in a bigger city for months without working! Sure, Thani was there to split the cost, but that still meant all the money she saved up in Ocean's Guard would be gone, leaving her with silver only. Most of her personal value was her armour nowadays, and hopefully an upgrade to her bow and daggers once they got to Ebb.

She was about to take out her part of the payment when Thani shook her head at her and paid the whole price herself without batting an eye. Confirming they could leave this very day, she waited until the harbour manager they spoke to returned to his business to speak to Alice with a happy grin.

"You have no idea how much money I made with my constant hunting, digging, bets and challenges, do you? Told you that only working wouldn't get you that far. Look in there."

First, the pouch was bigger than hers. Second, it was also many times heavier. Third... there were only gold coins in it, around a hundred maybe; meaning Thani had at least one other pouch. But... how? She stared at her wide-eyed, formulating a silent "how?".

"Okay first, the drakes are a good half of that even after paying the crafting costs for our stuff, then I had leftovers from Ebb and the arena, I dug up some nice gem ores in-between fights up the mountains, and the brawling bets... Let's just say the odds for 1v3s and up are just that favourable. I've robbed more than one or two poor sods blind."

Alice felt dizzy. Thani made that much money fooling around?

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"If it makes you feel any better, Oakbud made less money than you."

Leaving the stunned Alice behind her, Thani got out of the harbour master's house to meet the sailor and the boat who'd get them to Ebb. And as they loaded their belongings, thunder struck Alice a second time in the form of Oakbud, who said happily:

"Me think we can meet water fairy again!"