

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

58 Second visit to Ebb 3

Thani couldn't remember the last time she had slept so soundly. After so much time, she was finally free of responsibilities like temple duty in Pilgrim Woods, wasn't alert on the road, or in any kind of danger. The group was in the biggest city of the Primal, in a secure location and with nothing but entertainment to think about. For the first time in maybe years or even her drafting into Kali's temple, she felt at ease and more like herself; she had no more role to play or people's expectations to conform to.

Sure, there were daily worries to cater to like her most recent tab at Auri's smith, but the rest was still quite far away. Now that she thought about it, she had been stifled for half of her life and even the recent freedom she got by escaping with Oakbud was nothing compared to the feeling of peace she felt this morning. The little spirit had gotten more proactive recently but was still happy to go along with anyone's plans and needs.

And when she realized that he had beaten his fear of losing time, something clicked deep inside Thani. Despite the crushing hardships she had met in so little time, her perspective hadn't changed; she still felt like a runaway busying herself before getting caught and going back to her previous life. But that night changed things.

Why was she worried about time herself? Before she could comprehend it and its meaning, her own time had become close to unending too. What were a few years stuck in the temple when she had so many more to come? Perhaps she'd even look at this memory fondly in the future. How could Pilgrim Woods be considered a problem, how could a debt of money? How could her lack of recent progress with her powers be considered worrying? The scale had changed, and she had everything to create and learn.

Opening her eyes, she gave a genuine smile to the little spirit who first gave it to her.

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Oakbud was happy. His Thani Fairy felt even more like his image of a fairy. Something had changed in her, and it could be felt in the air around her. She felt much more like Talia, Nidhögran and Jack had when he met them before. Thani looked at peace, not unlike the first time he saw her sacrificing blood in her temple's fountain; except this time he could see its truth.

Alice was smiling too, unwilling to get up from the revamped bed.

"Me will go see Talia today, what will Thani fairy and Alice do?" He was looking at them from the ceiling, hanging from one of the many flowered branches he grew like a weird fruit.

The two below exchanged a look and seemed to agree on something: "Well for now absolutely nothing, it's way too cosy here to move," said Thani.

"Definitely. I don't intend to move until I'm hungry enough to warrant getting up."

"Ooooooh, do you think they have room service here?"

"We'd have to get up to ask, screw it," answered Alice with a sigh.

"Are Thani fairy and Alice tired?"

None of the girls answered immediately. Tired wasn't the right word after all; it was more like the accumulation of all the stress from their round trip to Ocean's Guard came crashing down now that they could settle securely for a bit. It was more of a mental exhaustion type of fatigue rather than physical. Both trained their bodies well after all, and boat travel certainly wouldn't give them muscle strain.

"Not exactly tired, no... Oh, and before you go, Alice and I need to tell you about our stuff from yesterday. Are you okay with staying in Ebb for a while? It should be around two months for Alice's stuff and my armour to be done. Think you can wait this long?"

"Me can wait! Meet other Gods in temple, say hello."

"I honestly doubt you'll get to speak to them if we don't find their Children, but you can try. Don't get your hopes up too much."

"Then me follow Thani Fairy!"

It seemed like they didn't need to worry after all. The real trouble was finding how to pay Auri, but they couldn't plan anything before discussing with him again so they decided to laze about for the time being. It was barely dawn so Oakbud had enough time to go to the temple of the Three and make it back around midday, depending on

how long he would chat with the Child of Nature.

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Since the Anger the continent's population had fallen extremely low, enough for Ebb to be considered the biggest of cities with a few dozen thousand people in it. It might not sound like a lot, but human population wasn't the only one to get culled brutally at the time and it even affected climate enough for a small cultural revolution to take place. Many species had been extinguished completely, now at the mercy of the Gods to reappear one day. Four seasons had become two and were renamed to better fit what happened during them nowadays. Spring and summer have become the Boon, fall and winter the Renewal. Influenced by the new Gods after history was hidden away, they had tried to change the number of days in a week and months to better fit the new pantheon but it was quickly abandoned, staying at twelve months of 30 days in four weeks of seven days (including the last two days for rest) each for a total of 360 days a year.

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The God-Tree's death had had much more impact than he thought by dying around the start of the Boon. When he learned of this for the first time, Oakbud had been conflicted. On one hand he was still sad that his Dad-Tree had to die, but on the other he has now decided that it was also a good sign of birth for himself.

Thani and Alice's commission was expected to be done on the fourth week of the fifth month of Boon, and travelling would become harder after that with how broken the Anger had made things. According to what few notes weren't hidden away by the Gods it had gotten much better since then, but it was still impossible to move during the Renewal without ample preparations.

Thinking about this timeline and his own objectives, Oakbud failed to notice he was attracting attention to himself by being a rare and intelligent spirit asking directions to the temple of the Three. A crowd quickly gathered around him and tried to ask him questions, follow them or grant them all kinds of wish for the boldest ones. But this was still Ebb, the city of the Three, so no one dared to grab him forcefully. Spirits only existed in accord with the Three's domains (even though no one had ever met a spirit of Time and lived to record tell the tale), so harming one under the nose of Nature's Child was reckless at best, suicidal at worst.

In the end, after getting the directions he wanted he got tired of the obstruction and rose a golem on the spot to get to higher ground, away from all the ruckus. His construct also doubled as a convenient bouncer to open up a path, and from the top of its head he could also finally see more than a sea of feet. With its intimidation size, he

easily made his way towards the religious quarter.

The round and unadorned temple exterior hadn't changed at all since last time, and Talia's tree was still towering in the sky above and broadcasting Nature's presence to any who would look. The three sections inside were the same too, with a few footsteps in the sand at the foot of Time's sculpted hourglass and a scant few believers sitting on the floor mosaic of Elements. He would need to get to the centre of Nature's little jungle to see if he could meet Talia alone or not.

As it turned out, she had felt Oakbud's presence the moment his golem stepped up to the temple and so the plants gave way to him voluntarily. When he arrived in her tree's clearing, Talia was waiting for him while sitting cross-legged with her back to the bark and her head resting on her hands.

"I didn't think I'd see you back so soon, little Oakbud. You were pretty determined to go on a wild chase when you left last time." She had a slight smile on her face and extended a bark-covered arm for him to climb. He accepted joyfully, quickly making his way to the top of her head and hiding with relish in her leafy hair. If the Stalwart Oak was his Dad-Tree, then Talia could be seen as a cousin of sorts.

"Me met plenty of people and got much time to think. Me isn't in a rush anymore. Meet Gods, say hello, but bring friends too."

"Oh? Tell me more about that, and I'll tell you some things that happened here in return." Talia wasn't afraid of their reunion being disturbed; anyone trying to reach her right now would wander endlessly in circles in the plant life around her tree. Being the Child of Nature had its perks and staying undisturbed when one wanted to be was one of them.

His speech wasn't as hesitant as before, but it seemed to her like he wouldn't stop referring to himself as 'me' instead of 'I' like everyone else. When she asked why, he couldn't answer properly. Maybe when he grows more he would change his form of address, but despite his incredible learning speed he was still thinking and speaking like a very young child.

She listened with interest to his tales of adventure, cheering with him about meeting God's Eye Lake's spirit and seeing the previous God of War's body, comforting him when he got to Nidhögran and Jack's meeting, and counselling him for the loss of the Granite. She encouraged him to continue learning different types of magic until he found one he truly liked and wanted to pursue.

While she played the part of a good audience, Talia had climbed her tree and brought Oakbud to its crown to admire the view of the city and its surroundings. It truly was a nice spot. From there, they could see the blurry shore of God's Eye Island, the great

plains to the south and forest to the north, and the start of the river going straight west towards the coast. The city plan was apparent with its neat divisions between quarters. With Talia on top of the tree and him on top of her head, he felt like he was standing on top of the whole world.

"I would like to meet with this Alice and see what it is Repose left with her. I've never spoken to him in person since none of us can move from our spots, but Nature told me a bit about him, and he usually doesn't bother with anything; he barely even moved during the Anger. Going to such lengths isn't like him at all so it's making me curious. How long will you stay this time?"

"Me will wait for Thani fairy and Alice to go on sixth month."

"Plenty more time to chat then." She clapped her hands once happily. "My turn now! You probably guessed it, but Nature is either sleeping or doesn't want to speak to you particularly. You didn't ask either, so you probably know more than before about how it all works ooor don't care as much because you already met last time. Not that I mind. It feels so good speaking to you, your presence of nature is so strong and more like a plant than the humans below."

Seeing that Oakbud was obediently waiting for her to continue, Talia smiled even wider and began to recount her side of things. Since she couldn't leave far from her tree, nothing particularly eventful ever happened. Routine life while meeting mostly the same faces, discussing the same topics, answering the same questions, waiting for Nature to wake up and bring something interesting up. As hateful as he was, Nidhögran's visit was very welcome as it broke that monotony. Jack and Time not coming to see her despite having the same objective didn't surprise her, that was their character and they were a good pair. She was angry at the dragon and Elements for hiding his status in front of Oakbud, but she had news from Nature for him that would be of interest in the near future.

"Now the good news, at least for you! Time has chosen a new Child already; may the other Gods help the poor soul who must now accept his eccentricities. I have no idea who or where, but at least you won't look for him in vain. Second information that's a bit stranger though, Nidhögran is no longer the Child of Elements, and he hasn't chosen a new one yet either. It's very strange, because Gods don't usually change Children unless they die or some extreme case where they need to intervene pops up; them leaving the Child normally kills them. I doubt the old lizard breathed his last though, we'll probably know when he finishes his next nap or you go meet him on the Third. Don't spread anything about the Gods around though, please, because that is for them to decide."

With everything that needed to be being said, Talia brought Oakbud back to the ground and bid him goodbye. He liked staying close to her very much too, but he also

wanted to visit the other temples in the quarter to learn more about each God. Time had flown while they spoke and admired the view, and lunch hour had ended long ago. If he spent that much time in each temple, his round would take multiple days anyway, so he decided to call it a day and go back to the inn. He wondered if it had room service.