

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

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The tension around the table evaporated slowly. About a minute later, Auri finally managed to calm himself down enough to think rationally. His blessing of fate received from his God Monte was screaming at him, but he couldn't make sense of it. Was it danger or opportunity? He could not decide.

"You can't say something like that and expect me to give an answer right away. Come back in... whatever, at least five days. I need to think and plan things, just know that I will not ignore what was said here today." Sharing a few awkward looks with Alice and Thani, he decided to send them away for now. He watched their receding backs in wonder.

It had been a while since he'd felt so conflicted about something. His bald head, tall height, flattened nose and sunken black eyes usually mellowed every customer enough for him to get his way in business, but this? How do you intimidate a God? Multiple Gods apparently even? He needed to think seriously this time.

He got up, not even finishing his meal; he didn't have the stomach for it anymore. The bronze mountain made his way to his vice-forgemaster to discuss organization.

"Something's up. I'll be out for a bit, put away whatever's in my forge and extinguish it. Cancel everything I had for the coming week and forget the money. Some things are worth more than that."

Not waiting for an answer from the gobsmacked man he'd worked with for a good dozen years, Auri unbuckled his tool belt and heavy leather apron and made his way out in the city.

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Because it was still early in the afternoon, Oakbud asked Thani and Alice to come and see Talia with him again. She could surely help Thani on her quest to Godhood, and she wanted to meet Alice anyway; he only anticipated the comfort of climbing her hair again.

They were unable to get straight through to meet her though, and had to wait for a good hour before the leaves of the vegetation parted away before them. When the group finally came before Talia, she was waiting for them in her usual spot with her back against her tree but looked a bit down.

"Sorry I couldn't let you through earlier" she said while giving her right arm for Oakbud to scale up, "but I was meeting with some of Ebb's administrators. There's been a confirmed rise in numbers of dangerous and blessed beasts in the southern part of the Primal since the Stalwart Oak's death and it's causing many problems overall; trade's declining, pilgrimages get aborted, information circulation is hindered and even if you can't see effects in the city itself yet, fear is rising." Talia rubbed her temples softly with her head hung low. People knew she was a Child and came to her for their problems, but that didn't mean she was able to provide the best solutions. Her status didn't make her omniscient; even the gods weren't. And as Nature's Child, she couldn't really make partial decisions and advocate for extermination. That would be against her very nature as a dryad, and also mean giving up her role of protector.

"Shouldn't blessed creatures become more intelligent? I'm pretty sure that with two blessings establishing rudimentary dialogue would be possible, no?" Thani asked. Having lived at the border of the Forest of Creation for her whole life, she was the most informed about that kind of thing.

"What happens when you let an oppressed predator free? The Oak was keeping them down and now they have no limits. Of course they don't stay peaceful. All people can do is wait, see and adapt for now. But enough about that, what can I do for you today?"

Alice took a hesitant step forward, intimidated by the fact that she was meeting with a Child. "Uh... I'm Alice, Oakbud told me you wanted to meet me."

"Oh? Oh!" Talia's face lit up with anticipation. "Yes! He told me Repose left something with you, I'd like to see what it is. He doesn't do much usually and Nature told me that he only stood by during the Anger, so I'm curious. I'm confident he did it because of Oakbud here, but because we're both aware of each other but unable to communicate, rooted in place, I really want to see. It's like an undirect meeting of sorts for us."

The dryad was outwardly much more approachable than Nidhögran or Jack had been, so Alice managed to calm down quite a bit by the time she got close to Talia. With a slight blush, she opened up her shirt to show the crystallized lifegem the Granite had left between her clavicles.

"Wait, isn't that some of his lifegem?" She grabbed Alice's shoulder and pulled her face closer to the rock. "That means he's able to hear us! Hi! I'm Talia, Nature's current Child! I've heard a lot about you, sorry we can't meet face to face! Let's get along."

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There was no answer, though, and she sighed. "Aw, he can't communicate back it seems, too bad. I had so many things to ask him. In any case, you don't have to worry about it. He's just looking out for you because he's curious of your group somehow, and if you show it to other people or creatures that can recognise it they'll definitely be friendly like I am. There might be something more about it, but Nature would need to be here to tell us."

"Wait, seriously? You... You've got to be ki-kidding right?" Alice lost her cool enough to stutter and tried to pry the stone off her chest. "You damn stack of rocks! I've been scared shitless of what your nasty trick was since the day we've met, and now you're just peeping on us? Even when I... Fuck! No way! Fuckfuckfuck it hurts! You damn creep! Aaaaaah!"

Leaving Alice to her hysterical fit and Oakbud playing with the leaves on her head, Talia turned her attention to Thani. She had sat down and was waiting for her turn. Talia couldn't help but notice how much she had change since the last time they met. She looked more poised and confident, and the shadow of fear that her wavering faith had cast over had gone from her face. "Why are you here, though? Nature won't help you more on your path, as much as he'd like to help Kali. And you look quite well on your way."

"I hoped to talk to you about magic in general... I feel myself and my magic changing, and my soul's shape has been in the back of my mind for a while now. I've become more proficient at using the little divinity I own so it's easier to perceive it myself, but there are still many things that elude my understanding. For example, I've decided to walk the path of Blood and Life; I've pretty much figured out blood and know of its role in life and healing, but I still have yet to take any more steps in that direction. I'll be forever grateful for the magic manipulation lessons you have given me, but I feel I have reached a wall there."

"Well, isn't it simply a case of lacking knowledge? You know extremely well how natural healing works after experiencing it over and over again with your regeneration, but how about Time healing and Deva's return to Order? What is your ambition for healing, what will you create?"

Thani realized the dryad was right. Her knowledge was limited, and while she was taking on Kali's domain of Blood and sacrifice for herself, she had to create something new entirely for healing. No wonder she was blocked, her perspective on what she had to do was wrong from the start.

"I'll take your silence as acceptance, then." Talia continued. "Why don't you go and meet Eliott in the temple for Time? He's no child, but his mastery of magic is

incredible and I thought he'd be chosen next after the undead. I think he doesn't have many years left either, maybe that's why. You could also try the temple of Deva later."

"I'll do that. What is that return to Order you spoke of though? It's the first time I've heard of it." Deva was known as the Goddess of Truce so it wasn't totally out of place, but the word Order made her think of contracts rather than healing.

"They'll tell you more than I can about it at Deva's temple. No point asking me more, because I honestly have no idea." Talia looked at Alice, who was now rolled in a ball on the floor whining. "She's not taking it well, huh... You look pretty okay with it though, it's surprising."

Thani answered with her signature grin: "Well, I've practiced ritual scarification naked in front of crowds for years, so I haven't cared about that kind of thing for a good dozen years, you know?"

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Alice's eyes were still a bit red when they left Talia's grove. They went straight for the hourglass statue, and after asking a bit about the Elliott the dryad mentioned, they found themselves face to face with a decrepit man. He only wore a simple brown robe, opting to stay barefoot in the fine sand around the statue.

His eyes had lost their light and he was obviously blind, his head was bald, his skin saggy, his bones devoid of much flesh. At the side of the bench he was sitting on was a wooden cane, and going by his general look of frailness he was someone who needed assistance in his daily life to keep on living.

It looked like Oakbud felt something from the man though, because he was awfully silent and reserved in front of him, examining him intently.

"Hello? Are you Elliott?" Thani asked softly.

"In the flesh! Or what's left of it, anyway." He turned to her with a broken half-smile, gesturing to invite them to sit at his side. His voice was surprisingly normal in comparison to his appearance, not weak nor wavering. Looking up at the hourglass he couldn't see, he spoke: "What do you need me to heal, and when did the injury occur? Which of you three needs my assistance?"

"Sorry, we're not coming to see you about an injury... Talia has told me to come to you to learn about Time healing."

"She did, did she?" He nodded a few times to himself, lost in thoughts. They didn't realize he knew of Oakbud's presence despite the absence of any noise announcing his

presence. "Yes, let's do a bit of a lesson here. What do you know about the magic of Time? My guess is nothing, but let's take it from the start anyway. Do you know how threading clothes work? I like to compare Time to a thread of fabric."

Thani and Alice exchanged a look. The comparison seemed a bit far-fetched... "You think I'm crazy, right? I felt you tense up for a second." They were caught red-handed. "Don't worry, it'll make sense soon. Imagine that each person or thing has its own thread, and that all combined together, they form an intricate mesh that is... Time. Time magic is the art of navigating this mesh and changing parts of it as precisely and effectively as possible. And it's only because I'm so good at it that I can bear being blind. My vision isn't the same as yours anymore. But because it's so incredibly complex, and I'm coming back to the analogy of a thread of wool here, you can't touch that mesh without consequences. It's commonly referred to as erosion. Look at my robe, for example."

Elliott pulled on the right sleeve of his robe, rubbing it between two fingers. A few tiny specks fell to the floor, lost in the grains of sand.

"Some fell off, right? It's all the little parts that are lost because of my actions. My robe lost a bit of thread, and maybe my skin has been rubbed off a bit too. And that was only touching the mesh. Do you understand better now?"

Thani felt Oakbud shiver on top of her head. She didn't even feel him climbing up there. Was the old man messing with them? Each of them remembered the traumatic encounter with Jack vividly.

"This is terrifying..." murmured Alice.

"It is, isn't it? and it takes a lot of willpower to dive in again and again. Let's come back to our thread for now, and I'll try to describe what happens during common time magic usage. Slowing and accelerating things is what most people think of first, and they're right as it's also the basis for far more advanced uses. My left hand is the current point in time, and my right is what we're going to enchant, alright?"

Elliott made his right hand close in on his left.

"Compression. The same thread happens much faster than usual, but coming to the opposite, it stretches the other end."

He widened his arms.

"And stretching. Now things will happen slower until the string is back to normal. But leaving someone slowed down or sped up by a fraction for the rest of his life would be tragic, wouldn't it? If you have ever experienced a Time spell of this kind, you know

how sick it can make you feel at the end of its duration due to the catch-up in time. That's why the very first thing we learn when it comes to Time magic, is the ability to grab more wool from somewhere, be it ourselves or the target's, to patch up the thread. And that's where the life consumption occurs."

Elliott lifted his right hand, and pointed down at his left.

"We can't take from our left because it's the build-up to the right, the future, and touching the past can create lasting damage to it easily, maybe even snapping the thread and destroying what it's linked to. So we take it off the right end."

"Wait, maybe Oakbud's scream is Time magic then? I know it feels horrible at least." Alice intervened, and Thani nodded.

"Oh? Please describe the effects of that scream. Better in fact, use it on me and I will be able to tell immediately, won't I? Don't worry, I can take it."

Oakbud did what he was asked after jumping down in front of the man from Thani's head, weakly at first but quickly rising in intensity. He reached a level he hadn't before, one enough to slaughter small animals and knock people out instantly in an area. Thani had gotten up, taken a step back and was grimacing, while Alice was kneeling on the floor retching, and Elliott stayed unfazed.

"Definitely time magic, indeed. It's like he's grabbing the mesh and shaking it, just like the stretching and compression I explained before, only with a bigger amplitude and higher frequency. Do it hard enough and the thread can snap, killing whatever it's connected to. But I haven't felt erosion from it, which is strange; it felt different than usual magic. That would be divinity, wouldn't it? What an incredibly wonderful creature you are, able to do so much while preserving the threads perfectly. Thank you for having come here to meet me. Thank you for showing me this before I pass away."

"So that was the principle of time magic for living things, right? Do inanimate things also have threads?" Thani asked.

"They do. But as they are not alive in the same sense as we are, interacting with them is different. I would not compare them to wool, it differs for each thing. For example, I could turn a rock into sand," Elliott said, pointing at his bare feet under the hourglass. "But It's much more taxing; how hard do you think it is to break rock with wool?"

They knew that like each leader of the temple of Time, he'd had his part in filling the sand pit around the hourglass. His description of the act only reinforced their awe of the frail old man.

"And now we come to your question I know is coming, healing. Why wouldn't it? As

you surely know, to make wool thread you need wool fibre. Healing concerns that much finer fibre, it is the art of repairing the thread. Here is its principle : focus on a point of the thread before the injury occurred, find the fibre showing the healed state you want your patient to be in, find the fibre of the present where the injury occurred, shave off the future end to connect them both and replicate the past on the present. The older the injury, the more you need to shave off to connect time, hence the incredible cost of time healing. Without this connection, just like the moment after an acceleration spell, the injury would reappear because there would only be a small healed section on the thread without continuity, and the shock would in most cases kill the patient immediately. Without that connection, I would need to heal the whole future of the thread, and that would bring ruin both parties. And repairs are repairs, only a patch on a weaker point of the thread. Multiple time healings over the course of time will only exacerbate those weaknesses, and their cost will rise exponentially. That is why Time healing is the most powerful, but also the most dangerous."

"Your appearance, all this knowledge... you've been practising for an incredible amount of time, right? No wonder Talia asked us to visit you." Alice whispered in awe.

"Hohoho! Cough cough..." Eliott took a minute to calm his coughing and laughing fit.

"Thank you, I hadn't laughed that hard in a while, but you're wrong. Everyone always is, for that is the price of Time. For your information, I will be turning 28 years old on the third month of Renewal." Feeling their brains stop working for a moment, the seemingly old man smiled proudly.