

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

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"I'm not going to the temple of Deva. I'd just slap the first of them I see." Alice declared before Oakbud or Thani could give a signal to their now staple carrier-golem. She didn't get on its arm, hesitating a bit in front of the construct.

"Alice fairy doesn't like Deva?" Oakbud asked. "Why? Maya fairy was nice, with pretty wings!"

"Never met her, and I told you why I started traveling before, right? I want to find a cure to the disease that killed my childhood friend. But it didn't happen in a snap of the fingers, you know?" Alice sighed, while Thani looked down from the golem's arm to listen. "I don't know the specific limits, but Deva's followers are able to heal wounds and treat diseases. We... I... did all I could to stop him from getting worse, and called for a healer. With what we just learned I understand a Time healer couldn't have helped, but I don't even want to hear how Deva's blessing works."

Alice took a big breath with hate in her eyes. "Her temple answered us, saying they'd send someone quickly; he came a whole week later than what they said, and it was too late by then. And when the priest arrived, not a word about the delay, not a sorry, AND HE DIDN'T EVEN VISIT HIS GRAVE! HE JUST LEFT AGAIN LIKE IT WAS JUST ANOTHER JOB!"

Her outburst turned a few heads in the street, and stunned Oakbud and Thani completely. But Alice wasn't done yet, and climbed on the golem's right arm in front of her to get closer to them. With a steely voice, she continued softly so only them could hear her: "I never told you how I got my blessings before, did I? Maybe you won't want me following you anymore. I stalked him, and I killed him in cold blood. On his way back, staging a beast attack. I thought my vengeance was blasphemous to the Goddess and prepared to end my own life, and I received two blessings at once from Liezel telling me otherwise. So I'll say it again, I'm not going to that temple. I've made my peace with Deva, but I don't want to associate with her followers either. Ever, if possible. See you later."

She jumped down and started walking back towards the inn, leaving her two companions petrified and trying to digest what she just told them. Oakbud was the first to recover through his naivety.

"Is Alice bad?"

"...No, she's not." Thani took a bit of time to think before continuing. "But don't speak of it to anyone. I think she told us now because what Eliott said has shaken her, hard. Deva is known as the Goddess of Truce, and that manifests mostly through healing, contracts and order in general. But that man... He didn't have long to live anyway in my opinion. A capable healer has at least two blessings, and that represents a certain level of piety and self-investment; if what Alice just told us is true, then he broke two or even all three of these three tenets at once. That's not something you can do without paying for it dearly at that level. And ironically, that's the kind of scar in her mind that only time can heal."

"Then is Alice good?"

Thani sighed.

"...No, she's not. But who is or can be, really? I thought you'd seen enough of me by now to know that." She tapped the golem's shoulder and pointed at the direction she wanted to go, prompting it to begin moving. "Come on, let's get this over with and get back to the inn before night falls. Alice is going to need some support when we get back."

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Deva's temple architecture was rather clear-cut and sober, but also featured beautiful curves towards the top and windows of the second story. The roof was slanted inwards into a patio where a little garden was tended to. The whole place was radiant, built with pure white polished rock and decorated with soft winter flower pink and subtle gold. Thani and Oakbud got off the golem in front of it and took a moment to take in the view of the building.

The man welcoming them seemed very young and probably just got his very first Blessing. It was plastered all over his overly cheerful face and tone.

"Hello, welcome to the temple of Deva! What can I help you with? Do you need healing, counsel, or settle some business? Oh, and is this a spirit? How incredible!"

'At least that bubbling idiot didn't ask if I wanted to convert...' thought Thani. He didn't even have a trace of wings poking out of his back, definitely a zealous newcomer. She hadn't come here often in the past, maybe once every few years, but Thani could understand why Alice didn't want to be exposed to such a cheesy greeting.

She answered with a flat tone, not showing any interest in or effect from his speech. "If you're not an accomplished healer, you can't help me. And I do mean one of the

higher-ups, not a general healer."

"Healing healing!" sung Oakbud from her hair.

It might have come off as rude, but having eyes without pupils didn't always help with expressiveness and they didn't want to linger too much this time. Alas, they needed his help and couldn't just brush him off to head inside.

Talia was a Child so her knowledge and power were incredible. Elliott, if pressed for it, would surely be able to contend against someone with five Blessings. But they were surprised to learn that the highest power in Deva's temple only had three. Apparently the most they ever had in Ebb was four, but that person had passed away about twenty years ago. Because of this, their insights weren't currently that deep and the healers relied mostly on their Blessings to do the work. Deva's Children had only appeared as human two times in history, which didn't help either with their accumulation of knowledge.

They still found a healer with free time to speak to, and were able to learn the wide principle behind their healing methods: "order", also called the "normal state" of things. That was why an already scarred wound couldn't be healed because it had become the new "normal state", and they were able to fight but not directly cure sickness: they could restore the symptoms but the patient's body was still the one curing itself.

Thani and Oakbud realized two big things: first, there was a fundamental difference in approach between the Three and the Gods of Men. The Three didn't bestow blessings per se but rather pushed one to improve their own comprehension of their power. Thinking about it for a bit, that divide was clearly visible with elementalists, completely obvious with Elliott, and gave food for thought about Nature too; they'd have to ask Talia to confirm. On the other hand, the Gods of Men bestowed blessings through their divinity, which acted like shortcuts to use magic or improve an aspect of the recipient.

And second, Oakbud could mess with that. It was already proved when he bestowed Blessings early on on Maya and later Harp. This in turn had them reflect on what divinity actually was, and why Thani felt so stuck on the path she had to make for herself. With how unnatural Oakbud's learning speed, common sense and general comprehension was, The God-Tree had truly done something incredible that toppled everything they knew or could have imagined a few months before.

But ignoring those revelations, the most memorable point of their visit was still the beautiful building and that was a bit disheartening.

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The return to Ebb's Flow was made without much conversation, each thinking deeply about what they learned - again. Despite having no time imperative or planning to follow through, the rush of information and the process of integrating it felt suffocating. Their rate of growth was almost alienating. Luckily the golem was taking care of walking for them, as who knows how long they could stay absorbed otherwise.

The sun was just beginning to come down when Thani made her way back to the room with Oakbud on her head. She sighed in relief when she saw Alice was there, and again because she was asleep and looked like a wreck; it was clear she had been crying her heart out on her bed.

But that break down seemed to have another effect, that she probably hadn't noticed herself yet in her state of dismay: Her hair had completely transitioned from the blonde dyed tar black to a natural black with profound purple hues. It seemed like Liezel had bestowed his blessing on her again for a total of three.

Thani decided that if any, now was the time to get back to her gentler temple head persona, and stepped up to do something about it. She had soothed innumerable physical wounds in the past but wasn't a stranger to mental anguish either. Sitting on the bed, she took Alice in her arms and began combing her hair softly with her fingers while repeating softly:

"It's okay. You're not to blame. You did right. You're not alone."

Oakbud watched in contemplation from his little nest on the ceiling as the sun began setting down accompanied by Alice's wailing. Unable to fully understand the situation below, he wondered how the coming fight in the arena would go.