

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

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"That's me?"

"No, I'm not you." Answered the skeleton with a lackadaisical tone. "The name is just a coincidence." He was sitting on a throne of stone and lazily supporting his head with a hand on the side, contradicting his tattered clothing.

"Then are you Time? I doubt it." Said Jacques firmly. He didn't know exactly what or who that was, but he knew that he himself was there because he decided to. And he also inferred that him taking the right step was the key to end the plague of nightmares.

"Didn't you hear his voice when you came in?" The skeleton dodged the question, choosing to give the man scraps of information instead. "Would Time give himself another name and play house with you like this? He threw me away for you after all, surely you can be more... entertaining?"

"You're a Child of Time then, like I saw in the nightmares before. But how are you here? Don't Gods only change Children when one dies?"

"And where do you think we are?" He gestured with his free arm, showing the darkness all around them. "Take a guess. Or don't. You wouldn't get it right, no mortal can, and it doesn't matter so let me get to the point. I'm just an image of who I was; even beyond death I can't escape being a puppet of Time. Memories of me aggregated with divinity to bring my personality back the time of a debate."

"A debate? What a peculiar choice of words." Jacques voiced his thought aloud with furrowed brows. He wasn't speaking to the God, despite being its Child. Instead, the God forced him into meeting his previous incarnation. Why pull him there then avoid meeting him? The whole roundabout reeked of a trap of sorts. He took a good look at the skeleton, who was now patiently waiting for him to speak up again.

"You are a test, then. What lesson am I to learn from you?"

"Perhaps you're not as worthless as I thought. But you missed something: what makes you think I'm on your side? For someone boasting of knowing all sorts of things, you are quite lacking in intelligence." The skeleton spat at him. "Think again."

And so Jacques thought again, from the beginning of their exchange. He wasn't just any previous Child like he first thought, the skeleton was the Child living right before him. Then who was he? The last known Child was human, not an undead; the king of the Undercity in the Jagged Heights. But that was more than a century ago, and he should be dead already, with another vessel between them. Unless he was one and the same? The name certainly fit. Then when did he become it? Before or after the tragedy that unfolded? He himself was growing younger by the day, so he based his decision on after because in front of him stood an undead and not a living man.

"You are Jack, the king of the Undercity." He nodded his skull, then motioned him to continue with a hand. "You... sacrificed the entire population of your domain. And failed, from your appearance." Another nod. "You are a warning to me, not a lesson." A shrug, this time. Not entirely correct, then. "Hmmm... You are all of it then. A test, a warning, and a lesson. Hence you being not on my side, but pitted against me."

Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap.

"An acute deduction," answered Jack between claps, "but a wrong one still. A second chance is all you'll get I'm afraid, and I will provide the answer to your narrow mind so we can save time. It is oh so precious after all, isn't it? I am... entertainment."

That word again. The skeleton was playing him like a fiddle. "Wouldn't that make me entertainment as well? However, your words... A debate, was it? Surely there is more to that than you would let me think?" He had no choice but to admit defeat and ask directly.

"Indeed, but that is because you are not entertainment... not yet. You are an experiment, as you would call it. A curiosity to make sense of, another frog to dissect alive on your table. Whether you wake up or die depends on its result, and Time made me its knife! Isn't that... intriguing?"

It was becoming obvious that the skeleton held bad intentions towards him, and that Time didn't control his actions. He thought about a possible source of such hostility. He was undead, so his sustaining will made him effectively immortal; yet here he was, dead. The chicken in the nightmare, entertainment. A distraction, nothing more. To wait. Then interest brought change. So, Jack was inadequate to fulfil that interest then; a different perspective. Discarded; jealousy? How did he die, in which circumstances? He didn't know enough about this man. All sorts of thoughts were swirling in his head.

"Would you tell me about you?" He didn't like conceding like this. The skeleton was simply throwing him against a wall again.

"So, you know your inferiority then. Struggling with the boundaries of your knowledge and mind. You're weak!" The skeleton taunted him. "Quick wit isn't intelligence. Knowledge without intelligence is useless. What use are your little books now, I wonder? I lost the game, and so will you!"

The skeleton punched his own head, hard, and screamed in rage into the dark: "Damn you! How dare you put me there, only to interfere? You're nothing but a cheat, changing the rules of the game!" Jack huffed non-existent air with his non-existent body, before turning his burning eyes towards the old man once again, silent.

Entertainment, again. A game to lose, resulting in death. The split action, the rage. The God of Time intervened against the skeleton; when, and what was it? The last thing he said, surely. The game is a hint. The game against Time? He needed to know more, to fish for scrapes.

"This is not a debate, but a duel. You're trying to crush my mind." He accused the skeleton directly. All along he was being demeaned, led by the nose, proven wrong again and again. Jack wasn't only hostile to himself, but also to the very God that put him there. How did he come to be antagonistic to his God? Something very wrong must have happened. Was he himself wrong? The incident. The key. "Why? All we know is the result. Why did you sacrifice the city?"

"You're closing in on the crux. Have you figured it out yet? I didn't become a Child after, but right before." Jack was calm again, and pointed a bony finger at him. "I wanted what you have. Turn back time. Live. Know more. If you want to learn, you need time. Isn't it ironic? In order to have the time, I learned. Lost secrets of magic, complex spells that would put any so-called great mind to shame. And then... I accomplished my ambition. I earned my time; but time was denied to me. Time took possession of me and turned my grand spell I had prepared against me."

"Then you died at the time, and became undead from sheer resentment? This got you the immortality you wanted, even better than a reversion of time." Success or not, the people would have died any way. Time hadn't stopped the spell. Did he not want to, or was he unable to? No, if he wanted to he could have done it, but chose to smite the king instead. Why? He wouldn't make him his Child for an instant just to punish him; a lesson, then? A lesson that was rejected. The game. A game of time between two immortals, insanity. Jack could only ever lose that game because of his origin. His stubbornness kept him going, but accepting the lesson meant making peace with himself; making peace with himself meant he would dissipate as an undead, and refusing the lesson meant denying himself his past ambition by staying stuck in place with his hate. Yes, he saw it now, he wouldn't be broken anymore by the blabbering madman trapped in his loop.

"You said I'm weak, but I'm standing in front of you alive. And that is more than you

achieved." He countered.

Step. Step.

"Are you sure about that?" Jack said as he stood up and began walking towards the old man facing him. "Why don't you take a look at yourself?"

A look. Meaning something changed. Younger, his hair. Immediately, Jacques put a hand on his head where the black lock of hair had appeared recently, and pulled hard. White. He felt frail.

Step. Step. Step.

"I was alive too when I reached an incredible height of power. Younger than you are now, even. But you, for all your ambition, where are you now?" Jack pointed an accusatory finger to the old man's chest.

Step. Step.

"You ignore half of what makes up the world you so dearly study, magic. Is it unworthy? Not interesting? Are you scared of losing your original goal perhaps? Taking the easy route, you're just a coward. That's not called ambition, but pipe dreams."

Step. Step.

"I hate me, I hate Time, and I hate you. Your only luck was being chosen before you came to the point things ended for me. I wish ruin upon you, I wish that your sleep be never easy, that every shadow torment you with fear of your end, that every path you take on your quest be a dead end. I wish undeath upon you, so you wallow in the agony of your failure." The bony finger was touching him now. Something he didn't know was radiating from it. Cold? Fear? Death?

Step.

"Did you know? Time didn't win the game against me; he flipped the board. He gave up, changed his mind. All because the God-Tree died and left something behind. I won! I. Won. He had enough and killed me for good. Don't you see? You should just die right now. Close your eyes and take a deep breath now. Recognise you are lacking, admit that you don't deserve your position. You're nothing. Breathe in, breathe out and it'll be all over."

Jacques was petrified, looking into the hollow skull less than an arm's length away from him. The skeleton was right. He had given up. He thought that magic was a

one-way path following a God, a trap with an unsatisfying end unable to reach the apex. He chose to give up one to study the many. That's right; he hadn't let everything go for the sake of his ambition. He was alive, and he could change. Jacques breathed in, and breathed out.

He opened his eyes.

"I knew you had it in you, Jacques. Good morning." He was greeted by a hearty, toothy smile.