

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

67 Brawl

A week later, Alice was still trying to adapt to her new Blessing. She wasn't sure she had understood everything it did, and she wasn't sure she deserved it in the first place. Using her small knife to carve a fist-sized block of wood in her hand, she put too much force on it and chipped a big piece of wood by accident, ruining her work. She looked at their inn room's floor covered in sawdust and chips and sighed.

"That's the third. Why do I keep messing up on the finishing strokes like this?" She whined in a small voice.

She'd been unable to finish an idol of Liezel since. After the second failure she'd tried to make something else, and even though the quality wasn't transcendent the piece was a success. The third failure left her at a loss.

"I mean, why are you even trying to carve an idol?" Asked Thani from the side. She was laying on her bed, quietly thinking about magic and relaxing to Oakbud's floral arrangement on the ceiling.

"It calms my mind."

"Doesn't seem like it." Thani turned her head on her pillow to stare Alice in the eye. "Look, with all the mess we've been in and Gods we've met, we both know they have some measure of awareness and influence on things that have their attention. You've gotten a Blessing just last week, so I'm pretty sure he's messing with you intentionally right there. We both know you've made idols in the past, and that your skill is greater than that."

"But it's so unfair! What do I do if even doing what I like doesn't help? I- hey!" Her dismay turned to anger as Thani had gotten up to slap the failed creation out of her hand. "What's wrong with you!"

"Come out back and fight with me."

"What?"

"You haven't unsheathed your daggers all week, not even for maintenance. You've also stopped exercising." Thani pointed at Alice's gear, which was beginning to accumulate

dust. She frowned at the purple-haired woman in front of her. "So, the question is, what's wrong with YOU? Come in the yard with me and let's spar."

"No! I –"

"What are you worried about? Just do it. Now." With finality in her tone, Thani got out of the room without even looking if Alice was following.

She had ignored her for the most part these days to let her sort her emotions out herself, but that was taking too much time considering their schedule. Oakbud rightfully refused to participate in the exhibition match two days later by principle; it was very different from a regular spar with someone, nothing more than a fancy execution and he wanted no part in that. He didn't like fighting anyway.

The little spirit had instead opted to work with the innkeeper to renovate some of the building's interior with his nature magic and make some coin of his own. He didn't need it yet, but he accepted the fact that he may need it later to stand on his own. It was an overall good learning opportunity for him.

Thani wasn't worried at the prospect of fighting without Oakbud's golem as a frontline. She'd already fought and won against much bigger and fiercer than whatever the arena personnel could find for them to fight against. She caressed the spot where the drakes had severed her arm and exited the building into its backyard. Alice followed a few seconds later, looking down at her feet. She would need to shake her up and make Alice look herself in the face for good, otherwise she'd be fighting alone. Right now, she couldn't be considered a valid combatant.

"Come on, hit me." She said, trying to get to the point directly.

"I can't!" Alice answered, shaking her head.

"I can't, my ass! You're a better fighter than me. But you're right, you're not fighting anything or anyone in your state. Listen to me for a bit, stop running. What's Liezel's domain, and what are his values? What does he approve of, what does he condemn? Say it aloud." Thani's aim here was to have Alice re-focus on the facts rather than her out-of-control emotions.

"Liezel is the Unfettered, he advocates freedom in all its aspects and despite the associations people commonly make because of his magic, he despises treachery and other purposely evil acts." Alice answered mechanically.

"Then what are you capable of now, what have your blessings given you?" Thani pushed. She had to make her admit how far she'd gotten, that it was a great achievement, and how ridiculous she was right now.

"The blessings... They've changed my body. My eyes turned purple, and now my hair too. I've gained the ability to [break] things and magic alike by touching them directly. As for magic, it's about the shadows. I can jump to a shadow, obfuscate my appearance, presence and movements; and now I can also wield shadows without contact and give some substance to it. It's a bit strange but I can use it as footing while other people can pass straight through it. What's your point?"

"My point is, with all that do you feel free right now?"

"Yes!"

"And that's why you're so stuck! Look, I've counselled people for years even without liking it, held stupid useless ceremonies and stuff. I know how that stuff works. You're not free." Thani raised her hand to cut Alice's reply. "It's going to sound cheesy, but think about it. It was the first time you spoke of your past to someone, right? And that got you your third Blessing from Liezel? That's you freeing yourself from the past by talking about it. So why can't you go a step further and let it go? Isn't it about time you stopped hating yourself for what happened? You've gotten your God's approval twice now; can't you trust him on that at least?"

Thani could see Alice's eyes redden already. It wasn't the time to push further, but to build her back up. She herself had her own life flipped on its head two or three times already, and that experience put to use could soften the blow for Alice. Looking at the daggers dropped on the floor, Thani went in for a hug while thinking she'd ask Oakbud to give Alice flowers later to cheer her up some more.

"Letting go doesn't mean forget. It means being at peace with what happened and your decision at the time. I've had to kill people and blessed beasts too, multiple times, and it's never become easier. It should not." Thani did her best to be as calming as she could while caressing Alice's head and back softly. Leading the Blood family, and by extension pretty much the whole of Pilgrim Woods, hadn't been easy either and had needed some unsavoury acts to be performed over the years to keep up. This was a good occasion for herself to think back on things too. "And even if you're feeling stuck right now, look at how it was for me in Ocean's Guard. I'm standing back up taller than ever now; you will too. Let's go back upstairs, okay? I'm sure you'll get the fourth idol just right this time."

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Thani had gone back to visit Auri the day before while Oakbud was working and Alice sulking. He had said to come back five days later, but she gave him a sixth just in case. The time he had taken off was for him to reflect on himself, his motivations and his faith.

What was he working for? He was happy and satisfied with his situation in Ebb. Did he forgo the idea of climbing up further? The short-term losses couldn't be compared to the surge of rekindling ambition inside of him. The context for those pieces of work was mind-blowing, and fate was whispering in his ear. Rather than following usual practice which meant that he would refuse for lack of payment, he had an occasion to give it his all and make something fate-changing. He couldn't make an artifact, only Gods could. It wouldn't be his best work. But wasn't his faith in Monte all about being in the centre of the currents and choosing their flow? That work would be for himself too.

And so when they met again, the blacksmith had come to an impressive decision, one that would benefit all parties involved. He had decided to tackle their order first, which meant that Alice would have her stuff in time for the gauntlet in the arena the month after; and also decided to make it for free, with a smile on his face.

Thani had refused immediately. They'd still give him as much as they could for his work, even if they couldn't get the full amount. It was the least she could do to honour his resolve. It was objectively not the best course of action for Oakbud's party given how much they needed to move around, but it was the right one.

Of course, she hadn't told Alice the piece of news and only shared it with Oakbud, trusting his lips would be tight enough about it. It wasn't a good idea to bring down a strong pillar of motivation and responsibility in her at the moment. She could tell her after things were done to give her more time.

Waking up on the day of the exhibition match, Thani really felt like she was too used to leading. They were following Oakbud on his journey, but she was the one making most practical decisions. At least the little spirit was taking independent action and vocalizing his thoughts and preferences now, and that was very good progress. She'd be able to be a bit more carefree in the future, she thought happily.

At the foot of Alice's bed stood a carved wooden idol of Liezel, showing a smiling man sitting in a circle of broken chains. Was it smiling at her, she wondered? How sly. In any case, it looked like she wouldn't be the only one blowing of some steam in the fight today.