

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

7 Pilgrim Woods 1

It had been a full eleven days since the little group left the God-Tree's clearing, and the uneventful journey was stopped by a pack of goblins. This group was fortunately small with eight members, but no one liked being rushed at by two guards and bombarded by six throwers. Adult goblins have the size of a human child, green warty skin, and lithe builds. Their deformed human-like face usually have grey hair, an often crooked by fights nose, and yellow eyes shining with creativity. Yes, creativity and not intelligence ; goblin leaders are rare, and so they tend to form little groups arranging themselves between ranged and melee fighters, hunting and looting whatever they please instead. Improvised weapons, improvised armour, improvised explosives, improvised hideout... the word "improvise" sums up the goblin race pretty well, excluding their true and well-known tribe leaders who are intelligent and able to cast magic.

The fight was quick : Mark and Aldo were definitely used to this kind of encounter, one rushing them with his wooden wall-like shield, toppling their fighters down and deflecting projectiles, the other growing grass and plants to bind the fallen. Kilb watched indifferently with a slight smile, while Maya clutched her staff, her knuckles whitening from the strain.

Pushing his torso out and swinging his free arm, Mark spoke : "Didn't even need to unsheathe my axe. Do we take time to finish this properly, or do we let them bound here and go? We're close to Pilgrim Woods now, I really want to get to a bed and bath soon."

Before anyone had time to answer, Oakbud was already by the closest goblin's head, and screamed at it to make it faint. It then went to the other seven, repeating the operation, before standing in the middle of the pack. The Spirit focused and radiated its magic out, his little arms planted into the ground and his mouth open in a silent scream. Like the snake before, the goblins started turning to piles of wood and plants, sparing the farthest one.

Maya was the first to understand that Oakbud made it so it could possess the last goblin. "That is way cleaner than the first trip when Mark had to kill beasts and Aldo buried them after... but don't you need it to be dead?"

Tilting its head, the Spirit looked at her before passing through the nearest goblin. Aldo jumped from surprise, because the ex-goblin plant-mass began to grow at an accelerated pace while Oakbud was inside it. "I get it, he can help plants grow and

probably gets something in return, but it's different for animal creatures. Let me help, I guess the less damaged the better it is for you. Maya, you may not want to see this."

Finished talking, Aldo stepped towards the last struggling goblin, picked up a stick on the ground, and impaled it through the creature's nose to the hilt. It stood still after a few last spasms. Waving his wriggly arms in thanks, Oakbud entered the goblin's head. Like with the bird from before, the creature's head began bleeding blackish pus, its eyes turned the shade of night, and the Spirit's arms poked through them.

Standing up after being freed by Mark's axe, Oakbud began familiarising himself with his new form, walking, jumping, stumbling and rolling around. He tried to climb a tree and failed miserably, eliciting a few chuckles from Kilb : "Thank Deva you didn't have these fragile wings yet when you were younger, that clumsiness was one of your strong traits even before you were blessed by the goddess of Truce."

"Uncle! Please help him instead of making fun of me! I'm 19 already!"

"Help Oakbud with what? It's not like he doesn't know how to walk. I'm more curious about what, if any magic he can still use like this. The bird had flight to compensate, but aside from his scream, it didn't look like he could sense around it through the earth anymore."

Mark squatted in front of Bud, poking his shoulder curiously : "I really can't wrap my mind around that possessing trick of yours, makes me shiver. So, what can you do besides face-planting when you try to run?"

"Speak!"

Four pair of wide-open eyes stared at the strange goblin. "That's new... no more doodling and guessing from you and Maya, eh? Finally you can stop gouging the earth and treebark with your little claws! No more need for me to tire myself cleaning after you with magic!" Aldo was the happiest one at the idea of their strange companion being able to talk. "Also, could you tell us more about how you came to be now? I got that you come from the God-Tree, but that's pretty much it."

"Speak!"

Kilb sat on the ground, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I guess that's the difference between understanding what we say, and learning to speak...At least we should be able to teach him before we reach the border of the woods. He can think and understand,

he's just unable to form proper words, nothing a bit of training can't resolve. I'm more worried about what he'll be possessing next, maybe he's going to re-learn each time if the creature's different..."

"Speak! ♪ Speak! ♪"

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Two days later...

"Me like fairy!"

"I know, Bud, you only told me a good hundred times since this morning."

"Pretty wings! Maya fairy!"

"Hundred and o- hey!" She blushed furiously and knocked on Goblin-Bud's head "Compliments are nice but you have to mean it at least! I can read you, remember? You're just repeating that like a stupid song! Also being complimented by a dead goblin is gross!"

"Somehow that ability to see through people makes it look like you're in looo~~~~ve with that very dead goblin, you know?" Mark was grinning behind her, closing the march.

Aldo nodded in front, looking serious but doing his best not to laugh : "Yup, I can't see the cute little forest Spirit through that fugly goblin either. So weird, so weird."

"You guys! No more scratches and splinters healing for you!"

"What is love?"

The smile on Kilb's wrinkled face could only wane at Oakbud's latest question. That little critter really couldn't be held back once he got curious about something, and that meant one more headache for himself as the other three would push the Spirit to him for answers. Travelling with young people really was tiring sometimes. At least the little one didn't stutter anymore.

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Two days later, in their last camp before town, Kilb frowned, thinking about the problem they postponed solving until the last moment. "How exactly do we come back Pilgrim Woods, announce the God-Tree is dead, and that we found its Child who currently possesses a goblin's corpse, without getting pursued by everyone in the

temple?"

Mark scratched his head : "I'd say we talk with Bud about anything he needs now, before going into the town, so we can dispose of the goblin and bring Bud under our hood or something."

"Goblin not good for town? Mark said strong goblin speak! Me find temple and God-Children, God-Tree dad say goodbye."

"Sorry Bud, but the goblin chiefs look nothing like the small-fry you're currently possessing. Also you don't really look alive, so you'll either get attacked because it's strange, or we bluff your way in saying you're undead. Can you pull off some magic for that? It's dangerous either way, that's why you getting out of it is better."

"What undead like? Time God like undead, me find more undead and find God!"

Aldo was the one who spoke this time, being the only one who met some before : "Your bad speech is a bonus, no offense there. You can also try to walk a bit more like how you did when you just possessed that goblin. But what's bugging me is your pair of pitch-black eyes, undead have soul-flames in their head... Can you make your eyes glow white, similar to your outside state? Also pull the wriggly arms back in."

Apparently, changing his appearance never crossed Oakbud's head (aside from his bark hat), and he could indeed do it effortlessly. "That works, but there's still one last problem, remember? Just like me, the higher blessed people from the temple might see your overpowering soul and magic.

There hasn't been a new God-Child in centuries and the live ones are known, so you just popping out would raise panic. Even the hidden away God of Time's Child is known, the Mad Undead King Jack in his ruins."

"Me try hide me from Maya like plank-arm!"

"Call me by name, please. Mark. Ma-rk. You even said it before. You really speak however you want, huh. And it's not hiding, its protecting. You wrap yourself in magic to prevent thought-peeping."

Not wanting to abandon his goblin, Oakbud tried to follow Mark's instructions. Concentrating, he visualized a revolving wall of fog around himself. However, what wasn't expected was the quantity of magic power Oakbud assigned to that, creating a literal fog wall around himself, protecting him from any kind of eyes...

"Listen to me Oakbud, break that scary fog wall down, and do it again starting with almost no magic. I'll tell you when I can no longer read you.... Alright, it's not tangible

this time... a bit more? more still, it's getting blurry. Aaaaaand you can stop there, I can only see you as a strange goblin now."

"Now visit town, meet people in temple! Say meet scary beast, come back. No say dad dead? See house for God-Tree dad friends, say hello."

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Pilgrim Woods was just as its name said : more of a supply point for travelers than a proper town. It was located at the intersection between the end of the Forest of Creation, the God's Eye Lake, and the plain along its west shore. Still, a family of the Goddess of Suffering Kali lived here, bringing an immovable stronghold to the forest's border. Their powers of transferring injuries and rapid healing were a great help as well as a strong deterrent. No sane person would fight with someone who could transmit their own injuries to you, or even heal a severed limb in a matter of hours. They are invincible berserkers as long as their magic holds up and they stick to their foe.

The five-man team strolled right through the entrance just before noon, going towards the central inn, which doubled as a temple of the Three. Aldo booked a room for himself, Mark and Bud's goblin, while Kilb paid for Maya and him. Once this was done, they all felt fatigue setting in, and Kilb announced : "Let's meet up in an hour or so after we freshen up. In any case it's great that nobody stopped us and asked about Oakbud. We'll have to prepare answers for the temple, though. It's too big of a news for us not to report it, however bothersome it may be."

They met back up at the entrance of the temple part of the inn. Although it was a temple of the Three, it could welcome anyone, and was even headed by a follower of Kali. After a round of questions, they found the person responsible for the transmission of news, a strange wolf-man named Harp.

Sighing, he rolled his eyes at the one he was familiar with. "Don't look at me like that, Aldo. The God of Nature saw more of a hunter in me than a tree-hugger like you, and so he gave me claws, fur and a tail. Bet I can snip your bird-nest hair straight off, so I'll skip your usual comments today. What can I do for you today?"

"Ugh, I feel both welcomed and not. I won't be the one talking the most though. Me and Mark want to report a blessed beast, around ten men strong, about half-way to the God-Tree. We found its trail and three dead, no traces of injuries for the beast. has hooves, a dragging tail and big-ass tusks from what marks it left. Maya, you next."

"Interesting. I'll relay that to the Blood family so they can send a few blessed people to take care of it. How about you, lady?"

A bit nervous, Maya took a step forward. "Uh, hello Mr Harp. My uncle Kilb and

myself were accompanied on my pilgrimage by Mark and Aldo here. Sit down and brace yourself because we have grave news." Harp lifted an eyebrow "What can be bigger than a ten-strong blessed beast roaming on the pilgrimage trail? Did you find a dragon or an elemental spirit?" Maya could feel that he was not impressed, and could only resign herself to scaring him stupid and healing him after.

"We indeed found a peculiar spirit, see our goblin friend here. Name's Oakbud. I also got my third blessing on the way, I'm now able to read auras in addition to healing."

"Wings pretty! Maya fairy!"

This time Oakbud had prepared himself and grinned as he caught Maya's fist with his before she could hit his head. Meanwhile Harp was examining the strange goblin standing before him, thinking. "Looks like the usual small-fry, but it can talk pretty well... Interesting, did it get a blessing?" As the goblin finished squabbling with the little fairy, Harp paid attention to his face, and exclaimed "Undead!" when he saw the glowing eyes. "Is an undead goblin even possible? And it can even talk? Incredible!" He squinted his eyes, at almost twice Bud's height "...what do you want. I don't like your kind, we don't see you enough to ever grow accustomed to it."

"Aldo know too. Tree-God dead. Me find God-Children, say bye to them for him."

Edit : got a few typos who slipped in before. Writing until 00:30 am was a bad idea.