

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

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The more often they met Gods and their Children, the less they felt like they were the kind of untouchable and mystic existences the stories said they were. Naturally, they spoke very little while moving in the forest despite Liezel's assurance that the way was clear: it had become obvious to them long ago that oaths asides, Gods were far from omniscient. Setting camp for the night was another matter however, and Alice began to satiate everyone's curiosity about the God of Transgressions.

"The thing about Gods in general, is that their word is considered truth. Because of that, it's very easy for them to set up a heroic life story or spread what they like through their Children. I'm not saying that's the case for every one of them, and there's no way to know either, but I'm pretty sure what the records in the temples tell aren't stories of failure and defeats. You guys know about each one in at least a general manner, yeah?"

"Well I obviously know more about Kali since I've chosen the path at ten instead of fifteen years old," answered Thani from the other side of the fire they set up, "but I also have a general understanding of the other Gods and their domains. I mean, the Three's names are self-explanatory, so remembering what seven others are good at is no problem."

"Same for me." Said Harp on the side.

"..." Oakbud stayed silent. After all, he didn't know. He'd been so busy running around and learning how to live with others since his birth that he never had taken the time to accrue detailed knowledge on the Gods he was seeking. As foolish as it could seem, the decision wasn't bad either: after all, he didn't need to know about them to speak to them when they met. But here was a good occasion for him to fill in one of the blanks, even after the fact.

"Well, there's little to nothing about Liezel. And what's available isn't very glorious either, and that makes quite the contrast. It would be easy to tell people more, like he did with us earlier: he only needs to go to Ebb and say whatever he wants; but Liezel doesn't. In my opinion, that's why most people don't choose him and would rather follow the others." Alice sighed. "I didn't even choose him, though. Most people never choose either. I don't know how he knew of me, and how he managed to reach out to me. Seriously, that's some scary stalking, right? 'I'm pissed at you and I know your name' is terrifying when coming from a God."

"Well that's all nice and good, but you're still telling us nothing." Thani cut her speech.

"I'm coming to it!" Alice snapped back. "But it's truly not the most fascinating stories. It's like he's mocking the other Gods, saying they're patting themselves on the back with their stories while he's saying the truth. That's fitting of his title for sure." Everyone around the fire laughed.

"Anyway," Alice continued, "what we followers of Liezel have is mostly oral transmission. You've been in Ebb, so you know he doesn't have a serious temple even there; meaning no written archives. That in itself limits how much we know, and it's also likely things have become somewhat distorted down the line. He doesn't have stories of fights or impressive feats, it's mostly about his travels and who he met. First, there's nothing about before he decided to become a God, because that is 'the real start'. What would you like to hear about?"

"Well you're leaving the choice quite open... Did he go to the Third? Since people don't come back from there, surely a God-Candidate can, right?" Harp asked. He was quite curious about this issue since meeting with Nidhögran, who had asserted his home was the tallest peak of the cursed island. It also related to Thani's current state, and could only bring benefits.

"Yeah, he did. It's one of the more documented stories, paradoxically. It doesn't tell how to actually land there safely though, only what he's done. According to that story, the Third is a monster paradise where you can find anything and everything. Drakes are close to the bottom of the barrel over there, only fit for feeding stronger stuff."

"No wonder he's told us not to go meeting him directly..." Said Thani lowly while thinking about the Child of Elements.

"The craziest though, is that apparently almost everything on the isle is Blessed."

"Wait, you mean plants, insects and trees too, not just the beasts, right?" Harp frowned.

"Yup. Insane, right? Just by the Three apparently though, the other Gods seem to steer clear of it for some reason. So wherever you go on the Third, you can't do anything recklessly. And since everything is so sheltered, it means it's a paradise of time for older beings. Liezel has learned things from old monsters there. He was rejected by a dragon after waking it up, which I think is Nidhögran now that I think about it... He's also spoken with a giant serpent in a lake, fairies, trees and other rare beings in the woods. He's found what called itself the 'mother of spiders' there too, but there's no description available. If it's a giant spider for real, and I mean Nidhögran-sized... or worse, as tall as Repose? Ugh."

"And you're telling us that's not some kind of epic stories?" Thani scoffed. "That's already more than most other Gods have done before their ascension in the records."

"Well, it's really not. He was just travelling and meeting with them, we don't have track of what he spoke about though. Liezel's arts are all about freedom, so the rest is mostly him running away from dangerous stuff that wasn't open to discussion."

No one had a comment for that. "Actually, most of it is him running away. The dragon threw it from its mountain in rage, the serpent tried to drag him under after a disagreement, and if not for his magic he'd been trapped in the mother of spider's webs. Speaking of Repose, he's met him too but nothing special to note about it. If we go back to the Primal where we are, his tales also mention the Stalwart Oak. It's actually the start for Liezel, and one of the verified truths; the God-Tree once let him climb to its top, and the view he had over the world from up there opened his eyes to ambition. There's nothing about the underwater folk at sea, meaning he's either not found a reliable way to visit or he just hasn't spoken about it. Nothing much about the Jagged Heights either, besides it being a scary place full of undead. The Undercity can apparently be more dangerous than the Third if you're not prepared."

"And how long ago was all that?" Asked Thani.

"Uh, about three hundred years ago maybe?" Alice answered. At least that timeframe corresponded to Liezel being the latest addition to the Gods.

"This might be a bit insensitive, but listening to you, how come he's the God of Transgressions and not of Running Away?" Harp asked meekly.

"Oh." Sighed Alice in return. "Yeah, that's because I just told you the sunny sides."

"Those were the sunny sides?" The wolf-man's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Yup. Aside from seasoned adventurer, Liezel as a mortal was also... a debauched crook. Cheating gambler, scammer, escaping jail and other punishments, whoring... he's done it all without a care and leaving while laughing out loud. Hence the name. Can we skip the rest? It's getting real dark, we'd better sleep." She finished, trying to change subjects.

"And it's the lack of stories that make people choose other Gods, you say? Yeah right." Thani muttered under her breath. But Alice was right nonetheless, it was time for bed. She didn't intend to sleep right away though, because she wanted to reflect on divinity a bit while the subject was fresh in her mind.

Liezel had called magic the river, and divinity the tool to carve the riverbed; he also

mocked her current usage of it as simplistic. If this was really the difference between the two, then he was right: she had only been using divinity as a better 'river' for now. It was also no wonder why she was unable to dull the pain of morphing her body even slightly. Put into words, it was the difference between [deciding what exists] and [using what exists]. This fact confirmed that she would be able to create a framework for a new healing magic in the future; how much time and divinity that would take however, was another problem entirely.

Also, she wasn't the only one with divinity of her own in the group; Oakbud had some too, surely leftover from the God-Tree when he created his strange offspring. But the little spirit was still just a newborn, barely a few months old. Sure, the God-Tree had somehow managed to have him inherit some knowledge, but everything was still mostly instinctual to him and he was unable to explain how he did things. That meant that he had no way to make any progress with divinity yet, seeing how he was unable to do anything else than mimick magic-related things (to various degrees of success).

On the other hand, Thani had the magic usage well under her thumb already, and Liezel had just opened the 'right' door in front of her instead of letting her open all the 'wrong' ones first. In the longer term, the shortcut would probably prove to be detrimental, but that would still let her evolve faster overall. Thinking about Liezel's story that Alice had told everyone, Thani supposed that the then God-Candidate had travelled all over the world to meet the old monsters for exactly the same reason: ask for advice in order to progress. Good thing she was doing the same by helping Oakbud; the little spirit proved to be an invaluable help in the sense that he would be the prior connection preventing the old monsters from attacking them when they came.

Thani stayed up a bit longer, struggling to find sleep. The next day would be one of the hardest in her life, when she would need to assemble people and publicly make an oath following Liezel's recommendation. It meant publicly rejecting her worship of Kali in front of the people she grew up with and who admired her for her dedication to the Goddess, and asking them to support her instead. Despite being the most efficient, this solution had a bitter taste. To make things worse, her skipping a night of sleep due to anxiety wouldn't even affect her. She'd have to spend the night alone with her thoughts; a most terrifying perspective.

Of course, she wouldn't be saying it with those exact terms, but it was the idea. The actual discourse would be along the line of 'Kali asked this of me to help her directly rather than support her passively in prayer' and 'don't worry about Kali, we will hear from her soon from her Child (even though this one was probably a white lie)', or even the baiting 'you can resume the sacrifices you were anxious to make, only to me instead'. She could even sell the feat of helping a God-Candidate ascend in the future to the most ambitious of the lot. Liezel was right, it wasn't hard in theory; perhaps the ability to distance herself from those matters was also included in the bearing of a potential Goddess.

Her thoughts circled back to the little spirit, who was currently caressing trees all around the camp, repairing their bark and other miscellaneous help he could give the plant life. He'd need to find a good teacher of magic, one with enough patience to help him learn correctly. Otherwise, Oakbud possessing divinity would be a serious danger in the future given its potency and his almost limitless access to it. They were both at the sharp edge between mortality and divinity.

'Home', Thani thought, 'when has ours changed?' All it took was one fateful meeting.