

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

Chapter 73 - The Captain

The return to Ebb almost felt like they fled from Pilgrim Woods, but there wasn't much they could do about it at this point. The ability to travel extremely light without preparing any provisions or the storage for it helped a lot in speeding up the pace too: their only luggage was their clothes and other personal possessions, which weren't particularly plentiful and simply sagged over one of Oakbud's golem's arms. Most notable were their money pouches, Alice's carving kit and reserve wood, and Thani's ritual knife she decided to bring with her for nostalgia's sake.

They walked the majority of the time despite Oakbud's ability to carry everyone and everything with a golem, because it took much of his concentration to keep a good pace and didn't let him enough freedom to think or discuss things with Alice and Thani. His support was most felt during meals where he could grow fresh food in a matter of minutes, and at night when he was able to sleeplessly keep watch and grow plants to shelter the others. Water wasn't a concern either with path following the lake all the way, and Thani was even able to get some alcohol or other surprises by fiddling with Eludia's cup.

The most interaction they had before arriving was crossing a group of traders going the opposite way to deliver their goods.

Once the group reached its destination, the first stop ended up being Auri's shop to get their stuff back. True to the man's word, their whole arsenal was ready. Thani got her armour back, happy to find it lighter than before thanks to Auri's masterful engravings. Alice on the other hand didn't appreciate the moment as much despite receiving her armour, bow and freshly made daggers. The reason for that was her learning of the arrangement Thani and Auri had come up with for payment; namely, that there was none needed and that the amount would be left to their own heart and consideration. Even selling all she had and working for years, she wouldn't be able to afford the true price; she felt like she was leeching benefits off of Oakbud's quest.

After that, they went back to the inn Ebb's Flow they stayed in before to get a new room. After Oakbud's help for renovations, the owner had raised his prices a little but let them stay for the original one instead as thanks.

Finally, after putting their gear down securely in their room, Oakbud Alice and Thani started their final visit of the day and went to the temple of the Three to greet Talia. As always, the dryad seemed to know exactly when they would arrive and had the dense vegetation around her tree part in front of them to grant them access. She listened with

a motherly smile as Oakbud recounted excitedly his return to his dad-tree's spot and the quick growth of the new Oak, while the other two simply watched. On the other hand, she didn't react to Liezel's presence and actions.

"And we thought we could surprise you with the fact..." lamented Alice...

"You would have if he didn't stop by six days ago and already told me all about your meeting already." Replied Talia with a smug grin while Oakbud played with her hair-leaves.

"Wait, six?" Thani and Alice exchanged a perplexed glance. "We did meet him eight days ago, right?"

"How fast is he, that's crazy..."

"Well, that's a God for you." Asserted Talia. "He's not just watching over a Child, he's taken that crow's body over completely. Liezel is able to exert much more power as a result. Speaking of which," she beckoned Thani to come closer to her, "if all goes well you should be getting a slight but steady flow of divinity in the near future, so you'll be able to waste some on trial and error and learn faster. It'll start relieving pressure on Kali too."

"That's good to hear." Thani sighed in relief, a hand on her chest. After her actions in Pilgrim Woods, if what she did there had no influence at all... she would have been devastated. "But... just like that, I get divinity? Is it really that simple? You'd think people would hear about God-candidates a lot more, no? How come none has been seen or mentioned in the past few centuries?"

"Give me a moment before I answer that, please. I'm not sure how much I can or should say. I'm a Child, so I'll never get higher than this, and I have some knowledge about it thanks to Nature, but there's a reason." Talia sat down against the trunk behind her and closed her eyes. Oakbud playing on top of her head didn't seem to bother her while she appeared to try and discuss with Nature himself. He had even plucked one leaf off her head to replace the one serving as his current "hat".

A minute or two later, she reopened her eyes. "Well, here we go: there are multiple requirements to get divinity, be able to hold it in, and get on a path of ascension. The first is obviously to tread your own path of magic without following or overlapping

with an existing God's domain; the second is to have become strong and knowledgeable enough to not simply make a fatal mistake as soon as you get some divinity; the third is acknowledgement and can be subdivided between mortals and the other Gods. So, that's that. You'll have to think on it yourself for more."

"So as long as long as I have support from both parties, I can get some and use it, huh... I'm worried though, wouldn't the ability to grant Blessings like Gods do necessary? It's not like I'm going to become a Goddess tomorrow..."

"You should worry more about completing your framework of power before that. Bestowal of Blessings will wait until your ascension proper."

"Didn't Oakbud do that already though?" Alice cut in from the side.

Talia turned her head towards her and shook her head negatively. "He's a special case... it's a miracle he hasn't killed the two people he 'helped'. He needs to stop using divinity and learn magic handling properly, one at a time; also decide what he wishes to pursue." Oakbud wasn't listening, and was instead busy getting high on the energy of Nature omnipresent in the place, relishing the lively and vivacious greenery that was Talia's body. Seeing this, Talia was reminded of the other most special case she'd met before, Nidhögran. She knew he had it in droves, but had never seen him or heard about him use it. Thinking about it more, he should be more than proficient enough to become a God long ago, and was probably able to do whatever he wanted in the mortal world. If he followed the same kind of path of living and going with the flow while seriously learning and training, Oakbud would become a moving God-Tree at this rate.

"You look better than last time. And congratulations on your third Blessing." Said Talia to Alice, who was still uncomfortable being in her presence.

"Yeah... Thanks?"

After the awkward finisher, everyone said their goodbyes and the group returned to the inn for the night. The next day was the start of the arena tournament, and was sure to be full of excitement.

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Sunrise.

The atmosphere in the preparation room was stifling. Exactly one hundred and thirty-seven contestants were all stuck within arm's reach of each other or closer, all armed to their teeth and doing their best to not push or get pushed into their neighbour, waiting for the event manager's speech on rules and settings for what was to come. Among them stood Alice, Thani and Oakbud. The little spirit had fashioned a

human-sized clay golem to represent himself.

"Alright everyone, welcome again to Ebb's arena. Some of you might already know the rules after participating once or more, but for others this might be the very first time they have the occasion to stand in the ring, so I'll have to go over everything once again.

You are all about to fight each other in eight rings traced in the dust circus. Each ring will have a King, and everyone else will challenge the King. Unless the announcer gives you a challenge, which you can accept for bonus points or refuse for no consequence, the fights are strictly one-on-one. More on that later.

The King is to defend his position, and will score points according to the number of total and successive fights won. When defeated, his challenger takes his place and becomes the King. Only successful defences will grant points, beating a King does not count towards your individual score.

All weapons are allowed, as is all magic you have mastered. Winning conditions are as follow: your opponent surrenders, becomes unconscious, or stays out of the circle for more than ten seconds. In case of surrender, the loser must stay out of fights for half an hour; unconscious people may fight again at their own discretion; being thrown out of the circle bans you from challenging that circle again, leaving you with only seven other options to fight for.

Recovery time is set to five minutes between fights, only natural recovery is allowed – don't try to bribe the arena's healers or attempt to dissimulate alchemical solutions to give yourselves an edge, the latter need time to take effect and you'll be disqualified on the spot.

Attention please, this is most important, killing your opponent is to be avoided at all costs! Only extraordinary accidents will get you out of a hefty penalty and possible prosecution from Ebb's council. This is not a hunt in the wilds, this is entertainment!

On a lighter tone, successful Kings can and will surely be challenged by the announcer, but are also able to set their own challenges for double reward per fight as long as the challenger is agreeable to its rule as well.

And finally, I will now announce the skill range of the participants. Lowest is two blessings, and highest is four! I repeat, from two to four Blessings!

The first eight Kings have already been selected and will be specially guided by arena personnel when you step beyond the gate.

May Eludia guide your blows, and Monte your defense!"

With a dramatic clap of his hands, the promoter stood down from the podium he used, which in fact was a simple crate of supplies, and the other arena personnel began guiding the contestants towards the rising metal gate at the end of the corridor.