

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

Chapter 77 - The Captain (5)

Nobody spoke for some time, too busy to digest the condensed story of the former man in front of them. Then as if it weren't enough, the Captain simply continued as if nothing important happened and clapped his gauntlets to pull their attention to him again.

"Time for the real lessons then! Even though no real magical education exists because of the scarcity of its users beyond the very basics, it's easy to distinguish mastery by feeling alone. At the very bottom is feeling its existence and moving it around your body, that everyone should be able to do. Then, either you have a bit of instinct about it, or maybe you rely on a blessing to achieve a specific effect; that's when the first big step-up comes, and that's learning what you're doing consciously. If you're able to get that far, trying to alter your spell casts to experiment is the next logical step. If I'm not wrong, that's where you're currently at." He winked at Alice. Or perhaps tried to but seeing one of his soul flames go out for a second was only scarier.

"Not you, because you follow a God instead of your own path, but you can still get there with a bit of effort. And then it's work, work and even more work until you know enough that your magic simply bends to your very thoughts to produce the result you d.e.s.i.r.e; that, is true mastery of magic. Of yours, at least. Any questions for now?"

"Yes." Thani spoke, "What was that last sentence? Of 'your magic'? You said you don't have divinity yourself, but then what are you talking about?"

"Aaaaah, good insight, that's exactly what I was coming to. I'm happy when I get good students like you." This only made her glare murderously at the Captain, who chuckled in response. "You're still not worth fighting. Remember that feeling you got when you entered the Pit? That's what I'm talking about, you're feeling the ambient magic of the world around you. In this case, it's an area so charged with my own presence and death that it makes you shiver instinctively. That's the next watershed in mastery of magic, that no one will ever teach you about, but that every God and Elder of this world has crossed. That's what makes us old monsters so scary. It's dangerous, it can lead to catastrophe-scale destruction. If you want examples, here's two: Sorrow's Pass... and the Anger."

While the Anger's history had been wiped clean, only leaving the name of the continent-shattering event to scare children, Sorrow's Pass was marked clearly on maps of the Jagged Heights. It would be hard to miss in fact, since it cleaved the island cleanly in two to the ocean's floor, leaving a chaotic strait un-navigable and filled with

broken boulders.

"You're telling me no divinity was involved in this?" Alice exclaimed. "And you expect me to believe that? It's common knowledge that Gods were involved for both events!"

"Gods? During the Anger yes, certainly, since..." The Captain hit himself on the side of the head. "Almost had me talk here. No second-hand history allowed, ask Gods and survivors about it, not me. Sorrow's Pass on the other hand I can speak about freely, as I've spoken with some of the involved parties on my travels. No Gods were involved here, only an Elder and two Children."

Once again, there wasn't much to say for Oakbud, Thani and Alice. They knew better than to question monsters like the Captain after their successive encounters with that kind of entity. Following all this presentation about how strong he was, Oakbud was a bit disappointed that the Captain wasn't the Child of Theomars, but he was already growing past that setback and more determined than ever to become worthy of meeting his Dad-tree's friends.

"What I'm coming to is that feeling the ambient magic is only the first step towards using it instead of, or on top of your own. How do you get your magic back after exhausting yourself in the first place, since it's not a tangible thing your body can produce? How else would it be present in everything? Once that door opens to you, either you learn, or you die. The Gods watch over those in the know very, very closely and will not hesitate to erase you if you go on a rampage. No one wants another map-altering catastrophe. And since you spoke about divinity... when you can manipulate ambient magic, and you've understood what magic is at its root... then, then! You can think about using it properly. You're probably better off stockpiling it for now, instead of risking committing suicide each time you tap into it. The longer you live the better."

By now, Alice was seriously thinking of plugging her ears to avoid hearing any more history-breaking secrets. She had no idea what they were talking about since the topic breached into advanced magical stuff, but that last part was too much.

"Ah, and a word of personal advice before you go on your way. You'll probably hear of an expedition to the Undercity soon, since its King has disappeared; might as well tell you he was the Child of Time you met. Don't glorify undeath, don't think it is normal or a good thing. You have only met stray, weak undead at best, or those so overly Blessed like me that have nothing to do with it anymore. True undeath is found best in the Undercity of the Heights, and if it weren't for undead having Time's favour, they should be eradicated as swiftly as possible. It is a scarier place than the Cursed

Third in some respects. The whole place is saturated with the same magic you find in my Pit here. You can only stay there if you don't use magic, otherwise you'll absorb the ambient one that's toxic to the living and it's going to make you sick. You'll feel weak at first, drained of energy, then fall ill, and finally die all in a couple of days. Who knows, maybe you'll become worthy of a fight someday, and I'd hate to lose a potential opponent to such an idiotic death. The expedition is all political talk, it will never go far in the Undercity so you can avoid it safely and not miss anything important."

Seeing them speechless again, the undead decided they would be best on their way now. He had already gone above and beyond what Talia had asked of him anyway, and they had earned their gold. Call it a divine intervention, but he didn't feel the same irrepressible urge to fight Thani like others who could feel the Pit before, and he was able to speak a lot more leisurely than usual for him. Then he'd go back to his slumber, until the next opponent showed up. Like always, still hoping for that one last fight to come.

"And don't forget your money on the way up!" His voice reached the group one last time as they climbed up the stairs. He was right and it was a welcome distraction from the heavy topics. Oakbud, Thani and Alice would have all the time to think about it in the comfort of their room at the inn. In the meanwhile, they could always count their gold.

For making the Captain come out, Thani earned a flat hundred gold instead of her calculated prize of 42 and a few silvers. Oakbud attracted so much attention with his unusual way of fighting through a golem that he won the audience favourite poll, bringing in 27 gold and some silver for himself. Finally Alice, as the most normal person of the group got herself a satisfying 3 gold and some silver with her score. On top of that the previous arrangement between Thani and the arena management still stood, and their share of profits on the betting pool amounted to 247 gold and 58 silvers, for a grand total of about 380 gold when combining all their earnings.

For any regular person, this would be enough to live comfortably until the end of their days multiple times over. For Thani and Alice though, it only brought consideration of how much to pay the master blacksmith honourably with, how much to keep for their incoming travels, and if perhaps it was worth staying longer to earn more instead of travelling during the incoming cold season.

"Hey, Jacques, that's really Ebb this time, right?" The giant nereid's tail was swatting the air nervously behind her back. She had gotten it wrong once before, and she had to walk through another forest because of it. Ashirijen really hoped this was the anticipated destination this time.

"Yes, it is. The captain of the ship said we'd arrive at the docks about mid-afternoon, so we'll even have enough time to visit the temple of the Three before we have to find a place to sleep. We should still apply another coat of the anti-mucus salve on you before that, just in case."

After two weeks of cruise, the old man had continued getting younger, and did in fact not look that old anymore. He only had a few grey hairs left, his wrinkles were gone, and he had grown tall enough that his clothes didn't fit perfectly. He'd feel great if it weren't for Ashirijen's growing attentions towards him.

The 2.5 metres tall nereid had been a real slavedriver since their first meeting, not hesitating to threaten him verbally and physically to get her way. Yes, she'd warmed up to him enough along the way that he caught her off-guard once and almost died for it, but her attitude had taken a more radical turn after his nightmarish episodes with the God of Time had come to an end.

In fact, that moment was the first time she'd ever called him by name in close to two months of living together! She spent more time observing him behind his back, didn't push as hard when she wanted something, and teased him less overall. Jacques deduced that she'd finally recognised his worth and treated him as more of an equal than a useful pawn. With a sigh, Jacques went down to his cabin to finish packing his belongings.

Getting their feet back on proper soil again was less eventful than he'd initially expected. The Primal was populated entirely by humans, with only a handful of elves facing the Jagged Heights in the north-west, and it could be felt from people's reactions. Thanks to Talia's presence in Ebb, the ambient xenophobia was kept relatively low, but non-humans were still generally unwelcome if not hunted on sight.

Ashirijen begrudgingly accepted to wear a wide cloak to hide her body, so her presence didn't stick out as much in the middle of humans. Her face and sheer height were impossible to hide though, and her voice would still cause as many problems as before. But, even though she'd been left trembling in rage by passing behind-the-back comments while they crossed the city towards the temples, the nereid had not acted on her anger. Kali had probably exerted some of her godly influence on her for that, he thought; otherwise, with how hard she was clutching the shaft of her spear, it would have been a bloodbath.

"That..." Ashirijen spoke when crossing the threshold of the temple of the Three, "that's one big f.u.c.k.i.n.g tree." Her hand was contracting around her spear's shaft, probably wondering how hard she'd have to hit it to cut this one down.

"And I'm glad to see some things above the water can impress you." Jacques answered

to the slack-jawed nereid. Talia's tree was visible from anywhere in Ebb with how tall it was, but approaching its base gave it a whole other order of magnitude. "This is Nature's Child's tree, Talia the dryad; but I'm sure you knew that."

Still, she stood there. Ashirijen had steeled herself for so much more. Every passing day above the water was uncomfortable torture, feeling the full weight of her body on her legs, feeling her exposed gills dry and almost bleed to the air, the sharp stones she walked on, the direct sting of the sun on her body and the limits of terrestrial movement. She was ready to endure; but in the end, that was it. No one stood up in her path, no obstacle was in her way; she never had to fight. Now that she had made it here, everything after would be trivial in comparison. She could feel the tension evaporating from her tired body.

Jacques was walking ahead of her already, so she stopped thinking and stepped forward. She had Children and Gods to talk to.