

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

13 Wild night

"Is this woman crazy, or is it a trap? Travelling alone like that, she's almost begging us to rob her... Hey Dravin, have you found something?" A group of people was sitting at the edge of the dying campfire's light, close to the Tree Oakbud had grown for the night.

"All I can tell is that she really is alone, chief, and with a strange pet? Looks like a spirit of some kind. Anyway, it doesn't seem like other people are following anywhere close. Careful though, her hair is white and I couldn't see her eyes, she may be a devotee to Kali, so young with such a colour..."

"Hah, those pain addicts, thinking they're invincible... Just beat them in one stroke or stay far and they can't lift a finger." A shadow took the form of a human right behind the "chief", joining the seven other people. "Do we really need to be all nine of us for this? There's only one bag of loot to carry back."

"But she took down that big-ass fish by herself, so careful. Alright, briefing time. Dravin, you kill the fire and get ready to ambush afterwards, try and support the frontline. Gramor, you step up and block the pet and whatever they could throw at us. Jamie and Frond, you two do your thing and bust that tree down. Lami, prepare to try and influence fate with your cards. I'll get my wind magic ready for boosted projectiles. Lucas, Felicity, Delia, you take the right flank, Jamie and Frond will take the left after cutting the tree."

Eight voices responded in hushed agreement to that elaborate declaration, confirming they understood. This kind of tactics could be considered too much, but Kali's followers last throes were always the most cruel and dangerous. "Malar, I didn't see a weapon except a knife up here, we only need to take care not to let her touch us directly."

"Prioritise defending and wear her down, we'll have to kill her since subduing the Lady of Pain's favourites is impossible." They lacked any kind of magic healing, and Malar tensed remembering a fight against one of Kali's maniacs. He was hired to kill the man, a nutcase who murdered people in the name of "sharing the pain with everyone". Worst thing was that his ideology granted him two blessings. That man was able to refuse his very death for a long time, fighting like a creepy puppet until he was beheaded and taking five people with him. He would never again underestimate Kali's believers.

Oakbud was watching the waves crashing and rolling on the shore of the lake when the dim fire was extinguished, only leaving the pale moonlight shining. During his time with Maya's little group, he learned that it should *not* die out like this unless someone killed it. Alarmed, he turned back and used his earth sonar through the tree, finding nine people in formation around the tree against the shore, two of them rushing straight at him. He could see their two muscular bodies reinforced with magic carrying what looked like an enormous blade. Before he could decide on how to react since he was met with hostility for the first time, the blade collided with the trunk, cutting through three quarters of it. With a hard push, they brought the tree down before taking their position, and heard a cry when it fell to the ground.

"Did we get her already? Dravin, go and check, be careful of her faking anything." Malar asked in wonder. This would be miraculous! "Aye." After answering, Dravin cloaked himself in shadows and went towards the tree, being almost invisible. He looked between the fallen branches to find the body, but what met his gaze were two glowing white eyes at ankle level. The eyes seemed to grow until he could see only them, and his concealment magic broke as he lost consciousness.

"Too easy, I could feel his nervousness so clearly. Nice job little Bud', he didn't make a sound. Do you want to try and fight too? You don't have to hold back you know, they're coming at us with killing intent over there. Come on, you should try at least, you won't always meet friendly creatures you know". Oakbud hesitated a bit seeing Thani's bloodthirsty smile, but then nodded. "Good. Let me see that possession magic of yours then!" Her dagger was already lodged under Dravin's jaw, killing him silently. The dead man opened his now pitch black eyes again, his body trembling a little as Oakbud tried to get familiar with it.

"Me feel magic from people at the back and right. Thani will fight how?"

"Alright, the one at the back preparing magic must be the leader, the others all feel respect towards him. They're anxious. Four of them are couples, we can try do something with that affection. The two lugs over there are eager to fight, and if they're the ones who cut the tree they must be followers of the God of Warriors." Her eyes closed, she was concentrating, trying to use her blessings to determine the structure of

the group they were facing, their back to the lake. "The three on our left are terrified, I don't think they have any magic or blessing. the Shield-guy must be a follower of Oberon, we need to find what drives him to break his mind and power, otherwise beating him will be very hard. Can you speak aloud with this body, or did I mess up?"

"Can speak." Oakbud answered with the hushed voice of Dravin. "What me do?"

"You go right back to the leader, he was sent to scout me. Try to get the one behind him, I've got a bad feeling about her. Ideal situation is a big melee with no ranged attackers, but she looks more like support and if she follows Nyx, Deva, Eludia or Liezel like the one we just killed I may get in big trouble. I'll lure the fighters, you target the backline."

"Why are you coming back uncloaked, Dravin?" Malar was frowning, thinking something was going wrong after their stroke of luck.

"She saw me. She follows Kali, empty eyes." Dravin was a man of few words, as always.

"Shit. Let's go before she finishes getting up. CHARGE!"

Malar's shout pushed Gramor into action, the huge man rushing with growing momentum behind his shield, a heavy club lifted over his head. The others tightened the encirclement, while he and Lami concentrated on their respective magics, him with a bow and her with a deck of cards. She pulled the top card and infused magic into it before flipping it and looking at it ; "The Tower, on Gramor!" The rushing man's armor began emitting its own light, not only reflecting the moon's ; then the next card, "The scythe! Fuck! Backlash!", Her hand began bleeding where she touched the card, and she coughed blood ; Taking a deep breath, she pulled a third card, "The Seer! Wait, Dravin? But ho-"

Before she could finish her sentence, A dagger ran through her stomach and another into her collarbone. She fell in shock, stopping any further action from her part as her 'scythe' card aggravated her wounds. Oakbud abandoned Dravin's body, making it fall over Lina to further incapacitate her. The noise interrupted Malar's concentration, and he turned back to look at what happened.

"What the hell are you?!" He spotted Oakbud's eyes and contour in the faint light, shooting his wind-enhanced arrow straight at him. To his surprise, it went through Oakbud cleanly, only making him stagger back a bit. Dropping his bow, he pulled out

a sword and activated his magic again. He was confident the others could kill the woman without his help, and his experience told him that ignoring that little creature would be the last mistake in his life.

Oakbud dodged the first sword slash, its speed surprising him. It was much faster than Mark's axe! He launched a bit of sand towards Malar's eyes and a fistful of seeds around them both in retaliation. Malar pulled back a few steps, shielding his face with his arm, and cast a wind blade that hit an earth wall raised in defense. "Shit. How many things can you do, you're so small!" He felt threatened, his usual long-range fighting now sealed. However that did not mean his close combat ability was bad either and he changed tactics, using his wind magic to accelerate instead of attacking directly. Oakbud was prepared this time, and went all out with his nature magic, forgoing any sort of defense, not that he needed any in the first place. The seeds he threw began growing plants and vines at an accelerated pace, grabbing Malar's limbs and covering him head to toe, blocking his movement, pinning him to the ground. As he tried to struggle desperately he managed to cut a few with his sharp winds, but exhaustion took over him and his head was finally covered in plants, and twisted at an unnatural angle.

Oakbud had managed to kill all the backliners, and prepared to watch Thani's fight. Helping her crossed his mind but he remembered that she asked him to get the backline only. He didn't want her to come to harm though, after the help she gave him. He would help her if she called. Even if she didn't. He didn't know why, but he was feeling restless, wanting to move, to do something, his thoughts in disorder.