

# 《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

## 36 Raging storm

Thani was petrified, and her only movements was her eyelids batting her tears away. She knew, didn't she? She only didn't want to, didn't dare to admit it. All since that night... That fateful, damn night. Her whole world was crumbling, facing a crushing blow to the heart. Since young, she had admired the Goddess for everything she represented ; she made the choice of following Kali way earlier than people usually would at ten years old.

Since then, she had studied hard about her history, her domain, her magic, and most of all prayed. Everything seemed perfect! She was not an orphan, a refugee, or from any kind of tragic background! Even today, her family was alive and well in pilgrim Woods. What went wrong, where did it go wrong... All since that night...

She hadn't prayed since that night. Her powers changed since that night. Her body had changed since that night. Her mind had changed since that night. Body, Heart, Mind ; the three words her Goddess whispered in her ear. And what else she didn't even notice? She felt truly alone, for the first time she could remember. The dragon was right, she was lost ; and for months at that. Since that night...

She was stuck, and nothing Oakbud and Alice tried to say to her even registered in her brain. They were scared ; she was crying blood now, and if nothing changed she would die without a doubt. Nidhögran was the one to pull her out of her trance with his powerful, all shaking voice :

"WAKE UP! Little human... Don't let your heart fall. Why bother following Kali when you can be her equal? Don't think you're being rejected, because you would have been dead long ago. Listen to me now, and I will recount to you the story of your Goddess, and what motivated her choice of severance. Then you will know, and understand... That you, are yourself again. You are not lost! The rest of you humans is... Now sit, and hear me!"

The dragon sighed, expelling a cloud of embers and smoldering ashes, and stomped the ground once. The earth started rearranging itself, making a comfortable nest for Nidhögran and rising to form chairs for Thani and Alice. Oakbud had climbed upon the former's head, and was busy combing her hair with his little arms to comfort her. He waited for the trembling woman to sit down, and began his tale of divinities.

"Your Goddess, Kali, was a mortal, like you, like every other God was at the start. What are Gods, really... but that's not the subject." The dragon's fickleness was

nowhere to be found at this instant. Elements was wide awake, even though he was hidden, and was helping him suppress any flaw in his mind for the time being. The birth of a new God through severance... That was too interesting to miss. "I don't know don't know how Kali lived before I met her. All I know is, when I was rampaging through the world, she was the one to stop me. I remember her eyes... Her eyes! A mortal, herself, but also so much more! She was the one to thaw my fury ; she offered herself in exchange of the end of my carnage. Her body and mind were the sturdiest I had met amongst mortals, and I accepted ; under her care, I managed to recover my sanity, and taught her magic. She bore through every situation I put her in, and stayed true to who she was, unaffected by even me."

The dragon took a pause for dramatic effect, watching the reaction of his three-man audience. They were listening with rapt attention ; the life story of a God? Where else could they ever listen to that? Oakbud was ever-curious about any of his dad-tree's friends, Thani was still processing everything and calming down progressively, retaining every thread of sanity she could. Alice couldn't help but interrupt the story at the risk of her life however, having pieced together some things :

"You know too much... You can't NOT be a God or a Child. These are definitely not matters that mortals can be privy to..." She braced herself for the answer. Too many incredible things had happened to her since she started following that little spirit ; it was messing with everything she knew, almost everyday.

"Hmph! Rude little girl, don't interrupt me! But you're somewhat right. I am a Child right now. But I am also older than any God living today, and I wasn't a Child yet. Why can't I just have lived through those events? Didn't you listen to me speak of myself right now?"

Alice was stunned into silence. Older than the Gods themselves...

"That's what I thought. Now where was I... Right! Kali living under me, following my teachings as much as my whims. I went to sleep. When I woke up, a few thousand years had passed, and she had become a Goddess, the Goddess of Suffering, or Lady of Pain as you mortals like to call her. But I know... Only I know! That's not who she is! You mortals have distorted her worship, and got everything wrong about her : you revere her as a Goddess of pain, sacrifice, suffering and healing! But that... is not who she is." Nidhögrn could only shake his head in lamentation. His eyes glazed over in reminiscence, and focused back when he heard Thani's now hoarse voice.

"What... Is Kali forsaking us? Humans? Am I not special, like you said? Will she

abandon everyone?"

"She won't. But what mortals understood wrong hurt her deeply, as well as became a part of her. Your beliefs have distorted who she is. She is a Goddess of the self, of perseverance, endurance, fortitude ; she is immovable, the bearer of mortal burdens, the closest to the title of 'God of Men' you use to describe your pantheon. Only endurance is common with your beliefs, and still let her retain herself. She is nothing like a Goddess of Sacrifice, blood, healing and life. Her blessings, which should be in the line of wisdom, mind fortitude, bodily resilience and strength, have been distorted. Healing instead of resilience, emotions instead of wisdom, blood and life have even been forced upon her. Now think. Think back! What are your blessings and power now? Think and tell me, and you will know the answer to the question that haunts you."

At first, Thani still had a lost look, but as she retraced her life and the recent events, it turned to surprise, shock, and disbelief. Her beauty was smirched by her widened reddened eyes and dried tears. Oakbud and Alice's curiosity was stoked by her changing expressions, and Nidhögran knew that the Goddess had chosen well : the mortal before him hadn't died to despair like he thought she might.

"My blessings... the strongest, is regeneration." She took a pause, huffing violently to calm herself down. "Then, blood magic." Her heart was beating so fast it was hurting. "Then, injury manipulation, and emotion manipulation equal." With the dragon's latest information, she was understanding, bit by bit. Everything she had... pertained to the distorted domains that Kali had shouldered, and none of what he said was the true Goddess. Even Nature's lessons on magic ; that was no coincidence.

"Do you see it now? Kali doesn't reject you. It's the complete opposite, she is trying to sever the misunderstanding you mortals have of her by pushing you up to being another God, rightfully supporting the crooked beliefs in herself. Let me tell you about your soul. I've been alive for so long, I've probably seen all there is to see. I've met Children, I've met Saints, I've met God-candidates. But you... You have the crown of a Saint, the mark that you have reached the end of the path a God lays for his followers ; your soul also is in the shape of yourself, like God-candidates. The budding wings I see on it are proof of that status and of the formation of your path to ascension, even though it will certainly change ; and finally, it also has traces of divinity, coming from what Kali transmitted to you, and that I used to find you. You are yourself, you are not lost. You are free. Free to tread your own path, free to rise and meet the Goddess you worshipped on equal foot. That's all I had to say."

No one said anything for what felt like an eternity. The silence, broken by the dragon's breathing, was weighing heavily on everyone, waiting for Thani to compose herself and come to a decision.

"I'll do it... If it truly means that I can help Kali, I'll do it. I will walk the path of Blood

and Life. I will ascend."

There was newfound confidence in her voice, and it had stopped shaking. Even if she wasn't entirely sure yet for herself, she would at least do it for her Goddess. Forgetting immediately and scraping everything she had worked for until now was too abrupt, and she still needed to rely on that bond to not crumble under the pressure.

"Your eyes have cleared... Good, good, good. Little Droplet and Ole'Nature weren't wrong. But I won't help you, no God or Child will. Ascension is a path you must forge yourself, even if you have an inkling of it already. Never forget the divinity you own, and never forget that preparation is key ; confidence without strength will only lead to an early fall."

Nidhögran sighed once more, at least in the eyes of Oakbud's group. But he was actually conversing with Elements through his mind :

"So, are you satisfied yet? Errand complete?"

"No. He's too weak, way too weak. He owns divinity from the Three of us, he is as indestructible as the world we made. But he's too young, incomplete still. Give him a trial, make him experience more. I will speak to him when he has grown more."

"Do I still have to play baby-sitter here then? Thanks for helping me keep my mind clear while we're here, but that's nowhere near enough if you want me to follow the little Oakbud everywhere and be a nanny!"

"Don't be one, then. He'll get by just fine. The meeting with Time's Child should be interesting."

It only took a fraction of a second. The decision now made, the dragon addressed Oakbud once more : "Little spirit, little spirit... you heard that I'm a Child, and I know you want to meet the Gods. But you're weak, far too weak, and the God I host won't want to meet you with such poor standards."

"But... Me wants to meet Dad-Tree's friends, say goodbye?"

"No need to insist, I won't wake him up. When you feel capable enough, come and look for me on the highest peak of the Third. I want you to traverse the whole island, and know that I will be watching. No flying there directly, or I'll swat you back to your Forest! Hoho."

Finished with his mission, Nidhögran was happy and eager to go back to his precious nap. He couldn't feel any Child close by, so nothing was tying him up there anymore. With one last crushing blow to the earth, his claws left deep gouges in the earth when

he took flight again. His last laugh resounded across the plain as he disappeared from sight.

"Don't forget, little ones! Time... Time waits for no one!"