

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

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"Hey, Ole'Scrooge, you felt it too, right?" Back inside his lair atop the highest peak of the Third continent, Nidhögran sighed. "I'm on the path now. Now that you've helped me stabilize the bit of Void I understand so I don't finally snap and die, I think I know what's next for me. God of Magic doesn't fit me ; but I think a God of Knowledge wouldn't be too bad. I'm almost as old as the World you made here, and if it's that domain I can patch up my memories too."

Just like when he woke up months ago to follow Oakubd's trail, he was curled into a ball, his mighty head supported by the tip of his tail. His short period of being awake had felt like a hundred years at once this time. The dragon's furnace-red eyes shut for a moment, waiting for an answer from the God inside of him. But nothing came. He knew it had to come from himself, without any help.

"I'm going to sleep now. I don't know if I'll wake up this time... If I do, I won't be far from ascending. If I don't, you be sure to tell Little Droplet's Child I missed her, okay?"

"..."

The dragon's voice was as resounding as ever, able to crush rock by itself and start avalanches nearby.

"I'm tired of this... 'life'. Since the day I've integrated with Fire, I have not been myself. You can let go of my broken mind now. The last stretch is mine alone to make."

"..."

It was also trembling with emotion. Desire, regret... Fear. He was monologuing his innermost thoughts for the God of Elements to hear. Even he was not immune to the fear of death in front of his grand gamble.

"I'm not sure if this is goodbye or farewell, but... I don't remember ever saying this to you : "

The last words were left unsaid, as Nidhögran's breath pacified and he fell asleep.

[Thank you]

"The Witch is back!"

The murmur was spreading around the campfires. One had to say, Thani's arrival wasn't exactly discreet, flying straight into the clearing with the last of her strength. She fell flat on her stomach, blood wings melting into a puddle of blood that left a long trail due to the momentum of the crash. Luckily, she didn't lose consciousness, and was able to reply to Harod when he came to check the commotion.

After he dispersed the more rowdy ones who had begun the night with a bottle glued to their lips, the circumstances could finally be explained. Shock, awe and fear were the most common reactions to her story. She had survived all that? She was even able to get up after barely an hour, and managed to return to her house supported by Harod, dagger in hand and swearing all the way. Like she herself said while coughing, Thani was lucky she hadn't gone too far and had a visual on the town from the mountain flank she was on.

Frenzied discussions bubbled up as soon as the two's figures disappeared.

"Why'd you call her 'Witch'?"

"Yeah, what happened while we were out?"

"You told us there were new arrivals three weeks ago, but I haven't met them yet either. Tell us!"

Some people were interested in the story. Some had already met Thani and simply didn't care. Some had been under her 'care' and shivered a bit from the memories. Some stood up to follow the leaving Thani.

Under the pressure, the man who now had a dozen other people listening started his little legend with a smile plastered to his face :

"T'was a week after Thani and Alice came here. The little girl went hunting with Tembra, and the other stayed home. Because we knew nothing about them, nobody went to bother her either. Until a few idiots tried to flirt a bit too much with her when she got out and joined everyone around the fire again. Not surprising you haven't heard

of it since you were out at the time too."

At that moment, Harod came back into the circle of warm light emitted by the bonfires. "She's got it really tough on her first outing. Let's talk more when she's better, we'll see if there's anything worth preparing a sortie to get back."

However the narrator interrupted him before he could even pick his skewer up again : "Don't sit down and get some healers ready instead, some guys followed you when you helped Thani back."

"For fuck's sake, not again." He was livid. That skewer was a rare fish that was brought back by the fishermen now listening to the story, and he really wanted to enjoy it in peace. Absolutely delicious, but hard to come by since fishing expeditions took the most time ; just walking to the sea took a few days already. "How many?"

"Three. Want to bet on the results?"

"Yeah right. OY EVERYONE! I NEED A TIME HEALER WHO'S NOT SHITFACED WITH BOOZE AND ONE SUPPORT! NOW!"

"Story's finished guys, you can just follow and see your happy ever after in person. That's better than listening to me." With this, he dismissed the little circle of people and got back to his own meat and bottle. Luckily, Harod's authority was no joke and he was quickly obeyed. He and the two healers left again quickly.

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"My luck's been fucking terrible lately, Bud', I swear. It's like everything is against me. The more I think about it, the more miserable it gets. I mean come on, a dragon, the Child of Time, and now this? Does it just keep on escalating until I die?"

Thani was lying eyes closed on her makeshift bed, and relying on Oakbud, who was with her, to wipe off the blood and grime off her wrecked body. She had pushed herself too far this time, and would need a whole two or three days to recuperate properly. Compared to her usual rate of healing, that was indeed long.

"Even in the temple back in Pilgrim Woods it wasn't great, you know? Just... staying there, praying, cutting myself and offering blood to Kali. Listening to sad, scared and crazy people confessing whatever was on their mind for comfort. Disgusting lechers speaking behind my back thinking I couldn't hear them or feel their intent. Only the kids were alright."

With a pained groan, she turned on her side then on her belly, avoiding as much as possible to put weight on the arm that was severed.

"Only times to get a breath of fresh air were small trips to Ebb, only to get locked up in the temple there with the old hypocrites. In the end I'm 34, but I'm really still a 20 years old girl like the day I was made to stay under Kali's statue. Haha."

"Me's not against Thani Fairy!" Oakbud protested while changing to a different piece of fabric for the third time. As he worked, he washed off the barely holding on blood braces and replaced them with ones he freshly grew from wood and vines himself.

"Alice is not against you! Harod is a good man!"

"Yeah, I guess... Thanks, Bud'. It feels good to know I'm not alone anymore."

As the little spirit finished his cleanup operation, he felt three people outside. He would have frowned if he could. He had spoken to Harod, and they should have been left alone ; the man knew Oakbud was special, and could take care of Thani himself. Oakbud threw a cover over Thani, and went to the door instead of curling himself at her side to spend the night watching over her.

"See? It continues. I can feel the pigs from here too. Blessing mutated, I can't feel everything anymore, only strong negative emotions like pain, rage or lust, but not fear. Break their fucking arms and legs, Bud'. I'll get them myself later."

Sweat dripping from her forehead in concentration, she created twelve shivs to give to Oakbud. His pair of glowing white eyes radiated anger. His mindset had changed for good. From 'learning', he was now eager to 'grow stronger' and 'protect'. He'd grown to understand more about people during the three weeks here, and he flared again when he remembered what Thani had told him on their way to Ebb.

[Just look! Learn from me, see that everyone isn't as good as you've seen. Not even me.]

And just like that, it wasn't time for him to be good anymore either. It was a very immature approach, but it was still progress.

Before they could get any closer, Oakbud knocked the three men out with a soul scream. They never understood what hit them, and didn't wake up when the dirt track met their faces. Pulsing with magical power, twelve vines grabbed a blood shiv each.

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The three who followed Harod from the start evidently wanted to abuse Thani and bet on her not remembering afterwards due to her fatigue and injuries. Ocean's Guard counted many more men than women, so the arrival of two "free" women was a welcome sight for everyone. Food, equipment, security ; such were the bottom lines of

the town's management. Unless one wanted to become a pariah known in the whole place and suffer the retribution, consent was obviously required. Living in a difficult frontier didn't mean they were crazy or savages.

But crime was a part of everyday life everywhere, and this time the line was crossed. It wasn't the first time this type of things happened, and it surely wouldn't be the last down the line either.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

Shrill screams reverberated in the mountain. Harod and the two healers broke into a run, despite the risk of tripping in the dark.

"We're too late, hurry up!"

They finally arrived in front of Alice and Thani's house, only to find the three nailed to the ground face up by blood knives, one in each limb exactly at the same spot. Silence had come back after the initial cries, probably passing out from the pain.

Everyone's blood ran cold. Restraining their fear, Harod and the healers got to work and began healing the three, before carrying them back with some spectators' help. Turning back, Harod could see Oakbud's glowing eyes peeking from under the door, and he gave him a nod ; thank you for not killing them, was the message conveyed. In return they had only provided first aid for them to remember the lesson ; they would still be immobilized for weeks.

Everyone got back to the bonfires with conflicting emotions, only to meet the man who had started telling them what happened before. He was smiling.

"Told you, the Witch is back. You don't piss off Kali's worshippers and get out easy. The pushy ones were beaten down, but ****? Tsk tsk tsk. Just wait for her to recover and see, I myself don't think it's the end of it."