

# 《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

## 60 Hammer and anvil

One of the many good points of the arena, was the fact that you always knew where it was. Partly because it was big enough to accommodate about a fourth of Ebb's people on its stone benches, and also from the permanent noise and life around it. The circular building had most of its functions hidden inside and underneath the stone, and only left its dust ring open to the public's sight. Armory, cages, baths, bookers, a kitchen and a guard post shared the space to organize public demands and entertainment.

The not so good point of the arena was the abundance of use it received. There were periodic shows and fights for man against man, beast against beast and beast against man, with some tournaments mixed in. Thani had participated in one on her previous visit and took the big gold prize home. But it could also be used for non-violent cultural manifestations, like festivals at the turn of the season where almost everyone would participate and the arena was the only place big enough, or even a space for city guards to train.

The rest of the time it was used as a space to resolve conflicts between people, by either fighting it out or asking a popular jury to form. Whatever they chose, they would need to register the grievance and method of dealing with it before waiting for the allotted time to come. The delay could range from a few hours to a week or more depending on the already booked schedule. But at least the registration was quick.

Thani quickly led Oakbud's golem to the public entrance, where they found the five brawlers already waiting. The golem's intimidating size wouldn't stop them from trying to get their betting money back. They weren't thugs or thieves in any way, just normal people working normal city jobs with normal pay who lost their whole money in one evening and couldn't accept it. But Thani wasn't opposed to some hearty bullying, especially since it could net her some more money for free this time. After exchanging a quick greeting with a shrug, they went inside to sign up and queued in silence.

When their turn came, the booker's eyes bulged when he recognised the Blood Angel and Alice. Both had left a strong impression on the public during that tournament, and as working personnel he had to keep an eye out for potential prize fighters and returning champions. He quickly rang the little bell at his desk to call for someone on his side to come take his place, before standing up and going to the group to greet them. Special people deserved special attention, and the least he could do was offering them some privacy in a room away from the noisy hall.

"This way please," he gestured. "welcome to Ebb's arena, how can I help you today?"

One of the five men didn't even wait to be seated before cutting to the chase: "Hey, why can't we just register at the counter like everyone? Are you going to try and ask for money or something? I've never had to come to a separate place to do business before." His gambling buddies, Alice and Oakbud were just as perplexed, and only Thani had an idea of what was going on.

"This is VIP procedure because of me, right?" She asked with a brow raised.

"Precisely," the booker answered all smiles. "We can't go around forgetting four times blessed tournament winners now, can we?"

Thani on the other hand was frowning while Alice and Oakbud watched the proceedings. "Except that now that these guys here heard that, there's no way they'll honour their bet. Just look at them..." Indeed, the five men had gone white as sheets. They had a single blessing at most themselves, and two of them didn't have any! They could consider themselves lucky they hadn't signed or sworn anything before coming here. "And now goodbye to my 10 gold 3 silvers. If I had known, I would have come earlier alone so you don't scare them off like that. And don't start telling me how unfair that would be, would anyone really turn down 10 gold for a minute of warm-up?"

The booker was starting to sweat heavily too under the accusing glare of Thani, the reality of his blunder sinking in.

But that was not the end of his torment. No business sense was required to make threats once you got strong enough, and Thani's usual grin making its way back on her face was indication of that. "Since you value me so highly and made me lose that much money, you can be pretty sure I'll be dragging the arena in the mud for a bit. Unless you've got something available to compensate me maybe?"

--

"I can't believe you're not secretly a follower of Liezel or Monte. You're one of the most crooked thugs I've ever met." Alice spat at her companion.

Oakbud was humming atop his golem's head while Thani chuckled in response. The employee of the arena had been completely overwhelmed and the ordeal ended up going to the upper management while the five gamblers ran with their tails between their legs and not a copper richer.

Not only did she manage to get a flat five gold directly as compensation, but she'd also

secured her group of three a spot on an exhibition match against beasts and another for an endurance gauntlet, where one could stay as long as they won in a 'fight whoever challenges' kind of competition. They were forbidden of betting on themselves but would get a percentage of all betting money concerning their fights in return.

The first fight was scheduled for the end of the following week, and the gauntlet for the month after, well within Auri's deadline for money. Since beasts had to be captured to be fought in the arena, nothing too threatening could ever be brought back; according to their standards after Ocean's Guard, of course. As for the other fights, it would depend on who challenged them, but none were overly worried despite their respective weaknesses.

Alice had trouble against defensive fighters, especially shield-bearers. A shield is extremely threatening to her because of her short reach and lack of brute strength and stamina. A good fighter would know this too and fight from behind his shield-line without opening himself up to counters, at which point the loser would be the one making a mistake first or running out of energy. Luckily magic could get her out of that kind of stalemate, however it was also applicable to her would-be challengers, and as a result she was the one most likely to get defeated first.

Oakbud had trouble with long-range fighters like himself or those who could outpace him and his spellcasting. He was good at controlling the terrain, but the arena offered very little possibilities in that aspect and his lack of mobility was a serious problem if he had to fight alone. He wouldn't be at risk of anything and could receive any attack freely, but it would be cheating without rules for elimination.

Thani was still vulnerable to blitzing with heavy hits, but that was only comparatively to her other strong points. In practicality she remained very much impossible to take down despite deciding to fight bare-handed and unarmoured. She would need to fake exhaustion or no one would ever come up after the first challenge or two, and she would end up making the least money. Her years of faking a good nature and soft personality in the temple would come in handy.

Each with their own thoughts on the newest plans, they relaxed on the ambling golem's arms. It was time to get some food, after which they would all go visit Auri and finally Talia. They would still need to find some other source of revenue after and in-between; earning six hundred gold that easily was completely unrealistic and the amount of betted money wouldn't even amount to a third or half anyway. Even with the cash prizes they would get, maybe they'd earn eighty to a hundred at most. That was still far from enough so they would need to negotiate going into debt with the smith, not the best of prospects for a group of adventurers; especially considering the amount and irregular income.

"I didn't expect you back so soon, to be honest. Thought you'd be scared by the price or would go to my competitor, but you did neither and that's quite impressive of you. So, what will it be? Tell me quickly, I've got to get back to the forge in about ten minutes, metal's almost molten."

They were able to catch Auri during his own lunch because he had left orders to let them in if they wanted to speak with him. Thani pushed Alice forward, as she was the indebted one. Her money was enough to cover her own armour engraving and she was only helping Alice collect enough for her own order. With a bit of luck, the arguments she'd worked on on the way would convince him to accept the order despite the lack of money.

"We've got an opportunity for about a hundred gold in a month in the arena, meaning after you'd start crafting. That pushes our gold to a third of the amount you're asking for already. It also leaves time for us to do other things, including the favour you wanted to ask of Thani. Would you consi-"

"Stop right there," Auri interrupted by slamming his hand on the table, startling her out of her litany. "I'm not doing 500 gold favours, and you don't have the money. Too much of a gap, what are you even trying to negotiate? Price reduction? Going into a debt I'm not sure you can repay in a couple lifetimes? Or did you want to order less? Stop dodging around, my time's precious and I thought yours would be more than that too."

"I... I..." Alice's words were stuck in her mouth from the bluntness.

"I what? Out with it or walk outside already. I don't do charity; we have city smiths for that." Auri's intimidating air was at its maximum at this moment, as anger mixed with annoyance in the tall bronze mountain of a man. She felt small, like she was facing a Granite all over again. But she wasn't alone, and Thani came in to save the day.

"What if we make an Oath that this job concerns the well-being of at least one God, and the interest of..." She bit her lips for a moment. Until now her sentence contained no falsehood. However, finishing it was a huge gamble that could end her right here and now. After considering how involved Oakbud was and who his 'parents' were... Thani decided to take it: "the interest of at least three more."

No one really knew how Oaths worked and how much magic was involved in them, or how the Gods were aware of them and when. But one thing was written in stone, and that was immediate catastrophe for whoever made one and lied or broke it. Immediate loss of blessings, curses and even death weren't out of the question for the biggest infractions. It truly was the best insurance system for anyone and anything, applicable to any creature sentient enough to make one.

And now it was Auri's turn to be speechless. How dare she? Who was that woman really? He got a glimpse when he made the dagger for her, but things looked to be far more complicated than that. If she confirmed that and nothing happened, it could very well be the biggest event since the Anger, and also meant that at least three Gods recognised his would-be role in whatever she was dealing with.

And under his eyes, she repeated it . And while Oakbud stayed gleefully ignorant of the severity of the situation, Auri crumpled down on his table holding his head in his hands, Alice stock stiff on the side.