

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

68 Brawl 2

Thani and Alice could hear the clamour of the crowd on the other side of the gate. They were waiting for the previous segment to end before coming in for their match. Their suits of drake scale armour were in the hands of the blacksmith Auri so they couldn't use their best gear, but they didn't have grounds for worry either. Both of them had their favourite weapons in hands: Thani her masterfully crafted and enchanted dagger, and Alice her bow and steel daggers.

The promoter had every participant wait in the same room, and tension had been mounting the whole day as fighters went in in high spirits to come back with various degrees of success. Deaths had been avoided so far thanks to the reactivity of the medical team, but that could never be guaranteed.

Being assigned to one of the very last spots was a double-edged sword in a sense. On one hand it let Thani and Alice look at what the others were fighting in advance, but on the other pressure was rising and people's gaze was lingering longer and longer on them. Some were jealous, some admiring, some lustful, some didn't care, some anticipating, but none mocking. Every fighter knew better than to take one's appearance at face value in the ring.

Just like in an auction, the best pieces were kept for last after all. At the beginning it had been very simple fights with wolves raised in the arena, then goblins captured in the forest; the little buggers were weak individually but their ingenuity and experience in using anything useful at their disposal made them a threat the longer the fight went on. They were a bit like janitors for the forest, cleaning up everything their little hands could grab.

The true test had first shown up against a party of four, a flock of birds able to cast rudimentary wind magic. The four had been caught completely unprepared for this type of fight and surrendered before ending up pecked to death. The tamer of the birds, a devotee to the God of Nature who had taken some bird-like features himself, had called them back quickly with the satisfaction of having taken no losses.

Soon after, the first blessed beast had made its appearance. Not an intelligent one, but a strong one. Creatures gifted with intelligence would often be able to communicate, and none of them was dumb enough to come here of its own volition. It was a strange wolf, easily triple the usual size, and it also had what looked like two horn bumps in between its ears. The man facing it had three Blessings on his own though, and had been able to take its charge head-on for the enjoyment of the crowd.

And now the announcer had come to see them:

"I hope you are ready ladies," he waved amicably. "You are the third to last match and we have an air mage drake that's hot to trot. It's got at least two blessings, toughest guy we have as promised. We wanted to keep it for last, but since you've been scheduled as a bit of an extra in the first place... But I digress. Don't worry about the safety of the public, that's our job; our medical and elemental teams are on high alert for stray shots during your performance. Just so you know, it also has a bit of intelligence. We've discovered that after capturing him but since we've beaten it, it's agreed to fight once for its freedom. Please, do your best not to kill it. That would be the wrong kind of reputation to get for us."

"That's your problem, but we'll try, I guess? How big is it compared to me? And I suppose it's going to fly around a lot?" Questioned Thani. It looked like Alice's bow and evasion capabilities would be in high demand for this fight. But it was an exhibition match after all, so waiting until it was pelted down or fatigued to engage it on the ground was a bit boring. "Think I can catch up to it?" She asked Alice.

"No idea; maybe if you force a bit? Don't injure yourself though, please. I don't know if it's to put us on the spot or just a coincidence, but flying matchups aren't too bad now, are they? Oakbud wouldn't have been much help there, good for him to work on something he likes."

The announcer frowned. For such an opponent, these two didn't look to be considering things carefully enough in his eye. That wasn't his job however, so he signed them to follow him to the gate with a gesture of his hand. "Gate's about to be lifted, your time to shine... And let's avoid deaths on any side, alright?" He also couldn't know that the single beast ranked in the lower middle evaluation for them.

"You want flashy?" Thani asked, unsheathing her dagger and pointing it towards her shoulder blades through the gap in her clothes at her neck. "I'll give you flashy."

"No promises." Added Alice with a slight smile, already envisioning Thani's ten-metre blood wingspan. Just like Ocean's Guard, but with an audience. Too bad they were forbidden to bet on their own match.

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Two ordinary people fighting an ordinary drake would die without a doubt for multiple reasons, the main one being anatomy. First, humans needed tools to augment their offense; drakes already had claws, teeth, horns, tail, and their scale-covered body.

Second, weight, inertia and bodily resilience: for the same movement, the bigger body generates much more force and thus will be able to inflict damage more easily while needing to resist the impact itself. And third, flight, which didn't need a long description.

Luckily, magic and Blessings from the Gods were there to balance the matchup.

Thani was, well, Thani. A close to fully-fledged God-candidate, with the ability to match. Overpowered regeneration, feeling the general mood of someone by focusing on them, and blood magic which got stronger the longer the fight dragged on. Her not learning to fight properly wasn't too much of a handicap as she was able to overpower her opponents with relentless and reckless trade-offs no enemy would like to make.

Alice was more subdued due to the inherent properties of her magic: the shadows of Liezel. Her offensive power was zero, inversely proportionate to her movement and disruption potential.

The fact remained that none of them had any true frontline capabilities and relied exclusively on evasion to avoid injuries. On the other side stood a creature they'd come to know during their stay in the mountains of Ocean's Guard: a magic-capable drake. Strong musculature, tough scales, easily thrice to four times their size and able to knock them out of the fight with one direct hit. Since the personnel of the arena had told them about its wind magic, it meant the drake was able to fly faster than would be normal and could probably use some form of projectile.

"Fire an arrow, see how it reacts." Ordered Thani to Alice who stood behind her. She wanted to get a grip of the drake's personality quickly to get control over the fight's flow, and an arrow was a good test for that. It wouldn't hurt it until it hit an open eye or its thin wing leather, and she wanted to see if it would let the arrow bounce off its scales, use magic to deflect it, dodge it, or break it in flight with a direct hit.

"Gotcha!"

The drake rushed forward, letting the arrow bounce off with a pitiable sound. Its speed and the claw marks left behind made it obvious that it wasn't holding back on its magic either, so Thani and Alice broke off to either side to avoid getting crushed by the mass of flesh barreling at them. They had the advantage of knowing what it could do, while the drake ignored how they fought.

Alice stood out as the weak link for being in the backline at first, making her the drake's target after the dodge. Rather than stopping its charge with its legs, it instead unfurled its wings, flapped and slapped its tail towards Thani to change its momentum and continue pursuing.

"Whoa there!" Alice made a screen of shadow pop up before her to obscure vision and successfully made the drake lose its target. That split second was enough to dodge towards a blind spot in the beast's vision and swap her weapons from bow to daggers. Thani was also rushing after the drake with full access to its less protected hind legs and tail.

The first engagement ended as the drake took flight after missing twice. After a flying a quick round above them, it chose to swoop down on Thani. Alice was standing further on her side bow in hand again, but the two arrows she'd fired at the wings got deflected by wind magic this time.

"We only get one chance to nail it down, get ready!" When 10 metres were left between the drake and Thani, she chose to suddenly deploy her own blood wings while also imbuing her dagger with magic, granting it a new, longer and sharper bloody blade. The surprise was effective and the beast tried to brake to no avail, it was already too close. Its reduction in speed meant that its prey escaped its claws once again though. Frustrated at its inability to win quickly, the drake tried to bite Thani.

She purposefully failed her dodge and exposed one of her wings as bait. The beast got a mouthful of blood and nothing more to show for it, while Thani was able to transform it into bindings and propelled herself over its extended neck and towards its wings. The drake was once again surprised, as the gust of wind it tried to cast didn't even appear. Only then it felt Alice's touch on its back, before roaring in pain. Thani had inflicted severe cuts to the base of one of its wings, effectively pinning the beast to the ground for the rest of the fight.

The two women were shaken off by the wildly bucking drake, resuming the original standoff after eliminating the flight disparity. They had planned for Thani to obstruct it if she were able to keep up with its speed, but she wasn't able to because of its wind magic. And with Alice losing contact and unable to use her blessing, it was able to cast spells again.

"I'm still around 80%, how do you feel?" Asked Thani.

"30 to 40 at most. I've never stopped something so big from using magic, it's drained me in an instant. I've got two shadow jumps left max, best I can do is try to injure a back leg and back off quickly. I'll stick to dodging and blocking its vision after that." Alice was breathing roughly, the toll of her actions obvious. Using magic quickly or in large quantity wasn't physically exhausting, but the flow of power still had a proportionate impact on mental fatigue.

"I'm charging up front then. Be careful." Thani nodded.

True to her word, she reformed her clipped wing and rushed to meet the beast head-on.

There was no way for her to win a clash of strength, but she was the one holding the upper hand in mobility now and fully intended to exploit it. She also needed to wound the drake more to establish herself as the main threat so Alice could do her thing.

The drake roared and stood on its hind legs to receive Thani's charge with a threatening display. Alice waited until the two exchanged a flurry of blows and dodges resulting in mutual injuries. She jumped into action when they broke off again to prevent the beast from pacing its breath while Thani regenerated her mauled upper left arm and torso. It wasn't severed this time at least. She reappeared under the drake, and plunged her two daggers as hard as she could in the softer inner thigh scales before jumping back to Thani's shadow without waiting for the result.

And she did well, because the drake started thrashing around wildly, looking to crush the unseen opponent that just attacked it. The daggers fell back down, but the beast was now limping slightly.

"I'm out," she panted. "I did it. You finish it."

"Sure. Still got about 40% in me discounting cheating with divinity. Good exercise, good money."

The two smiled lightly at each other, and Thani rushed back into the fray with a powerful flap of her wings. Her display of skill and bloody exchanges earned the passion of the public, and she started hearing the people all around screaming again now that the pressure was dying down. The roars of anger transformed into unwillingness before dying out slowly some time later under Thani's gleeful laughter.

Going back to the waiting room after the fight and under the ovation of the spectators, she winked at the stunned announcer: "Flashy enough for you?"