

# 《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

## 69 Home

No casualties, no grave injury, but a light tune and the jingle of gold was the sign of a fight well done on the way back to the inn. Since their income was a royalty and would therefore only be given after calculations were made, Thani's pouch was only heavier from the arena management's "gratitude" for not killing the drake. Alice would still have some minor bruises, scratches and muscle aches the next day or two, but that was it. Compared to what they had faced in Ocean's Guard during hunts, a lone drake truly wasn't high on their danger scale anymore.

But now that the exhibition match was done, the question remained of what the party would do during the coming month to wait for the next planned arena fight. The format was to be quite open, in a sort of king of the hill series of fights. Eight stages would be set up in the pit, with one king each. The king's job was to defeat as many successive challengers as he could, and to step down when he got defeated himself. People would be able to climb up on stage freely, the only real limit being a five minutes time-out between each fight. The king could even take risks and allow multiple challengers to come up at once to increase his streak quicker, if he dared.

As a bonus and incentive to bet, the announcer would fire up the audience and give out optional challenges to high-profile kings to spice up the contest. Some of them in the past included fighting a round barehanded, getting another opponent on stage, challenging another king... Each had the clear-cut benefit of not breaking the streak in case of a loss, thus letting the prospective champion get down to rest for a bit, and of course bonus prize money in case of a win.

Rewards would then be distributed at the end according to a ranking with multiple criteria: highest win streak, highest number of simultaneous opponents defeated, challenges completed, and an audience vote.

Still, that was for the next month. When Alice and Thani entered Ebb's Flow, they found Oakbud on the innkeeper's head, both busily looking at the stairs to the first floor. Looking around a bit, it seemed like the little spirit was using nature magic to revitalise the wooden construction, as well as decorate it slightly. Within a few days, the atmosphere of the building had changed already thanks to his work. It was clean and received light well on top of its tasteful decorations before, but it still stood out as man-made. Oakbud had changed that in a miraculous way, reminding Thani and Alice of the treehouses he had grown for them to sleep in. The growth of the visible wooden parts now flowed beautifully from one door frame to the other, as if the beams had been seeded and naturally became the inn over time. It seemed like the man had really

liked what Oakbud did in their room first and decided to revamp the whole inn based off of it.

Later that evening, the group of three was sharing a drink and tossing ideas on what to do.

"We've got a month to kill until the money-maker comes up, want to do anything special? Don't get me wrong, we're not going to get thrown out of the inn for not paying a room anytime soon, but there's only so much distraction we can get in Ebb. I like a good fight in the arena and gambling, but two out of three of those cost money and it'll get boring quite fast." Thani slammed her pint of alcohol on the table, and used a sling of blood to catapult a roasted nut from a bowl to her mouth. Auri wouldn't run away with their stuff anyway.

"You mean to travel again? I'm not against it, but we can only go so far if we need to be back there for the arena." Alice was nursing her own drink slowly, digesting her sugary pick as well as the events of the day.

"Me want to go back to the forest." Said Oakbud slowly. Come to think of it, city life really wasn't his forte. Common knowledge told of the much closer relation between civilization and nature in the elven and fairy populations, but those were rather far and hidden from prying eyes. Going there was one thing, but getting inside was another entirely. So his proposition most likely meant the Forest of Creation he had come from. "Me want to see dad-tree again."

"Going home, eh... Guess that wouldn't hurt to go back to Pilgrim Woods for a bit. We can go the way there and back in three weeks without rushing too much, even taking a day or two to rest should be fine before diving in the forest to see the God-Tree. How about you, Alice? Any plans to visit home?"

"No... No." She hesitated, searching for more adequate words to describe her feelings. "I don't want to go there."

"Is Alice sad?" Asked Oakbud.

"I don't feel like I've earned it yet." She shook her head. Indeed, she wanted to find a cure before going back to her childhood friend's grave. She had woken back up to her original goal.

"Pilgrim Woods it is then!" exclaimed Thani. "We're gonna need to leave soon, tomorrow would be great actually. Just enough time to drop by Auri's to tell him to keep out stuff in store and buy a few seeds. No need to worry about food with Oakbud,

and there's the lake along the way." She snickered and lifted her glass back up. "Can't wait to see what face Karj is going to make when we talk about all the stuff going on. Not sure if I'll say everything to mom and dad, though."

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As discussed the day prior, the group finished their arrangements and got on the south road along the lake. Alice reluctantly had to leave her bow in the blacksmith's hands, but she had to if she wanted it engraved for power. Since her blessing couldn't be enchanted into it, a twin circuit engraving was what got planned instead: one would help the bow flex, and the other straighten back according to her arrow shooting. As a result, she would consume a bit of magic each shot in exchange for more power and less effort on the draw. But for now, she had to exchange it for a regular weapon and she was grumbling about the downgrade.

The journey to Pilgrim Woods was without incidents. Oakbud's golem helped everyone travel faster and longer, his nature and water magic combined with fruit and vegetable seeds fed them, and they were even able to make use of one of the treehouses him and Thani had left on their first trip to the city.

Despite Talia's warning that things south had gotten more dangerous, it seemed like the effects weren't visible that far yet. And since the temple of Kali in Ebb didn't receive urgent news either, Pilgrim woods should be in relative safety still. However, when they arrived, they were greeted by palisades around the settlement.

Frowning, Thani jumped down from the walking golem's arms to examine the structure. It wasn't made, but grown from nature magic. After all, it was simpler considering the comparatively huge number of Nature adepts in Pilgrim Wood's population. The people they came across also seemed a bit on edge. Signalling to the other two to follow, she went straight to her Blood family's compound to get more info. Quickly shutting down the surprised reaction of the watchers who recognised her at the gate, she sent for someone to call Karj and Harp to see her.

Calling Karj was obvious, since he was the acting chief of the family and head of the temple in the city. Harp on the other hand, was responsible for information and oversaw the expeditions and pilgrimages going through Pilgrim Woods. Combining those two should be enough to know everything going on in the settlement, so they simply waited for them in the lobby on the side of the temple's entrance.

A few minutes later, both men were silently exchanging conflicted glances while looking at Thani and her fashionable Oakbud head ornament. One wanted to but couldn't really complain about anything because Thani had sent back a proper letter and money, and the other was simply wary of the little spirit.

"So, what's up with the barricade around the town? Something bad happened while I was away?" The white-haired woman took the initiative since the others didn't look like they were ready to talk.

"It's good to have you back", sighed Karj slowly. "It's all begun a bit after I received the pouch of gold you sent back..." The man began to narrate the dragon's visit and their inability to hold sacrifices in the temple, followed by the increasing danger of the forest, eliciting soft gasps from Alice. Attacks had multiplied and the strength of the aggressors had gone up significantly since the God-Tree's passing.

Since they were told of the situation before hand, their surprise wasn't as big, but hearing the details was unpleasant nonetheless. They had lost fourteen people defending the town already, and people's morale was at rock bottom because of the temple. Thani was clutching her hands tightly, almost perforating her skin with her nails from the tension. She knew more of Nidhögran's background than Karj and Harp, and that he was trying to help, but the situation still couldn't go as it were. Still, there was another matter to address.

"What's up with you Harp? You changed again since we saw each other last." Indeed, it seemed like the man had gotten his third blessing in stride after Oakbud gifted him his second. His wolf-like and human features were more clear-cut now, and some had changed. His skin and hands were back to human, the only obvious signs being his feral eyes, teeth and furry ears.

"Well, I'd like to think it's thanks to my efforts only, but I'm not dumb enough to brag about it. Thanks to Oakbud here, I was able to go out more often and more safely, as well as participate actively in the defense. As a result, I've received my third blessing from the God of Nature. I'm able to control my transformation now, so it's much more practical to switch between town and forest. At this rate, I'll be able to change into a wolf completely if I get another one; but the fourth will never come that easily or early, if it does at all. I need to think on it for while I'm just glad it came when it did so I can help everyone out more."

"Won't you check out the temple?" Interrupted Karj. "People are scared, some even say we've been cast out by the Goddess. Some blessings still have come through for the youngest ones, but it's nothing compared to before. I've tried everything, but I can't do anything about it... please, try something. You're the one closest to Her. Please."

Alice and Oakbud were waiting and reading the mood, watching as Thani's expression crumpled further and further throughout the discussions. Seeing her worry, they decided to go straight away and to go to the God-Tree the following day instead.

The temple of Kali was as impressive as ever with its giant double doors operated by heavy chains. The interior was as spotless as ever, the Goddess' effigy towering in the

middle of the stone basin. Head and gaze cast down, kneeling with wings of carved stone wrapped in chains to pillars on the side and roof and crying tears of blood. Kali's statue depicted the moment of her ascension, the yearning of mortals towards divinity.

From what Karj told her, they could come in just fine, but as soon as they tried to hold a usual ceremony or sacrifice, they were cast out by the dragon's magic. People could only pray quietly from afar. If it was the past her, she would have been lost and wouldn't know what to do. However, since she had accepted the mantle the Goddess gave her, Thani knew. Solemn, she put Oakbud down and disrobed to get to the foot of the statue in the water, as she had done countless times before.

Knee deep in the water, she roused the spark of divinity inside of her and guided it to the cold stone carving in front of her. Everyone stared in mute horror as the chains holding the stone wings rattled; the statue was trembling slightly and bits of stone were falling down in the water.

When the shaking stopped, Thani fell to her knees in the water, exhausted by her usage of divinity. Looking up, the statue wasn't depicting Kali anymore, instead featuring Thani's likeness in the same position. No one said anything nor moved for a time, the silence only disturbed by a crow flying out of the temple, disturbed by all the noise.

"We need to talk."

This was the point of no return, the true start of the road to divinity.