

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

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For the first time in fifteen years, Thani felt stage fright. It had happened to her the first few times she had to host ceremonies to Kali in Pilgrim Wood's temple, but had disappeared quietly over time as she got used to people looking at her. There was always this sensation of not being looked at directly as herself, but as an intermediary to the Goddess.

This time was different however. This time, she wasn't performing rites to Kali with the people she knew since her childhood; she would effectively be severing that profound tie with everyone in the town. Sitting on the edge of the basin in front of the statue, which was covered up with sheets for now, Thani was mulling over what she'd say while waiting for people to get inside the temple for the announcements. Harp had gone back to his duties, and Alice and Oakbud were waiting for her in town too; this mission had place for no other than herself.

Karj was standing on her left side, looking just as conflicted as she was. He was the one who taught her at the start and over the years, until she could take the role of managing the cult. And since it had begun when she was still just a child, it felt more like a father-daughter relationship than master and apprentice. When the group came back, she told him about her encounter with Liezel and what the plan would be. It had been hard to hear for him, and just thinking back to it would be enough to give him a few more grey hairs, if they hadn't already been white.

The people following Kali had entered the temple in the first time in a long while now, and their worries weren't abated by Thani's presence; after all she had suddenly left a few months ago, a crazy dragon had come, they couldn't offer prayer in the temple as usual, and now Kali's statue was covered up.

Thani stood up and waved her hand, silencing the finally assembled restless crowd. This was so familiar, and yet. Her thoughts wandered back to Liezel's story that Alice had recounted before: the then God-Candidate had climbed on top of the Stalwart Oak, and that had been the 'start' of his story. Surely, this would be the start of hers. Or maybe it had already begun the moment she met Oakbud.

"Everyone." She said with her clear, bell like voice. Her gaze washed over the familiar faces in front of her, feeling her throat tighten from the stress and emotion. "I'm back."

Among the crowd's murmurs in response, she could make out some "finally!", "thank Kali" or even "we're saved now", making her feel even worse for what she was about

to tell them. Was her choice of her usual ceremony attire comforting or hurtful?

She lifted her hand again, putting an end to the hushed discussions and speculations.

"I've seen and lived all kinds of things during my absence this time; including the dragon that came to visit." Thani waited until the noise died down again. "And, I also learned that mortals like us are far less estranged from the affairs of Gods than we think. In fact, Nidhögran the dragon is the Child of Elements. That's why I would like everyone here to listen to me until I'm done talking. I will also make multiple Oaths to prove the veracity of what I say."

The mention of making not one, but multiple Oaths sent people into a hushed frenzy. Perhaps this wasn't good news after all, people whispered. Even people who didn't follow a God in particular suffered harsh consequences for breaking one; Thani on the other hand had four blessings, meaning certain death in her case.

"Please!" She shouted over the noise. It wasn't too late to give up, now was the last time she could dodge the thorniest of paths of no return. The relieved gazes had changed to worried and anticipating ones, pushing her to continue. "Let his be my first Oath: I have met with Nature and his Child, with the Child of Elements, with Liezel, with the Ancestor of Granites Repose; all have given me fair advice and knowledge." The way she phrased it showed that the ones she had spoken with weren't only the Children of Gods, but the Gods themselves. This was extraordinary, but didn't seem like the main topic.

"Let this be the second: following Kali's wishes, I now officially declare my position as God-candidate of Blood and Life." The reactions were as expected, but tore at her heart nonetheless. The people she was familiar with, listened to, counselled and helped in the name of Kali before were trembling, shouting at her, seemingly losing their minds and ready to jump on her. Some looked at her with hate or disgust, others simply stood there with blank faces, completely stunned; they all knew each other for half of their lives or more, and she had just betrayed their trust and Kali.

"..." her voice was completely drowned, and her heart hurt. But she wasn't done quite yet. Preparing for the worst, she took the ritual knife dangling from a belt on her robe and nicked her exposed shoulders. The apparition of her resplendent blood wings silenced everyone, engraving a picture in everyone. The crowd faced the temple's interior with its pillars on either side of the central alley, with Thani in the centre in front of Kali's statue and its basin, framed by two encompassing blood wings that filled everything else in their vision. That's when she pulled the sheets off the marble

statue and threw another rock in the pond. Kali's statue now had Thani's face, and the tattoos she usually had on her arms and heart were now on the marble instead.

"Let this be the third: offer your sacrifices of blood to me, or only pray to Kali; you will not lose anything, and this is both for the Goddess and me." She lifted her hand again before the hubbub could start again, keeping the attention on herself. "I can't make an oath on that, but Kali will know of what happened today quickly; she probably does already. Whether you choose to support me to help the Goddess more directly, or stick to Kali without sacrificing flesh anymore, you will surely hear from Her and her current Child soon."

With nothing to say anymore, Thani could only let the cries and shouting resume. She stood up and started to walk towards the doors, navigating amongst the parting crowd and its varying glares. She had to go now, otherwise she would delay everyone and have the little group miss the fight in the arena. Dabbing the tears she didn't realize had started flowing before, she only hoped she'd be in a better mood by the time they arrived in Ebb. Pilgrim Woods would have to sleep on her announcements and make their decision, a little revolution called Ascension that last happened three centuries before when Liezel made his debut.

Meanwhile, the administrators of Ebb had their own share of dramatic news. An elven messenger had been dispatched in person from the Jagged Heights instead of sending a bird like usual. The people in charge on the island insisted on transmitting this in person. A trail of death had been spotted leaving the Undercity all the way to the south-eastern coast. This could easily be related to some crazy undead acting up, but the elven messenger had another piece of thunderous news. For the first time in a century, the mad Undead King was absent from his throne.

A first 15-person exploration team had been sent as a result, and they were asking for support to make a bigger second team. Ever since the Anger, the Jagged Heights were a place of danger and strangeness and some parts were off-limits to exploration. The Undercity was particular in that sense, because it had only changed into a kingdom of death a century before. It had regular trade and contact before that, but the mad King had changed the place into his own laboratory of undeath.

And now with his absence, its archives were free to peruse! All the knowledge that genius following Time had accrued was now open, and his secrets could be revealed. The current Undercity was full of forgotten and forbidden knowledge assembled by the mad King, stolen diaries and experiments, and probably even some remnants of history from before the Anger... The problem was that, even with a solid expedition, return wasn't assured for everyone: Jack being gone only changed the place from 'death wish' to 'absolute danger zone' with the presence of other powerful Undead.

For people at large, Undead were simply story material. For the more adventurous, they were either something to stray far off, or defend yourself from. But for the residents of the Jagged Heights... Undead and the Undercity are terror incarnate, an abyss that nobody came back from, for the Undead King was ever watchful of the living.

Seeing an amazing opportunity, the city's administration began its preparations to cooperate. It wouldn't be possible immediately, but an expedition would surely set off after the coming Renewal.
