《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

Chapter 75 – The Captain (3)

"Big words coming from a bag of bones!" Thani answered the undead 'Captain'. He somehow had touched a pride she didn't know she had, and that irked her.

"I'll take that as you accepting the challenge, then."

A moment passed, where none of the two moved. The Captain was perfectly still, the tip of his sword unwaveringly pointing at Thani while she didn't make an effort to get into a stance. She frowned, thinking that something was wrong here. If he wanted to fight her so much, why hadn't he made a move yet, only talking her into action?

"You are awfully polite and restrained, for an undead who wants to fight." She probed.

"Attacking someone without warning during a spar would be awfully rude after all, and us followers of Theomars can't have that. Fighting and sparring are two very different things, but that is not the subject of today's meeting. Have you finished getting information from me now?" Thani was surprised by the undead's wit. Undead were creatures born from strong remnant emotions, grudges and obsessions, which left them very goal-oriented and often stuck in a loop until they grinded themselves to dust or resolved said obsession. But this 'Captain'… Was just as intelligent as other living humans, witty, and also quite sharp.

Thani nodded, and taking the cue the skeleton sheathed back his sword. "Only one thing left to do then," he said before completely ignoring her and walking to the announcer. The poor man was unceremoniously grabbed by the shoulder and forced to look in the Captain's fiery eyes. Despite not exchanging a word, Thani could see recognition then bewilderment slowly creep on the man's face. He seemed to whisper something to the undead.

"YOU! EVEN KNOWING WHO I AM YOU DARE ASK A FOLLOWER OF THEOMARS TO RIG A FIGHT!"

There it was, Thani thought while getting goosebumps from the deep anger and hate she felt from this shout. Well, if the man had really suggested that he'd be lucky to keep his professional reputation intact anyway.

"You're not the one I'm interested in right now, otherwise I'd slap some sense into you

for a bit. Just do your damn job and let me have my fight." Then he went still again, waiting.

The official reason the announcer gave to the audience was an exhibition match while the rewards and popularity vote were tallied, but Thani knew better. The Captain only wanted the space and her undivided attention. He hadn't gone for any other Kings or owners of four blessings, only to her.

"Don't be so tense."

Thani was startled out of her train of thought by the undead. Looking around, they were the only two left in the centre of the arena, and a new, bigger circle had been traced around them. Everyone else had gone to the edges, waiting for the surprise event to begin.

"For all my will to die, this is a spar and not a fight. Your life isn't in danger; your pride, on the other hand… Hohoho."

Thani frowned. "Trying to taunt me again?"

"You mean you can't even feel the difference between us?" He paused his speech a bit, looking for the words to hide his disappointment. "I'm only stating facts here. And here I thought there was a chance this time." Could an undead sigh? The Captain certainly did and looked at the sky. "Oh Theomars, hear my prayer and grant my soul strength, for my mission will not end today once more…"

It seemed like no one would give a signal, so Thani pulled out her dagger, opened the wounds on her back again to let her blood wings free, and took a stance. The undead mirrored her; she couldn't see his expression under the helmet, but she guessed he was smiling.

"Have the first move." He spoke.

Not one to be begged, Thani immediately sent a salve of blade-shaped blood projectiles. She was ready to jump in the moment the undead would begin shifting his weight to dodge or parry, but he did… nothing. The Captain simply let the projectiles bounce off his cuirass in the very same stance, only bothering to tilt his head slightly so one didn't land in his left eye.

"No power behind it at all. But that still counts. Dodge."

The moment he finished speaking, the undead came into Thani's arm reach with incredible speed, a wide horizontal slash already coming for her waist.

"Duck."

After she had stepped back, the Captain released one hand from his sword's hilt and seamlessly chained his slash with a straight jab. She dropped low and prepared to strike the defenceless arm.

"Parry under."

A metal-plated knee was already flying at her face, and Thani reflexively used both hands to push it upwards, standing back up and repelling her opponent at the same time.

"Acceptable speed and intuition. Again."

This time, Thani was the one with the initiative and pushed forward before he could get his balance back fully. The Captain was wearing heavy, full metal-plate armour, and the only visible gap was his eyes. Every joint on his body was protected by supplementary parts. The resulting suit of armour had to be excessively heavy, but she knew the adepts of Theomars often had superhuman strength and endurance.

She decided against going for the eyes. It was the only visible weak point, an obvious bait with a single way to attack it considering the size of the target. Instead, she went to grab his sword-arm with both her wings turned to arms and delivered an overhead swing on his elbow with her weapon. Thanks to the double cast, she was able to manipulate her wings and use the dagger's augmentations at the same time to deliver a powerful enough strike.

"Good choice. endure."

Her blade hit its mark at the same time the Captain's free hand landed on her kidney, sending her away. The blow was reduced by her own armour, but its force was still enough to shake Thani off easily. Without her ability to dull the pain, she would probably be rolling on the ground already. As expected from him, the undead wasn't hurt at all. While Thani had to rely on her double cast to get a hit in, he simply countered her strike's augmentation with his own raw magic for defence. Chipped elbow plate against bruised armour, a weak draw for both fighters at best.

Thani was troubled. Usually, she'd wear down her opponent, but this time she was the one on the clock. Her magic could help her regenerate extremely fast, but it would still run out. The undead however, was already dead. Only a crippling injury to his skeleton would restrain his movement or kill him, anything else was irrelevant. She couldn't force a heavy trade either, for the same reason.

He was angry at the announcer for suggesting rigging the fight, but here the undead

was, telling her how to fight him. He was truthful while doing it too, not even trying to throw her off. It made no sense to her. She had to admit though, that she would have had trouble if not for his warnings. He was very fast.

"You think too much, focus on striking harder. Counter."

The Captain stabbed at her one-handed, aiming for the t.h.i.g.h. Thani dodged to the side and slashed at his elbow again. The undead reacted by taking one more step to a shoulder bash straight into her core and shoved her to the ground, breathless.

"I said counter, not dodge and strike. It means parrying and hitting back at the same time."

The Captain had reset his basic stance and was waiting for her to get up.

"What's wrong with you?" Thani spat at him. "Are you fighting for the both of us now? Is this some kind of performance?"

"Interpret it however you wish. Dodge."

She hated how he had been looking down on her from the beginning. The Captain was coming at her with the very same horizontal slash he'd made first, and she chose not to follow his advice. As reckless as it was, she tried to block the hit.

The bastard sword struck her dagger's blade, pushed it against her arm and pushed her arm against her hip; it crushed the armour's scales, and bloody splinters embedded themselves in her flesh. The blow finished shoving her to the side, and she tasted the arena's dust again.

"What are you doing?" The Captain spoke. You could hear the annoyance in his ranting tone: "Why would you try to block a hit when I'm so much stronger than you? Are you giving up? We've barely had a couple of exchanges."

"Then stop treating me like some f.u.c.k.i.n.g kid!" Thani shouted. "And fight me for real, as you said!" The wound had already closed up, but the armour would have to be repaired at this spot. However, considering the undead's raw strength, without it she'd have been cut in half. She shook off the numbness in her arms and threw herself back at her opponent, releasing all the stops and using some of her divinity to boost her performance.

"I said we'd spar, not fight. You're not worth fighting."

Thani was using everything she had, transforming her blood wings into more weapons to strike with, her dagger, and even a fistful of dust she had grabbed when standing

back up. Alas, the Captain was able to block the strongest hits and ignore the others. His armour took a few more dents, but Thani was unable to land a blow that would turn the tables or press the attack further. Worse, he was casually talking her down all the while.

"And Talia told me you weren't a fool." He put her off-balance by parrying her dagger with his gauntlet.

"You must be truly special for her to ask the favour of teaching you from me." He cut both blood arms in one swift motion, wasting her energy and giving himself more room for a few seconds.

"You thought you were the one holding back?" He sidestepped another stab.

"I could knock you out the next second and you wouldn't know what hit you." Thanks to his side stance, Thani's weapon and blood arms got in the way of each other.

"You're just a snotty brat whose little power went to her head. You're clearly not a fighter." He ducked under a wild swing and swiped her front leg with his own, forcing her to step back.

"Your magic's strength is a joke, your fighting is sloppy, you're happy you can bully weak mortals with a bit of divinity. Look at me, damn prideful idiot! You want to become a God and bestow blessings because you've managed to change your body a bit? You can't even bless yourself to compete in strength with a mortal like me! Your only strong point right now is your control." The Captain countered Thani's next blow with a headbutt and rattled her brain, stopping her barrage of attacks in its tracks.

Elder Repose, the mad undead time mage, the giant dragon, Talia, even the lake pixie… Thani had been and felt outclassed before, but those were all unstoppable forces far above her own ability. This time however, she was being crushed by someone she considered at her own level. He was right, and she hated him for that. Yes, she had gotten stronger, but not much better. She was far from being a trained fighter and relied on brute force to win her matches. Thani had only learned the basics a decade before, and practiced a bit with Alice for a couple of months recently. Like he said, she was only good at control, her body's and her magic's: after all she was managing two spellcasts and her divinity just fine.

"Now, try to take a hint, follow my lead, lose like a good pupil so you can at least keep your reputation, and we'll speak more back in my cell."