

# 《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

## Chapter 76 - The Captain (4)

Far from the hustle and bustle of the crowd, Thani, Alice and Oakbud were following the Captain down the underground cells of the arena. Most were human-sized and unused, but they saw a couple that had some living amenities for humans along the way. Further down, cells got less numerous as their size increased. Thani guessed that one of those had to host the wind drake they fought earlier. The occupied ones at this level were more common, and they crossed paths with some arena personnel dedicated to the care of the wild monsters held here. Two packs of goblins, one of wolves, a young drake, a flock of notoriously carnivorous birds were among those easily recognised.

Finally, the group entered the third underground floor. The stairs led directly to a well-lit, circular pit that still reeked of blood and death. The monochrome lighting of the alchemical lamps only added to the bleak sight. Directly above them around the pit, in a twisted kind of irony, a narrow walkway gave access to more cells. As soon as they took their first step on the sand, Thani felt like a cold hand rested on her heart, ready to close and end her life, and missed a step. Alice and Oakbud were apparently fine.

"So, you can feel it. That'll save me time." The Captain said his first words since they entered the tunnels, but his voice was almost completely absorbed by the sand instead of reverberation along the stone walls. "Welcome to the real arena, where true combat is held. My domain and obsession in undeath. There is no glory to be earned in a fight here, only your own life."

With those ominous words, the man jumped up to one of the cells, his own, and turned around to motion them to come up after him. It was almost completely b.a.r.e, only containing weapon and armour caring supplies, an armour stand, a basin of water, and a hard stone bench.

"It's not like I need sleep anyway, undeath has its perks. Sit wherever you like and let's start with a round of proper presentations." He removed his helmet, and his polished skull was revealed. There wasn't a speck of skin or flesh left, only carefully sanded white bone.

"Well, I say that, but by now you know me as the Captain and you can assume that I know everything happening in the arena, and everything that Talia and Ebb's council know. Including all your names and recent activities of course. Our relationship is of mutual benefit. They're the judge, I the executioner; I get fights, they get closure on

problematic matters... or people." If Alice and Oakbud were worried after seeing Thani lose badly to this mysterious undead, the ambiance now was downright scary.

"Cat's got your tongues? I know you must be... dying to know more about me. Ha-ha."

Since Thani looked a bit disturbed, Alice was the one to start: "I know it might be rude, but... why am I here too? And how can you even speak?"

"Well, you're too weak to spar with me, but you're still part of the group, aren't you? If I teach your partners here something, might as well include you; second-hand lessons are... usually incomplete." He answered without mincing words. A moment passed where everyone just looked at each other. "As for how I speak, that's none of your concern. At least your current ones."

"..."

"Bah. Let's get to it since you don't want to talk." The Captain unbuckled his sheathed sword and hung it on the armour stand. "You're here because knowing you'd be here today, Talia asked a favour of me. She told me about you three and your endeavours, and she's worried about your future; enough to do this against her God's wishes. Don't worry though, Nature will just sigh about it and nothing will happen. Wouldn't be the first time, surely isn't the last either."

This finally got a reaction out of Oakbud, who squeaked once and started a strange eyeball-less staring contest with the undead's flames. "What? I may not look like it, but I'm here to help. I'm also one of the very select few who could actually hurt you. You know it's possible, I can feel that obscure terror deep down. You can feel the Pit too, can't you, little spirit?" With these words, the Captain won the contest and Oakbud sought refuge upon Thani's head.

"Which touches upon the very point I brought you here to make: get off your high f.u.c.k.i.n.g horses. You're only strong among humans, let me put this into perspective for you: about two-thirds of people never receive a God's Blessing. Those that do don't even know it half the time as it's usually something very minor. If you want to count people with a second blessing or more, you'll be left with less than five percent of humans already; three, less than one percent. You probably had an idea of the numbers already, making you think you're strong."

The Captain stared everyone down for a moment to hammer in his next words: "You're not. Your rise to power has been way too fast, you don't have a solid foundation yet. Neither of knowledge, nor of ability. Get far out from Ebb's region and civilization in general, to the central chain of mountains of the Primal, or to its south-east, or even to

the Jagged Heights; not even mentioning the Third, you wouldn't be able to take a step on it in your current condition."

"You've been there!?" Thani exclaimed.

"Yes." He waved his hand to silence her before she could continue. "But that's not the subject. I believe you've gotten a taste of the human species' weakness compared to others... a boringly standard a.d.u.l.t Granite, was it? And that wasn't a Blessed one either. Humanity is close to the bottom in innate strength, what distinguishes it from others it is its intelligence and adaptability which created civilization. However, we're not the only ones to receive the Gods' Blessings... Think of the implication of a species already naturally strong, give it a human's intelligence, and add on the Gods' Blessing. Do you see how weak you are now? A bit of divinity will not bridge that abysmal gap. Luckily for humans, that kind of beast is exceptionally rare and will often case be a loner. If I had to measure your ability to fight right now... Let's go simple, 1 to 100. For reference, an average human with no blessing would be around 6 or 7."

He pointed at Alice: "Twenty, because you can run well and you've learned to fight from someone who knew what he was doing. Considering your God is Liezel, that's a compliment."

Then at Oakbud: "You're a bit of a special case... a bit hard to evaluate... twenty to twenty-five, fifty to sixty considering your relative invulnerability... and zero if you meet someone who's able to hurt you, because anyone who can is far above your current level and you wouldn't be able to do anything about it."

At Thani: "No divinity usage, thirty points; you're bad at it, but you're still a well-rounded fighter. Add divinity, thirty-five at best. You're only using it to boost your strength a bit, which is laughable."

And finally, at himself: "About seventy-five. But every single next point is harder to score after a watershed at about fifty, make no mistake. It will also come at a price. Just look at me, I'm dead already and I'd run for my unlife if I met anything I could rate over 80." He shrugged.

"And how do you suppose belittling us like this will help us?" Thani asked, annoyed. "I get it, we need to be more careful. Talia told us already, Nature hinted at it, Nidhögran crushed us completely, Repose made sure to humble us quite a bit too, Time's Child almost killed us all, Liezel made fun of us... Is everyone we're meeting going to remind us that we're weak without doing anything more about it? Enough already!"

"Your annoyance at being here listening to me is enough reason for me to say it

again." The Captain countered. "You want to climb and carve your own path?" He laughed, "Then learn everything you can, from everyone you meet. Your mindset is much too arrogant and whatever help you think you're going to provide Kali like this is but smoke and mirrors. Little Oakbud on your head by comparison, is too reserved: listening and learning is good, but you won't progress if you don't do anything with it. Other people's help will only get you so far."

"Is this really alright for me to be here listening to this...?" Alice whispered to herself. Once again, they were meeting with some...one? Far above their own status, this much she could tell easily. Following Oakbud and Thani really wasn't good for her nerves.

"Bah, a few secrets are nothing much to be shy about." The skeleton said. "I haven't even started teaching anything yet, though. Stay all you like, but I'd be disappointed if you ran away. Not to boast, but few live and tell the tale of meeting me in this place. Let's start with a little story, if you would:"

Thus began the tale of a man born in a coastal village of the Primal, who grew up happy with his family and learned a trade. A few years after his a.d.u.l.thood, the man learned to defend himself and began travelling with merchants, changing his own set of skills along the way and bringing him wealth. When he settled down in Ebb, it wasn't as big as it was today, but it was still much bigger than his birthplace. There, he found his own love and happiness, as well as a passion for teaching. His dedication to the art and results attracted Theomars' attention, and the God of Warriors granted him a blessing in recompense. At this point, the man decided to respond to the God and prayed to him in thanks, before going back to learning to fight properly; soon, he stopped teaching the trade of a merchant and only stayed where the smell of iron was present. He soon got a second Blessing, and then a third, and celebration followed.

But all good stories had an end, and one day when he had become the one teaching how to wield a weapon to the younger ones, he made a mistake. A singular strike he lost control of crippled the teenager he was sparring with in front of others, and his retribution was both swift and divine. Theomars set his curse upon him, and the man lost his sight forever. Now crippled himself, the man wallowed in despair for a while, before re-igniting his will to atone. In order to lose a fight in which he went all out as the ritual dictated, he had to learn to fight again; but none could teach a blind man, and none would teach someone a God cursed.

So, he left to learn by himself again. The blind man travelled the Primal, and was humbled when the strength he was so proud of meant nothing without his sight. When he came back an old man, it was too late; even though he had learned how to fight without his eyes, his peak was already gone and his curse eternal. His wife had returned to the earth already, and his kids had left Ebb to unknown destinations. There he lived the remainder of his days, before dying of sickness. On his deathbed, the man

felt humiliated, but did not regret his life; he had only wanted the best for those around him, and his mistake had been to show a moment of weakness.

When the man drew his last breath, soul flames ignited in his skull as his will to atone to his God took hold. Awed by the man's determination, Theomars' curse remained but the God made him one of his heralds. He granted him strength far above anyone; senses so sharp he could hear a fly through the window; magic so potent he could rival a Child. And a mission to spread his knowledge. The man accepted it, and bore the pain of stripping his dead flesh off his own bones. Then, he wore his suit of armour loosely, and shredded his bed to stuff the plate with. He took his sword, put on his helmet, and went back to Ebb's arena where he had been teaching years before. People's faces had changed, and so had he. He left his old name behind, and became known as the Captain after beating every instructor present.

But he still wanted to atone, and when he did, he would die with his obsession. As he taught, he fought again without a fault. He also made his newfound strength his, bringing him further and further from his redemption, making him a better herald than his God could hope from his own Child. When his hope was gone, the man had fought for decades already, and he changed his method. Instead of teaching, he would be bringing the fight to those he found worthy. He left Ebb once again, in search of the Children of the Gods. He went to the Jagged Heights, Sorrow's pass, Ocean's Guard, the Roof of the World, Wanderer's Folly, the Forest of Creation, to the Cursed Third. He found them, he fought them, and he killed them.

The man learned that Children were only as strong as their God needed or wanted them to be, and that he was stronger still. That he would only lose to the strongest of all. When he was on the Third, the man met many strong creatures, as humans were absent from this land. There, he met some of the Elders of this world, but their strength was so far above his that it couldn't be considered a fight; he was a mild annoyance at best.

So, he came back to Ebb, where his story continued. He found an arrangement with the city's council, met Nature's current Child, and buried himself under the arena. His next opponent would be human or close enough to it, he could feel it. So he watched, and worked, and fought. Those too weak, he would teach. Those strong, he would beat, but none could be his match. His reputation never took off to the public because he appeared rarely and never for long. And he waited. For every close victory along the way, he carved another notch in his sword's leather and wood handle.

And today, after more than a century, the man was telling his story to those he would teach once again, when his weapon's handle was no more than b.a.r.e scratched metal. When he was alive, the man was dying to fight but couldn't; and now that he was dead, he fought to die but couldn't.