

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

9 Pilgrim Woods 3

Pain. Seemingly infinite pain, concentrated on his head. He'd been cut, rammed, or thrown to the ground violently during fights before, but that pain was special. Not a wound you could rub a bit of ointment on to heal, not a bruise you just didn't need to touch for a few days... this pain was far deeper than that, but what remedy existed for pain of the mind?

Harp was rolling on the ground, holding his head in pain, barely conscious enough not to scratch himself to death with his claws. Just as Maya wanted to heal him, she was stopped by a grim-faced Aldo. "Don't interfere while Oakbud's blessing takes effect. Every healing magic works differently, and yours would be useless here. You can't reconstruct what is not broken. Wait until Harp calms down before healing whatever self-inflicted wounds and fatigue he gets from his thrashing."

She nodded, thinking to herself she was somehow lucky to have fainted before. Going through the forceful blessing awake really looked excruciating. Maya could see the wolf-man changing slightly with the naked eye, and couldn't help but caress her wings. His human ears were changing, becoming longer, more triangular, covered in fur, and they were also... moving up a bit? His fur was also growing a bit thicker, standing erect and shivering from the pain.

After a few minutes, Harp stopped moving and his breath calmed down, eyes still closed and body twitching a little. Maya kneeled besides him, put one hand on his forehead and the other on his chest, then used magic to heal his sore contracted muscles, soothing his pain. When he opened his eyes, she was startled because they had changed too. His pupils were now black slits, like a cat's.

"Thank you... what was that..."

"Congratulations on your second blessing, Harp. How do you feel?" Mark wore a faint smile, wondering if all blessings were this painful. The more he saw the less he regretted not following a God.

The wolf-man was batting his eyelids and moving his ears reflexively "It's strange... I can feel so much more things now. It's disorienting. My hearing, sight, and... smell? seem to have been enhanced. I guess I'll be able to smell Aldo before seeing him now. And, thank you for the healing, miss Maya."

"Oi! Go look in a mirror, doggy. Your eyes and ears changed too."

Once Harp made peace with the incredible changes that just happened to him, he sat up from the ground and looked at Oakbud intently before speaking. "Now I get why you didn't tell me what would happen once you touched me. You did that to thank me, and yet I'm the one who thanks you." Sighing, he looked at the rest of the group. "Take what I've written to the Blood family, and find Karj there. This news needs to be released in a controlled manner rather than having more panicked people scream it around in the streets. I'll rest a bit more, then I'll rush the forest trail. With that new blessing I don't need a team to stay out of trouble."

Maya picked up the paper on the desk, and gave it to Oakbud, who happily held it by wrapping his wriggly arms around the roll. After a brief checkup to verify everyone was ready, they set off for the Blood family's residence.

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"Strange... why is there nobody outside keeping guard?" The silence at the front entrance of the Blood family's grounds was unnerving. "HmMMM. Maybe it's like Harp said before : undead mess with those who have an emotion sensing blessing, so they must all stay inside buildings. Karj must have told them when he got back." Kilb was the one who both spotted the problem and solution when the Blood family's estate came into view.

"Let's go to their central temple then, I guess he is speaking with the family's leader." Aldo was the one who knew the town the most, having lived there for years already, helping pilgrims on their way to the God-Tree. "Mistress Thani is a bit of an oddball, but don't be mistaken, she is extremely strong and you definitely don't want to offend her. She has been blessed four times by Kali already."

Even though she was the closest to that level, Maya was the most surprised one, being the youngest and least experienced of the group. Oakbud didn't care about such things. "Four blessings! Isn't this close to a Child of the Gods' level already?"

"Yes and no. You know by now that each subsequent blessing brings something new to the follower, but it may also reinforce the previous blessings at the same time. Your wings changing shape are a good example : your third blessing was heart reading, but they evolved too. Harp's fur also grew a little when he got his senses enhanced."

"So the growth can be exponential?"

Kilb was the one who spoke this time "No, it may or may not happen. This is why the differences in strenght become larger with more blessings, even with the same number.

But if we had to compare, a Child of God could be said to be blessed seven times. Their physique and magic have received an incredible boost from the God's possession, but the abilities they have will stay at a mortal's level, only raised to the maximum as soon as they get it."

"Thank you Kilb. To finish up about Thani, she has an incredible amount of luck, and one of her blessings was reinforced each time. I've never seen it, but they say even her most recent ability, blood animation allows her to become a one-man army, able to hold the town by herself if the need arises."

By the time Aldo and Kilb finished explaining how blessings would evolve, the group stood before the residence's entrance. A bit impatient because he had no part in the previous discussion, Mark went ahead and knocked. A voice immediately came from the other side "Who's there, and what's your business? The Blood family is regulating internal affairs right now!"

Aldo recognised that voice..."Director Karj, is that you? I'm Aldo, I come from the temple with a message from Harp for the family!"

As soon as Karj heard this, his thoughts raced and confusion showed on his face. "It must be related to what I felt earlier... he said it's from Harp... but why did he not come himself? Why don't I feel that pain and terror again? Strange, strange. Better safe than sorry, I can ask him about an undead in town too." Coming to a decision, he announced that he would open the gate.

"Come inside so I can close the gates behind you. We need to talk serious- what is that?" When they started walking, Oakbud was revealed behind them, still holding the paper scroll.

"It's related to the message, and also the reason Harp isn't here but us."

"Really? Then I'll see about that later. Come to the temple with me, I bet you are the ones Thani want to meet." Karj was now almost sure that the undead was related to this group, but Aldo had left him the impression of a good and serious person. The only answer would be the strange little creature, but it didn't look undead at all, more like an elemental spirit. Alas, he couldn't determine if it was one of fire, earth, water, air or even thunder.

"Wait... Mistress Thani expects us? But why would she..." Maya put her hands to her mouth to prevent herself from saying anything more, and looked at Oakbud, understanding what probably happened. Karj had not just come back to recuperate, he had sounded the alarm in the territory! But it was too late, and Karj felt her emotions shift from curiosity to fear, then guilt, and finally nervousness. The others were bewildered, however that came as no surprise : meeting Thani was a rare occurrence

already, so being expected by her would be even more bizarre. But other than being surprised, they seemed happier than scared. Maya's reaction confirmed his doubts, and he could finally relax, sighing a little in relief. His job would be done when they crossed the temple's doors.

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'Dong! Dong! Dong!'...

Karj's beating on the temple's doors gave a low resounding sound. Oakbud was now being held in Maya's arm as a makeshift stress-reliever. "I'm so nervous, even the place is already so imposing... I wonder what mistress Thani will be like?"

Aldo, who had already met her once, rubbed her head with his hands to comfort her. "Don't worry, she's not different from you or me. She's human, even though her body will startle anyone who sees her the first time. It's fine as long as you don't faint at the sight of blood or run screaming 'murder'."

"That's not reassuring at all!"

"Hm. Don't fall in love either."

Karj coughed to prevent Aldo from saying something strange. "Aldo, please... miss Maya, Thani's appearance reflects her devotion to Kali, and her blessed body shows her proximity to the goddess. That is what he meant." He could feel her relax a bit, but she still looked worried.

The doors opened inwards by themselves this time, pulled by heavy chains and pulleys hidden in the temple's ceiling. Thani's crystal clear voice invited them in, carried through the wind with magic.

"Welcome to my Blood family's temple of Kali. Come in everyone, and let us have a round of presentations."

Kilb took the lead, signing everyone with his hand to follow. At the door's threshold, he took out a pocket knife and pricked his left thumb, waiting until a drop fell to the floor inside. "I pay my respects to the Lady of Pain." He passed the knife to Aldo behind him and went a few steps inside, waiting for and smiling encouragingly at Maya.

Mark and Aldo entered at the same time, Mark mimicking Kilb with his axe and Aldo with the knife he was handed. Maya hesitated a bit before taking a deep breath and doing the same. She had already met other worshippers of Kali before, but that was at home! Not in one of their biggest families, and in their temple at that! She was ready

to heal everyone, but was stopped by a glare from Kilb who knew how weak she was to pain. Healing a self-inflicted wound showing respect for Kali with magic was one of the worst blasphemy possible.

Karj activated a mechanism to close the doors behind them, and went ahead towards the statue and the fountain. Thani was still meditating in the basin, blood running from her eyes on her perfect face, down her beautiful but scarred body and into the water. The tattoos on her arms looked alive, moving slowly on her body, tracing artful lines towards the heart tattoo on her breast.

The image of Thani sitting in front of the statue was forever imprinted into the mind of the visitors. Karj was looking at their reaction, and he could feel their awe, none of them moving closer nor speaking a word, their voice stolen. The Time that seemed to have frozen the scene flowed again when Thani opened her wounded eyes.

She stood up facing them, lifting her arms horizontally at her side, revealing her whole body. Maya let out a small gasp, shocked silly by the amount of scars she wore. She started trembling, fascinated, as Thani's eyes healed in mere seconds, returning her sight through her empty white eyes. The blood in the fountain was lifted from the water, flying up to stick to her tattoos. She stepped out of the basin, and clasped her dress back on her shoulder.

"I am Thani, head of the Blood family. May I know what brings you to my temple?"