

《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

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"There's no way people will take this in stride. This is a whole new mess!" Karj was pacing back and forth restlessly. He was torn between his awe of Thani's situation, his outrage at what she just did to Kali's statue, and the greater good in Pilgrim Woods.

Harp was silent, thinking that things were really going downhill since the dragon's visit and wondering if maybe moving house before stuff began exploding was a good idea. Oakbud wasn't interfering either: as much as he liked Kali during their first encounter through this very statue of her, he was capable of recognising his incompetence on the subject. His little social experience wouldn't help the situation, and he feared adding oil to the fire with a misplaced comment. It was the third time he'd seen Thani this riled up after the way to Ebb and Ocean's Guard, and her state still frightened him.

"Well, we don't need to tell them everything, right? They know who I am, just say I managed to restore the shrine." Answered Thani. "You've managed to cut yourself in the fountain again right now, didn't you? Just push that and sweep the rest under the rug, and they'll believe you. What they don't know won't hurt them. You're the one who taught me that kind of thing."

"But what is going to happen to you and Kali then? If you're truly helping her right our wrong and taking her place, but we still offer worship as before, what will happen?"

"That... that is a good point." She relented. "I'm not sure how it works exactly, but perhaps Kali can do something about it on her side? Especially since she knows what's going on here. There's no way she doesn't if Nidhögran was here."

"I don't really like it, but if you're manipulating things this way, why don't you go further?" Alice intervened from the side. "Focus the ceremonies on the statue instead of the Goddess, and on Blood rather than sacrifice? It wouldn't be that different, right? It could also mark the difference, increasing the odds of Kali being unaffected while reopening the temple all the same."

"You realise you're asking me to change fifty years of my belief in one day, and the same for everyone in Pilgrim Woods?" Karj shouted angrily. "How dare you! How can you even say that!"

"Who says worshipping Kali and supporting a God-candidate are exclusive matters? You have ways of communicating with her, right? You can prop up something

convincing enough if you do, at least Liezel has that. Gather people, do the special ceremony, make an oath or some kind of statement supported by a Blessing in return..."

"An oath, huh..." Karj took a big breath, calming his down his fit of anger. He knew they were trying to help, but whatever they tried the responsibility would be his in the end. "I'm not ready to die yet. Same with begging for a Blessing. This is much too important. Let me calm down first."

After exchanging more arguments back and forth, it was decided that the temple would close for good while Oakbud, Thani, Alice and Harp went to the God-Tree. That would give everyone more time to think of a final solution, while also letting people know that Thani was back and that she was doing something about the situation.

As soon as they were ready and stepped into the forest, Harp removed his boots and demonstrated his third Blessing. His whole body started bulging with more muscle than before, and got quickly covered in black fur; his feet and hands became clawed, and his face morphed into a more triangular shape. If he got naked and crouched in a bush somewhere, he could be mistaken for a real wolf at first sight if he didn't stand upright. "I'll lead the way, let's hurry. You're on the clock, right? If we're fast, we can be back at night in three days."

The past influence of the Stalwart Oak was gone, and vegetation had quickly taken back its rights of growth on the paths. They were narrower now, and branches dangled from nearby trees at shoulder level, hindering progression. True to his reputation as one of the best pathfinders in Pilgrim Woods, the group was able to progress quickly under Harp's lead. He had surprised everyone with his silent steps and swiftness.

During the first night, Oakbud grew some seeds for people to eat while Thani slowly coaxed Eludia's cup into giving them water. The relic was sulking, because it had been too long since they last used it. It even gave Thani a mouthful of vinegar at first. The little spirit guarded everyone while they were asleep. If anything dangerous came too close, he could either scream at it to knock it out or wake Harp up so he could decide what to do; he didn't need to do either though.

"You're saying that absolutely nothing came towards the camp?"

"Yes! Quiet night, good night." Answered Oakbud.

"But it's strange! We only had to chase away a small pack of wolves and kick a band of goblins yesterday... During the last weeks I had to hide as best as I could to avoid blessed beasts, and I needed to flee if I met one by accident. I even found some plant

monster gnawing on bones, and animal tracks unknown before to the area. It's completely illogical for things to have calmed down this fast. Let's stay on guard."

On the second day, they met nothing at all. According to the rule of the jungle that had taken the forest over, that meant they were coming closer and closer to something so strong, that no living creature wanted to approach it fearing death. And since the God-Tree was dead, it wasn't very good news. Still, the area was as quiet as it could be around the dead Tree. The little sapling planted in between its roots was healthy, and a pair of fresh offerings were sitting around it.

Alice and Harp were the first ones to look up when they heard a rustle in the dead Oak's branches.

"A crow?"

"Caw. You're slow!"

"It spoke!"

"Liesel!" Alice fell to her knees and looked down, trembling.

"Quick on the uptake, are you? Didn't look like it two weeks ago." The God flew down and landed in front of the group. His voice was...strange, to say the least. It sounded like a human was trying to speak through a long, resonating tube, and the result was also mixed with the bird's cry. All in all, it was really unpleasant to listen to. "Caw. I'm not going to eat you, you know? I've just taken a random bird over to come here and see things myself for a few days."

Nobody spoke while the bird hopped in front of Alice and the others in successions, giving each one a cursory glance. "So it's you, then?" Liesel asked in front of Oakbud.

"Dad-Tree says goodbye." The little spirit answered.

"Goodbye? Sure, but shouldn't you be saying hello instead? Caw. You can't just live for the Oak's memory, you know." The bird lifted its wings and pecked at its flank to remove a pebble of dust in its feathers, restoring their pristine black colour. "Look at you, you can be as strong as a God, you could do great stuff with that divinity! You can't stay depressed like this and waste it forever! Kicking Oberon in the nuts is a great idea, if you're taking suggestions. Caw."

Without waiting for an answer, it hopped back in front of Harp and continued talking freely. "You're not too bad, keep at it. It's become quite rare to see someone push that far on Nature's path of harmony. Just don't get too surprised later, cawcawcaw." He cackled ominously.

"And you!" Liezel jumped to Alice next. "I'm quite disappointed you know, you showed great promise at first. What are you hesitating for? You've got stuff to do, you know what it is and you want it. Caw. I'm not helping people for them to deflate and be all sad later, you know? I'm not giving you more blessings to break stuff until you stop running away like that."

Peck. "Ow!" Alice screamed and retracted her hands from her knees.

"Look at me, will you? You think you're just a random nobody? Caw. I don't have that many so I know damn well each and every one of my followers, you can be sure of that."

Finally, he came back to Thani, but Liezel didn't start talking immediately, instead taking more time to observe her.

"Thanks for babysitting miss whiny over here. What do I call you though? Future colleague? It's been quite a while since anyone joined. You've even got some divinity already, good job. Why the fuss in the temple though? Running like headless chickens."

"Wait, you were watching us? How?" Thani and the others opened their eyes wide. Did a God's influence reach that far into another's shrine?

"What how? You even saw me fly out two days ago. Caw. Anyway, the solution you seek is quite easy. You make an oath in front of the whiners and give them a choice: support you or keep praying to Kali without sacrifice until word comes from her Child about new practices. Nobody sane would doubt an oath, even we Gods are under the Three's thumb. Oooops, shouldn't have said that." Liezel looked at everyone around him. "You didn't hear that, okay? Uh, let me give you some tips, I don't wanna be the youngest forever in the pantheon. Nothing too advanced or you'll just fail later, but let's go. What's your take on divinity? Hey mini-tree, it should help you too so listen well."

Everyone had trouble accepting that a revered God could be that careless and crude with its language, especially Alice, but evidence stood before their eyes. Everyone here had also met Nidhögran and his antics before, even though he wasn't a God. Making light of everything and disregarding established rules and codes, the God of Transgressions didn't get his nickname for nothing.

"My take on divinity... for now I know it can help me shapeshift", said Thani, showing how she could stick two of her fingers together. "but it hurts a lot and it's not the kind of pain I can ignore. I can also use it in spells, even though it'll be consumed, or alongside magic to permit casting simultaneous spells. It's really powerful whatever

it's used for, but I don't know how to get more."

"Hahahahaha!" Liezel fell flat on his back from laughter. "I mean, Caw. Oh, no way you're joining us anytime soon if that's what you think." The God theatrically disappeared in a puff of shadows, reappearing in the same place but standing on his legs once more. "And I suppose you shared your insights with mini-tree here, so his point of view and use should be the same, right? Right, must be. Caw. Listen well because I'm not going to repeat that: you're dumb. Caw. I mean, sure, magic has to do with it, but you're getting the order wrong here. Here's the tip. If magic is the river, then divinity is the tool to make the riverbed. I'd say some more but then I'll get a spanking. Caw. Oh, and be sure to tour the continent a bit, there's plenty of old entities just waiting for distractions to come by, and you're definitely premium material. I know Repose's got his fill at least." Liezel said with a glare toward Alice.

"And if you're worried about the sapling here don't worry, the old dragon has done something to the area and I've added my own little twist to it. Nothing's going to come and destroy it. Look how time flies! Caw. And you need to carve bigger stuff for a change, whiny!"

With a final puff of shadows, the crow disappeared completely. Silence fell down on the area.

"That certainly was... something." Began Harp, scratching his head in wonder. "I won't ask what you've talked about, since I've been unable to hear after the God went away from me. Seriously, I hope meeting with Gods isn't like this with all of them." It looked like Alice hadn't heard anything either, judging from her blank look after being reprimanded publicly by Liezel.

The God didn't say anything about accumulating divinity, but it was rather obvious with all he had said. It was all about the people following you and giving back to them. And, although it could be considered far-fetched, as long as people believed in the Three, Oakbud wouldn't ever run out of it either. Speaking of him, the little spirit was happily using magic to water the sapling and hasten its growth even though it was almost two metres tall already.

Exchanging a glance with Harp, Thani declared that it was time to go back. Oakbud had seen the sapling, was happy he could see it again and help it, and even more gleeful at having met another one of his Dad-Tree's friends. Thani, Alice and Harp also had things to think about after the one-sided chiding they each got. The way back should be quiet too according to Liezel, so she would have time to question Alice on the God's story to learn a bit more.