

# 《The Forest Spirit who sought the Gods》

## 8 Pilgrim Woods 2

Harp couldn't believe what he heard and snorted. "You'll need to do better than that to scare me off. A being blessed by the Three dying by himself? What a joke!"

Aldo was the one to prevent Harp from kicking Oakbud straight out, claspng his shoulders with his hands, forcing Harp to face him. "Harp... right here and now, I swear on my own faith that this is the truth. No joke, no lie, no illusion this time. The God-Tree is dead. Now sit down, and let's talk."

Looking into Aldo's eyes for a few seconds, the wolf-man fell back into his desk chair, his legs unable to support him anymore. Maya watched him, ready to heal him, as he kept muttering "fuck..." into his breath, like a prayer. Taking a deep breath after a moment, he looked at the strange goblin undead again and exclaimed "Fuck! What the hell! This is worse than the incident of Sorrow's Pass over at the Jagged Heights!" Harp stood up. "Let me get some paper for this, I feel I won't be able to remember everything if we only speak." Going to the door of the room on shaky legs, he turned his head towards the goblin. "... I swear on my faith I'll listen to you to the end of this crazy story, and not tell anyone else until then."

"That went better than expected", said Kilb, finally able to relax a bit.

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"Damn it, vomiting from feeling pain is for rookies, Thani's going to laugh at me for a while. Never knew someone could hurt so bad. Got to go back to the family to tell her, some atrocious undead probably popped up. Harp's taken quite the blow too." Karj couldn't help but curse. As the one maintaining the temple of the Three in Pilgrim Woods, and a three-time blessed follower of Kali, how many years had it been since he couldn't handle probing the emotional state of someone close by? His pride took a severe hit with this incident. "I know it's part of the rites of Kali, but still, sometimes I wish we could shut off that perception like Deva's worshippers..."

Karj needed a few steps using the wall as a crutch to distance himself from the source of anguish before being able to walk normally again, and ran back to the Blood family's mansion as soon as his legs stopped trembling.

He felt like he spent an entire day running when he finally stood before the main

building's gate. "Let me through, I have urgent news, I need to meet Thani right away. Relay my orders, everyone able is to get ready in the front yard for instructions. Something creepy even for me got into town. Now MOVE!"

As the two guards scurried away, Karj opened the double door and walked in. The building consisted of a single room, with only one opening on the roof for light. It was made of smooth white stone, and was almost bare. The only thing of note was the fountain basin in the middle hosting a five meter-high statue of the Goddess of Suffering Kali, a bucket and a mat behind it. The white stone statue depicted the Goddess during her final moments, the time she was called by the Three to join them. She was kneeling, head bowed, hands grabbing her elbows behind her back, her pair of mangled and bloody wings entangled in chains falling from the ceiling. Her beautiful naked body and smooth carved face would inspire mercy in any who saw her, the shining eyes made of diamond shedding a single tear of red blood.

As always, he picked up the rock knife placed on the fountain's edge, and sliced both his wrists to bleed, waiting until his regeneration kicked in to block the hemorrhage.

"Is the temple so empty that you would have time to visit me, Karj?" His ritual was met with an enchanting voice coming from behind the statue, clear like the ringing of a crystal bell. With a sigh, he replied "It's as full as always. But I met... bad news. I didn't see what it was but I could feel its anguish through the walls of the building, and it was so much it forced me to give my lunch back to nature. You need to get ready."

"It gave YOU that much pain? Through walls even? You're right about one thing, I'm the only one who will be able to meet it. None in the family will even be able to stand facing that directly."

Karj heard Thani's steps from behind the statue, and she finally came into view. Her body was hairless and well-proportioned, her face beautiful, her voice soothing. She had white hair and empty eyes, her real age unrelated to her twenty-years-old appearance. Her arms were scarlet red from the tip of her fingers to above her elbows, ending in a splash of color, and had a drop of blood the size of a palm tattooed on her left breast. Her whole body was riddled with horrible whitened scars she forever refused to heal. Her attire was simple, and fit her role well : a barbed metal belt held a white robe revealing her tattoos and scars around her waist, a clasp at her right shoulder preventing it from falling. She wore golden bracelets on her wrists and ankles, walking barefoot.

He bowed to her, who was now standing between the statue and him. "What do we do now?"

Thani sat on the fountain, Karj's blood still mixing with the water in the basin behind her. "I heard you outside. Call off the alert, get people with two blessings or more to

stay inside a building. Less than that they'll feel uncomfortable but won't be able to pinpoint why, but they're useless if we need to fight. You go back to the temple, and ask whatever made you like that to come meet me right here. I'll wait."

As Karj walked out of the temple, Thani unclasped her robe, and immersed her body in the fountain's tainted water. Preparing to wait for the "special guest", she took the stone knife, and sliced open well over-used scars on her arms. Now sitting with the water at her waist, she took a deep breath and cut her eyes before closing them to meditate.

-- Meanwhile --

Harp came back into the room with fatigued eyes "I've stopped all departs for the God-Tree using the beast as an excuse, and the director. Now explain to me what happened exactly, so I can write it down and pass it to the Blood family. They'll be able to manage the shock better and act on it, while I rush the trail to verify whatever your insane story is."

"Me tell before, fairy say after!"

"Stop calling me fairy already! You're doing the same to Mark, call us by name!"

"Fairy better!" Ignoring Maya's protests, Oakbud went to Harp, who was now ready to write. "Me was born when God-Tree dad dead. He tell me no root be free, find his friends say goodbye. He give me leaf, ate it, no more hungry, become smart and magic! Meet fairy, come here."

"Wait... the God-Tree created an undead goblin? Are you kidding me? Wouldn't he make a plant?"

"Tree-dad no legs too sad. He make creature instead."

"But... Undead?"

"Me no undead! Fairy said me Spirit! But me no speak if no body..."

"It's okay Oakbud, I'll take it from there. Did you manage to get something understandable out of that, Harp? Trust me it wasn't easy for us at first either, he was in spirit form and could only draw on the ground, I had to decipher his scribbles and use my blessing to understand him."

"I've heard worse... but it's all so crazy. Alright, tell me your side now"

"We were a day away from the God-Tree, when we felt the whole forest tremble. The

tremor sent us all to our knees, Aldo even fainted because he follows the God of Nature. It was like a God had descended, there was a crazy wave of magic coming from the Oak's direction. Then everything went still, and another wave of magic in the reverse direction swept past us. When we got back up we decided to stop travelling immediately and set up camp. We met Bud' here shortly after when he came into our camp."

Mark intervened, as he was the main concerned party for that time "Yeah, I heard something in the bushes Aldo set up so I went to look, and I picked it up. You should have seen Aldo's face, almost fainted right back. Oakbud understood what we said, and he began responding with scribbles. Luckily we're good guessers. Then he brought us to the Tree, and that's when we learned and verified his death."

A bit ill-at-ease because she would need to lie now, Maya continued speaking. "The shocks one after the other pushed me and it triggered my third blessing ; thanks to being able to read auras and intentions I could look at Oakbud. His soul is... the height of the God-Tree, with three fruits of different colors, probably representing the Three. I vouch on my faith that reading is true."

"You're the third one of us here to swear the Oath today, even with the possible consequences... Shit. I guess you went straight back after this?"

"Yes. We met a small group of goblins, and that's where we learned he can possess dead bodies, hence the undead appearance. We had to bluff our way in, a Spirit is far too rare, even more so a non-elemental one. We taught him to shield himself from my soul seeing before entering too."

"Wait. Only that? You're a follower of Deva so you did what you could, but did you forget the temple head is from the Blood family? Karj is able to read the emotions of people around him really well. You know that an undead strutting around is going to give him a serious headache, right? How'd the goblin die?"

Aldo grimaced at Harp's reminder, twisting his fingers "Ran a stick inside its head through the nose. Should have been instant and painless since it was knocked out cold before."

"...Karj was buried under paperwork when you came in, and wasn't there anymore when I came out of here just now. I can only assume the goblin had woken up and felt every inch of your stick, Aldo. And THAT pain must have made quite a number on him. He must have gone back to the Blood family to recuperate. Undead really mess with Kali's believers."

"If me get out of goblin, no more pain?"

"You're right, little guy. I suggest you go back to whatever your spirit form is before you go over to Karj, or you'll make everyone over there faint from the pain and anguish the goblin body felt last."

Nodding, Oakbud took it as a cue to slide out of the goblin. Now the wolf-man was sitting in front of a sprawled on the ground, deader than dead goblin, with a little black ball wearing a piece of bark on its head, two glowing eyes looking at him through holes in it. "I did not expect that... how do you do, little spirit?" Even the aggressive-looking Harp couldn't resist Bud's looks.

The Spirit went back to his earlier mimicking method to communicate, pointing at himself, then at Harp, then making a point of touching the side of the desk with one of his arms. Mark and Maya understood that move first, her becoming pale, and Mark warning the wolf-man. "He wants to touch you. Probably to thank you. But please swear what happens next will never be told out of this room, and brace yourself."

"That sounds way too mysterious for me, but today's completely fucked already. I'll play along. I swear on my faith I will not tell anyone about what happens when Oakbud touches me."

Kilb, who stayed silent until now, sighed and put his fingers in his ears "You asked for it..."