

The great deer was making quick progress through the southern lush forest. When he stopped by a pond and drank, Yatika got some rest.

— You have long legs, you know that, right ? she panted. I truly hope we are close now.

The animal shook his head, as if he was answering positively, and resumed his walk. One hour later, they penetrated a clearing, with a shed in the middle. The deer stomped the ground and looked at the young human at his side.

— Here we are then, she understood. Thank you.

Yatika stepped forward. She wasn't sure why, but she felt the need to be cautious. It was all too quiet, at least until she heard a growl. In front of the house, she found a woman trapped in a cage of vines and roots. Running closer, she found her in a strange state. She seemed absent, or drunk.

— You are finally here, Tiara said as she get out of her home.

— druid, replied the human, interrogation tainting her voice.

— Indeed. My name is Tiara. Let's not waist any time though. You... Why are you staring ?

— By the Goddess, I am sorry. I only heard rumors about you and I was not thinking you were looking, hum... Please, excuse me.

— Yes, I have horns, fangs and many other mutations. That is one possible outcome when we dabble into nature magic. At least, my face is still intact.

Yatika smiled without adding anything, to embarrassed by the thought of making another mistake. She looked back at the prisoner. Tiara came by her side.

— This is the reason of your presence.

— Another human in these woods.

— An intruder for sure, however, I would not be so quick to say she is human.

Yatika looked at the druid, her eyes betraying the surprise she felt. Tiara glanced at her, smirked and nodded towards Sadora.

— Well, do your thing. That is the only way to better understand why I am telling you this. Night is falling soon, you should get to work.

They walked closer. Sadora seemed to ignore their presence.

— What happened to her ? asked Yatika.

— That is a story too long to share right now. All you need to know is that she suffered several injuries on her way here. She is exhausted, but also dangerous. Her grogginess is only temporary. Now, please, focus.

Yatika knelt and examined the woman's face. She was undoubtedly in pain. The young human removed her gloves and uttered a few words in an ancient language. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She had to succeed, but in what ? She exhaled and closed her eyes, trying to ward of the pressure she put on her shoulders. Her hands closed on Sadora's cheeks. She felt her soul leaving, starting the journey into the Immaterial.

In this plane of existence, the distance between her and Sadora's life force was increased tenfold. She had to explore colorful valleys and vaporous cliffs. Time was different, space too. Finally, she noticed something uncommon. An amalgam of dark tendrils, shivering under the currents of magic. As impossible as it was,

that entity was the prisoner's soul. More precisely, Sadora's life force was inside this shell. Yatika knew she had to inspect this from a distance before trying anything else, yet, she came closer. In an instant, a wave of raw magical power pulsed out of the shell. Yatika got pulled by a terrible strength and before she knew it, she was in another realm. Darkness surrounded her. A growl filled space, followed by what sounded like a laugh.

— She is mine, vibrated the deep voice. You will be too, mortal.

In the clearing, Tiara noticed the tension running through both humans. They were panting and shivering. Yatika almost fell and the druid came to support her. Things were not going smoothly, but she couldn't do anything.

Yatika's soul moved as fast as she could, even though she was lost in the dark. Then, a shape appeared from the void itself and jump at her. Pain shook her mind, she started to loose means. The human remembered a simple protection spell and shouted the incantation. In a flash of light, the dark mass backed off. Yatika fled as fast as she could. She could only go deeper into Sadora's mind. She started to feel things, see fragmented memories. This trance put her body and mind to the test. She was not ready to endure much more.

She found herself in front of a perfect black sphere floating between intertwined ribbons of memories. Yatika saw warriors, torches and horses. A furious band rushed out of a village. Draped figures raised their hands towards the night sky. A monstrous shape emerged from the dark. Everyone knelt before it. Yatika took her courage in her own hands and penetrated the sphere. Her heart skipped a beat. She felt evil, like never before it has been felt in this world. She was trapped in silence, malevolence pouring out of the nothingness around her. This entity was old and powerful. Yatika was terrified, yet, horror deprived her from reason and she ventured further. At this moment she knew she was not alone anymore. A presence manifested herself. It was too intense to even catch its shape.

— That smell... Need to eat...

The otherworldly voice cracked into Yatika's mind. Almost shutting down her weak protection. She turned back and fled. The creature was everywhere around her. The human's soul felt her strength diminishing. In a last surge of energy, she pierced through the black shroud, found her way to the Immaterial realms and then to her body. The shock made her jump aside. She fell on the ground and pucked.

— I guess this is bad news, Tiara said while giving her fresh water.

— Who is this woman ? shouted the young human.

— I fear she is a nobody. What did you see ?

— Evil. Something that should not exist. Something that should never set a foot on Mirh.

— Easy now, you sound like a fanatic.

Yatika looked at her, fury in the eyes. This was not a joke. Something had to be done.

— Can you be more precise ? continued the elf.

– This was pure cruelty and anger. Something able to devour life itself. Nothing in this world correspond to this darkness. No specter, no sorcerer. This entity is not from Mirh.

Tiara shivered despite her arrogant attitude. She nodded at Sadora.

– Is she a messenger ?

– More like a host I guess. She seems to be resisting the entity though. They are not allies.

– Would she be aware of her condition ?

– Better ask her. Wait, what is that on her neck ?

– A tattoo. When I healed her wounds, I saw more. Well, she is covered in them.

– Let me see.

Tiara shrugged and waved her hand. The roots moved, revealing Sadora's chest. Yatika muffled a few words while examining the runes and letters. It seemed to be elvish, though neither of them managed to understand anything.

– I saw that already, grumbled the human.

– Where ?

– In the temple's library. An essay on Dehest and the Silent Ones. By the Goddess, this makes no sense ! Did they made it this far south ?

– No. Besides, she comes from even further south.

– That does not help us... Here ! That symbol means "moon" in... well, in a forgotten human tongue. Damn, the rest is nonsense to me !

Sadora suddenly jump on Yatika. She managed to break a few vines before the druid neutralized her again. The warrior glared at the young woman. Hate was burning in her eyes, but it wasn't hers. The prisoner fell unconscious again.

– It is the second fucking time she almost break free ! shouted Tiara. A bear would struggle getting out of this cage !

– Something is taking control of her ! If she managed to leave, people will die !

– She is not leaving.

– Well, I have doubts now. For how long have you been holding her like that ? I am not an expert in magic, but I know that no spell is meant to last long after the incantation.

– You do not know everything indeed, human. I lowered my guard, that is all.

– We need to do something. You can not keep her like that indefinitely. The entity is growing stronger as we speak.

– We are not sure of that.

– I am not taking any chances...

– You will not kill her.

– It is the only option we have, before it is too late !

– As you said, this is a one of a kind discovery. We need to learn more.

– Are you ready to put Mirh in more danger than it already is, out of curiosity ?

– Yes.

– Damn, you have so little care for the rest of the world outside of your small clearing ! Besides, you ask for the Temple's help. This means that without me, you can not do anything. And as I refuse to assist you in your pervert studies, here we are, in a dead end !

— Do not overestimate yourself, girl. I needed a priestess to get more information the easy way. I can do just fine by myself, though, it might end up messy. I suggest you leave now.

— You are even more crazy than the rumors say you are... sighed Yatika. You can not kick me out of here though. I am more welcome in these lands than you, outcast. You leave here only because Sylfans do not come closer. If they were to change their minds, you would have to leave the Cradle, for good this time.

Tiara barely contained her anger. She clenched her teeth. Flames danced behind her emerald eyes as she stared at the young woman. They were about to jump at each other's throat. Yatika was ready to draw her scimitar. None of them realized the moon was above.

The perfect silver disc appeared as the clouds continued their course. Sadora threw her head back, eyes wide open. She let a long breath escaping her mouth as the light shone on her tattoos. The clearing seemed to be cloaked in darkness despite the moonlight. The air felt thick and heavy. Yatika cursed, finally grabbing her blade. Tiara jumped to prevent her to step closer. This disturbance in her mind was enough to weaken her spell. Sadora stood up and let a powerful scream out. Wolves invaded the clearing. They jumped out of the bushes, fangs out, rage in their eyes. They surrounded the prisoner as she was ripping her binds off one last time. Tiara barely escaped the bite of a massive beast. Sadora body twisted in all direction as she continued growling and screaming.

— This is our last chance, and I am taking it ! concluded the human.

— No !

A bright light flashed as she finished her sentence, staggering the beasts. Yatika charged. The druid raised her hands, commanding branches to stop her while trapping the animals. Dodging all obstacles, the human closed the gap between her and her target. Though, she was not facing the same woman anymore. In her place rose a towering lupine creature, ready to fight. Yatika struck first, her blade hitting the beast's flank. Despite her precision, she barely scratched her opponent's skin. The wolf beast screamed again and jumped on the woman. She easily surpassed Yatika skills and managed to plunge her fangs deep in her flesh.

Sadora transformed lifted her prey from the ground and threw her aside. The taste of blood stunned her mind, just long enough for Tiara to rush and put a hand on her head. A striking pain filled the beast's mind and it backed off. Then, as it realized something of greater importance, the creature ran away, followed by the predators pack.

Tiara was about to follow them, but Yatika's agonizing moan brought her back to reason.

— I thought you were dead, whispered the druid.

Yatika stayed quit, spiting blood with each breath. The elf pulled her inside her shed. The young human started convulsing. The druid recited incantations, burned incenses and prepared mixtures. She removed Yatika's clothes to expose

her shoulder. Bones were broken, muscles ripped. Blood was flowing out making a large puddle on the ground. The forest's magic could repair her body. Sweat was dripping from the elf's face as she stayed up all night, determined to save Yatika's life. They were both covered in blood, flesh stuck to Tiara's fingers. Tears were rolling out on her cheeks and she was tapping into her deepest resources. She managed to force bones and tissues regeneration. When the sun came out, the elf fell to the ground, pale and shaking. Yatika opened her eyes.

— You will live, whispered the elf. I can heal you, putting you back on your feet. The young woman cough and inhaled with difficulty.

— No, she replied. Do not touch me. Bring me back to the Sylfans. I do not want to see you ever again. Yre's priestesses will take care of me.

She passed out again. Tiara wiped her tears and prepared the journey back.