



Forever Young Eternity 2: Heritage

Kim Houtzager

*Expanding life, against the rules,
following a path meant to be.
A lover's touch; a destiny revealed,
to make a double life one.*

*Haikoni yume, lum donarè,
wallon sonai dayath.
Ninmei naga ne, elosy wolae,
san yume boykan io yume.*



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Author and Illustrator: Kim Houtzager
Edited by Selene Broers

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Questions can be e-mailed to info@keep-in-mind.nl.

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Summary of Eternity 1: 'New to this world'

There's a planet far away from us. It's bigger and greener than ours and has three moons instead of one. However, if you look beyond its appearance, you'll find out that this world has similarities to ours.

The name of this planet is Seken and it's a dangerous place. It seems to be stuck in the dark ages of Earth, with a prominent difference: on this planet, magic is not a myth. On this planet where people seem to live forever, no-one has died of old age yet, though the pointy end of a sword is still as lethal here as anywhere...

One day, a girl wakes up in a forest. She knows nothing of the world around her and people consider her new to this world, despite looking like a young adult. When Matsuuro meets this girl, he decides to take care of her and raise her as if she were his own. He teaches her how to speak, how to behave and even how to fight. Matsuuro finds out how dangerous his planet can be when he discovers that Naraku, as he named the girl, has amazing magical powers. There seems to be no limit to them; a fact that is most appealing to one Lord Zashjan, a sorcerer who wants to enhance his own powers and considers Naraku's powers a nice addition. He sends out more than one warrior to capture this mysterious maiden. Still, Matsuuro is not the only one who vows to protect Naraku.

Naraku first meets Matsuuro, a young farmer who decides to raise her and falls in love with her. He is calm and caring, but insecure about his own capabilities. Then both meet Blade, a childhood friend of Matsuuro and a skilled warrior who also takes a love interest in Naraku. His sarcasm, which he often uses to hide his fears, knows no boundaries.

The next additions to the group are Sushi and Mayonaka. Sushi is an Elf and unlike every other Elf on Seken, she cannot control the element Earth. Instead, she takes her refuge in witchcraft, which does not always go as planned. Mayonaka is a girl with a dark coloured skin; unique in the area where they meet. Not only that, Mayonaka seems to have an ability most people on Seken can only dream of: Mayonaka can read and write.

Later on, they meet up with Ao, Sushi's older brother who does have control over the earth. This Elf starts off as a tutor for the entire group and is the one who teaches them Telepathy. Ao often acts like a typical big brother to Sushi; know your days are numbered if you hurt his little sister!

In a large canyon they find Rain, a Water User. His real name is Rayne, but hardly anyone calls him that. Only he can hear the difference between the two names. He can control water and takes the role of Naraku's teacher when he joins the group. When they reach a forest, they find a Fire User named Kai. He is more unpredictable than life itself and filled with paradoxes. His full name is Kaiyou, which means 'ocean' and he simply adores Rain's water skills, becoming his best friend.

In the cold North of Seken they team up with Hane, a calm young man who follows the path of a vegetarian and pacifist. He can control the element Air and surprisingly doesn't hesitate to join battle after he lays eyes on Naraku. Just before Naraku must fight Lord Zashjan, they find a teenage girl named Clover, who has an unhealthy lust for killing Lord Zashjan and everyone who works for him. She joins the battle, telling the others she wants her revenge, but in the end Naraku beat her to it.

While both humans and Elves decide to protect Naraku, a few animals do the same. In exchange, the animals get to communicate with the humans and Elves by means of telepathy. Apple, Naraku's black mare is the first to join the group. Her mate becomes Matsu's brown stallion Pear. Blade's red-brown stallion Dusk is the last horse to join the group. While they often do their best to protect their little Magic User, it is the mysterious black wolf Shadowhunter who manages to become more than a friend to Naraku. According to Naraku, Shadowhunter feels like... family.

Together they manage to face whatever Lord Zashjan throws at them and unintentionally they become as close as a tribe. In the meantime, Naraku gradually takes the lead from Matsu and guides them to a deserted palace in the high North-east: MorningSnow. However, the efforts aren't enough to stop Lord Zashjan and eventually Naraku has no other choice but to face the mighty sorcerer.

A battle with magic, a battle without magic... it didn't matter. Naraku was up to the challenge. Matsu and Blade had raised her well...

Chapter 4: The Rose of the Desert



Episode 76: From dawn till dusk

The sun started to rise in the valley around the castle MorningSnow. While all day creatures slowly woke up, all nightlife decided to turn in for sleep. Fresh snow had covered the tracks of the inhabitants of this area. In this part of Seken, people often forgot time and the people in castle MorningSnow were no different. Nobody would remember that it was about one year and ten months ago that Matsuru met Naraku.

At least, they wouldn't remember it at this very moment! While the sun was still rising, everybody in castle MorningSnow had already been up for several hours, pushing each other away from the stables' entrance.

"Ow, your ear is poking me!" Kai pushed away Ao, the Elf with long ears.

"Hey, that's my foot!" Sushi pushed her brother Ao back.

All of a sudden, a strong brown horse pushed everyone away, looking into the stables. With his deep eyes, he saw a black horse lying on the ground.

Rain placed a hand on the brown horse's head. >Patience, Pear.< He said telepathically. >Apple is strong; she'll make it.<

Inside the stable, Naraku carefully touched Apple's head. The black horse rested her head on Naraku's lap.

On the other side, Mayonaka and Hane were carefully looking down. "Okay, Apple, one more time!" Hane said.

"You're doing just fine!" Mayonaka encouraged the horse.

The group at the entrance was trying to see what was happening and pushed each other out of the way. Naraku tried to see it as well, but she obviously had picked the wrong side of the horse. However, she didn't mind. Apple needed support and she would give it.

"Oh, just look at this beauty..." Mayonaka sighed and took a cloth.

"What is it?" Blade demanded to know.

Again Pear pushed his head inside. If the horse would have known how to gasp, he would have done so. There it was... Apple, the black mare, with a tiny dark brown horse next to her.

"It's so pretty!" Sushi felt like she was going to melt.

Apple licked her infant clean. "Congratulations." Mayonaka caressed Apple.

Naraku carefully came closer. With eyes wide open she gasped at this new life.

"He's so pretty, Apple..." She whispered.

Hane laughed. "Look again, Naraku, it's a she."

Not long after the foal's birth, everybody was walking around enthusiastically.

"Thank you for letting me be there, Mayonaka." Naraku thanked the brown-skinned girl.

Mayonaka smiled. "It's okay." She said. "Besides, it was Apple who said you could be there."

"I wonder how it feels..." Naraku pondered.

Mayonaka shrugged. "I wouldn't know." She admitted and walked towards the battlement. "Look!" She pointed. "Do you see those green spots? The High Ones are announcing summer to us."

Naraku leaned onto the battlement. She nodded. "This place is so beautiful." She admitted.

All of a sudden, a tiny white fur-ball attacked Mayonaka's legs. "Whoa, there!" Mayonaka smiled and looked at the tiny white wolf cub that was chasing a mouse. Suddenly, the cub jumped up and landed on all four paws; barely missing the mouse that vanished between two barrels.

The white wolf cub growled and tried to scratch at the mouse, but she couldn't reach it. Mayonaka picked up the wolf cub.

"Forget about it, Grasshopper." She smiled and stroked the cub.

Naraku smiled and looked at the cub. "She was very lucky."

"Indeed, she was." The cub rubbed herself against Mayonaka. "If Clover hadn't found her..."

"Clover didn't want her along." Naraku admitted. "You said you wanted to raise her. Clover said it would be impossible."

"Don't be too harsh on Clover." Mayonaka put Grasshopper down, who immediately started searching for the mouse again. "She doesn't like getting attached to something. She fears she will lose it again."

"Did she say that to you?" Naraku asked wondering.

Mayonaka shook her head. "No, but you could read that from her eyes. You know what happened to her when she was eight years old."

Naraku's face saddened when she spotted Clover, practising with her sword. Fifteen years old and already a skilled and experienced warrior. She wasn't by choice; the sorcerer Lord Zashjan was responsible for the death of Clover's parents. When she was only eight years old, his army had attacked her village and when Clover tried to escape, his soldiers forced her to see her father and mother being burned alive. Left behind to die, it was Clover's hatred that had kept her alive.

The day crawled by and Naraku checked on Apple and her new-born again, soon followed by the other admirers. The little horse did a few fragile steps and even added a small hop, before her mother touched her with her head like only a mother could do. Rain smiled. "It looks like she'll grow up to be a strong horse." Matsuru agreed. "I bet she'll be just as fast as her mother." Pear suddenly came very close to Matsuru, staring right into his eyes. "And as strong as her father, of course!"

"Anyone has a suggestion for her name?" Kai asked.

"Snowdance."

All faces went to the side, staring at Naraku. "Excuse me?!" Clover snapped. "The horse is dark brown, not white!"

"Leave it to Nara to make up strange names." Matsuru grinned.

Blade folded his arms. "If my Dusk ever gets a little one, I will name it myself."

Naraku smiled. "Just look at it. Don't her movements remind you of falling snow?" All looked at the energetic small horse.

Kai nodded. "Well, now that you mention it... eh... nah, still don't see it."

>I like it.< Apple rubbed her head against the horse that would be called Snowdance from now on.

All grinned. "Well, at least it's not another fruit or vegetable." Blade said, remembering that Naraku was the one who named Apple and Pear.

The day was coming to its end. A couple of hours later, dusk would be at its peak.

"Naraku, we're ready to go!" Mayonaka yelled, sitting on Pear.

Hane was beside them, sitting on Dusk. "She's always late."

"But she always comes." Mayonaka smiled at Hane. "She may often act childish, but she is our leader."

"I'm coming!" They heard from behind.

"Hey, wait!" Another voice came, this time from Rain. "You said I could cut your hair."

Naraku turned around for a second before running on. "When I return, okay?"

She smiled, followed by Shadowhunter, the black wolf.

"You have said that for the past fifteen weeks now!" Rain yelled, now getting exasperated by his leader's behaviour. "You're supposed to be the leader of The IceHunters, but you act more like a small child!"

"This time I promise!" Naraku yelled, took a leap and jumped behind Mayonaka on Pear. "Go, before he gets angry!" She giggled.

"Sometimes you are so terrible." Hane grinned and asked Dusk to move.

The two horses left with their four travelling-companions. Naraku waved at Rain, who started growling. "She'd better prepare for a shower when she returns!"

Matsuru smiled. "Give her a break." He said to him. "This is the first time in weeks she can go to the village again. Tomorrow morning they'll be there, just in time for the market."

"It's your fault." Rain grumbled, knowing it was Matsuru who raised her. Rain turned around and left.

"What?" Matsuru asked. "How can it be *my* fault?"

The next morning the travellers reached the village closest to the castle: Animuk.

"Hane!" A young girl ran towards Hane as he dismounted. She threw herself around his neck, almost tipping him over by the sheer force.

"Hey, g'morning, Kyla!" He smiled.

"I'm soooo sorry!" Kyla apologised, for the hundredth time.

Hane smiled. "Kyla, forget about it." He said cheerfully. "You didn't know and it happened months ago!" While most people had forgotten all about it, it was still bothering Kyla that she had accidentally betrayed them to Lord Zashjan's army. If she hadn't told that stranger where Naraku had gone, they most likely would have taken the wrong way and never found Naraku.

"And thanks to Kyla, Lord Zashjan is now gone." Naraku smiled at Kyla, who started blushing. "Are we in time?"

Kylia nodded. "Yes, they are already setting up the market. You are the first outsiders!" She took Hane's hand and guided them through the streets. "Outsiders, what a word." Mayonaka sighed while they followed Kylia through the streets.

Hane shrugged. "Only when the market comes, we get visits from people of outside the village."

"You're an outsider now too." Mayonaka smiled and spotted a stand. "Ooh, are those *real* bananas?"

"What are bananas?" Naraku asked, trailing behind her like a little child.

Slowly, the village got filled with inhabitants as well as outsiders. "Has been a while since I saw a true market." Hane confessed to Kylia. "What has it been? A month?"

Kylia nodded. "Indeed. Each new moon." She couldn't help but blush a bit while looking at him. Had he heard what she screamed after him, when he left his village to find Matsuru, who had been taken by the army as bait for Naraku? It was months ago! No, he probably hadn't. He was acting so... so calm. If he had known she loved him, he would probably have acted differently now. But Hane was still Hane...

Hane looked around, hoping to find the stand he was looking for. "Oh, there it is!" He walked towards it, followed by Kylia.

"Looking for something special?" Kylia asked.

Hane nodded. "Great, there they are!"

"Earrings?" Kylia asked and grinned. "I never thought you were the type for jewels."

"Oh, they are not for me." Hane exchanged rare coins with the merchant. "They are for Sushi." Kylia turned as white as a sheet and Hane couldn't help but grin on the inside. Oh, he knew how she felt. He would tell her one day. However, this was not the right time and not the right place.

"F-f-f-for Sushi?" Kylia stammered.

Hane nodded. "She saw them last month and she finally decided she wanted to get her ears pierced. She asked me to look if they were still here." He saw Kylia sighing relieved. "Let's find Mayonaka and Naraku."

Meanwhile, Mayonaka and Naraku had been moving from stand to stand. "Oh, what nice fabrics." Mayonaka smiled. "What do you think, Naraku?"

Naraku had a confused look on her face. "What are those spots?" She asked.

"... Those are flowers."

"People actually wear clothes like that?"

"Never mind." Mayonaka sighed.

All of a sudden Mayonaka got pulled away from the stand. "Hey!" Naraku yelled surprised and Shadowhunter, the black wolf, started growling.

Mayonaka looked into the dark-brown eyes of a tall dark-skinned man. Her eyes widened and everybody turned around, looking at the commotion.

Suddenly, the man knelt down to the ground. "I've finally found you!" He spoke. "Thank the High Ones, I've finally found you, Rose of the Desert!"

Episode 77: The lost princess

“The High Ones have blessed my path!” The man was still kneeling on the ground, simply staring at the dirt below. “I couldn’t ask for anything more! I’ve finally found you, Rose of the Desert!”

Naraku stared at the man on the ground. “I don’t understand him, Mayonaka...” She admitted.

Mayonaka suddenly grabbed Naraku’s wrist and pulled her along. “We’re going home.”

“But, Mayona-...”

“Now!” The usually elegant and wise girl called out.

The man stood up and followed them. “Rose of the Desert!” The man stretched his arms. “Why are you...?”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!” Mayonaka snapped back.

Hane joined them. “Is everything all right, Mayonaka?” He asked her.

“We’re leaving, right now!” She said and walked on.

“He’s still following us...” Naraku said looking back after riding for a while.

“Who is that guy, Mayonaka?” Hane asked.

“I don’t know him!” Mayonaka replied upset.

“He seems to know you.” Naraku answered and looked back. They had left the market a lot sooner than planned; they had hardly bought anything from their list. Shadowhunter had gone into the woods to hunt and to find a nice meal for herself and Grasshopper, the small snow-wolf. Hane noticed Naraku looking around worriedly. “Don’t worry, Naraku, she can take care of herself.”

“Yes, I know...,” Naraku replied. “but I just can’t help being worried.”

Night had fallen when they arrived back at MorningSnow. “What is wrong?”

Matsuru ran towards them, worried. “Is anyone hurt?” Grasshopper happily ran towards Shadowhunter and dove at the meat like only a grasshopper can do.

Mayonaka dismounted and firmly stepped towards the castle. “Who is that?” Sushi asked when she saw the dark-skinned man.

“Is he an enemy?” Clover asked and drew her sword. She was sounding both protective and most eager to fight.

“Don’t hurt him!” Mayonaka said, suddenly turning back.

Everyone stared at her. Mayonaka then looked down towards the ground. Her hands formed fists and she trembled all over her body. Suddenly the brown-skinned man started talking again. “Why are you running away from me... my princess?”

Silence.

Ao stared from the man to Mayonaka and back to the man. The man seemed to have a sincere look, while Mayonaka seemed to struggle on the inside.

“Mayonaka...?” Sushi broke the silence. “What is he...?”

“Leave me alone.” Mayonaka whispered. “Just leave me and my tribe alone!” Crying, she turned around and ran towards her room. Everyone could hear the door slam shut, even though her room was quite far away from the courtyard. Sadness filled the faces of Mayonaka’s friends. Sushi’s face was the first to change. “What have you done to her?!” She yelled angrily at the unknown man. Clover showed her sword. “You have ten seconds to explain yourself!” She growled.

The man did a step back, but a voice sounded through the air. “Stop!” Naraku ordered. She walked firmly towards the man. They had seen this face before. Naraku was determined to get what she wanted; and in this case she wanted answers. “Explain.” She ordered.

“You must release the princess at once!” The man replied with a firm and proud face.

“Release?!” Naraku asked, astounded and gasping.

“You heard what she said; she wants you to leave her and her people alone!” The man accused Naraku.

“Mayonaka is free to go if she pleases.” Naraku folded her arms. “And for your information, Mayonaka is part of *our* tribe, The IceHunters!”

Kai whispered to Rain. “I’m saying it once more, we should stop letting Naraku pick the names.” As an answer, Ao smacked Kai on the back of his head.

>It was your idea to officially become a tribe.< Ao sneered. >And ‘Kai’s tribe’ wasn’t that appealing either<

“Then you are the ones who kidnapped her!” The man drew a sword. “Surrender, or I...”

Blade was faster. The sword from the man danced through the air and Clover caught it nicely. “Guests never point swords at our leader.” He hissed.

The man pointed at Naraku. “*She* is your leader?!” He laughed. “A woman is not fit to be a leader!”

Matsuru now became angry as well. “You have ten seconds to apologise!” He stepped towards him. “No one insults any member of our tribe!”

“Wait!” All turned around and saw Mayonaka walking towards them again.

Sushi hurried to her friend. “Are you okay?”

Mayonaka nodded; she looked calmer already. “What is your name?” She asked the man.

“My name is Ancule, your majesty.” The man bowed.

“Ancule, go to my father and tell him I won’t come home. Ever.”

Ancule looked shocked. “But, my princess!”

“That was an order!” Mayonaka raised her voice.

“And I have an order from your father!” Ancule snapped back. “I’m sorry, my princess, but I cannot comply.”

“Orders from her father?” Kai wondered. “What orders?”

“Her father, the King of the Desert, has ordered to bring his daughter Mayonaka, the Rose of the Desert, back home, no matter what.” Ancule replied.

“I can’t, okay?” Mayonaka snapped back.

“Your father is dying, princess.” Ancule suddenly said. “He wants to see you before he dies. You must take over the throne until your brother is old enough to rule!”

>I thought women weren't fit to be a leader?< Hane said to his friends, pointing out the paradox in these words.

However, colour had drained from Mayonaka's face. “My father... is dying?”

It was the middle of the night when the warm fire crackled in the old throne-room of MorningSnow. “It is about six years ago now.” Mayonaka admitted. “I kind of forgot time.” She vaguely looked at Ancule now and then. “I was very different back then.”

“Different?” Matsuru asked. “As in, rich?”

“Different as in spoiled.” Mayonaka released a sad chuckle. “My father always spoiled me; he said I reminded him so much of my mother. She died not long after giving birth to my little brother.”

“If you had everything you wanted, why did you leave?” Clover asked. That was so stupid! She would almost kill to get a loving family!

“I didn't leave by choice.” Mayonaka admitted. She played with her long dark-brown hair. “I was kidnapped and taken away for ransom.”

“Oh...” Rain whispered. “But at least you escaped!” He tried to make her feel better.

Mayonaka looked up, with tears in her eyes. “You don't understand... I did *not* escape!”

Ancule was curious. “But my princess, how did you get away then?”

Mayonaka cried and Sushi comforted her. “It's okay.” Sushi smiled and held her in her arms. “Whatever happened, it was not your fault.”

“But it was!” Mayonaka sniffed. “It was entirely my fault! At first they gave me almost anything I needed; new clothes, expensive food... but I overdid it...”

“I'm not following...” Blade admitted.

“Because I demanded so much...,” Mayonaka cried again. “they kicked me out!”

Everyone became silent and looked at the sobbing girl. “They simply got tired of me and dumped me into the world!”

“But if that was six years ago...” Ancule thought. “Why didn't you return home? Your father, your brother, they were all...”

Mayonaka interrupted them. “I can't return home, Ancule!” She sniffed with watery eyes. “It would dishonour my family. I'd rather be dead than to bring shame to my family.”

Ancule knelt before his princess. “My princess, you must return home.” Mayonaka stared at him. “After you were kidnapped, your father has tried everything to get you back. Missing you was what made him weak. The illness could easily take over his body. The doctors hope that if he sees you, he gets back his will to live again. Not even your brother can bring a smile to his face!”

“I... I can't.”

“Your people need you, Rose of the Desert!” Ancule snapped at her. “You need to reign! The Council is desperate! Your return will bring back unity to the tribes of your country!”

Mayonaka didn't look at him. She looked aside, until she noticed Naraku staring at her. “You taught me a lot about leading a tribe, Mayonaka.” She said. “One of the first things you taught me was that sometimes you must bring personal sacrifices for your tribe...”

Dawn was rising again and everyone decided to turn in for some sleep. The night had been very chaotic, but they agreed a good night's (or rather, day's) rest would bring peace and maybe even advice on how to handle this situation. Sushi looked at Mayonaka who walked sadly to her room, while Hane brought Ancule to a room that had already been cleaned. Even though they'd been in this place for almost half a year, they still hadn't managed to clean everything in this formerly abandoned castle.

Mayonaka opened the door to her room. She had already been there before and she saw the jumbled pillows on her bed. They were still wet from her tears. Going home... she couldn't! If anyone found out her kidnappers simply dumped her...

Mayonaka thought back to those first days after she was 'released'. She had been walking around proudly, demanding a roof and food just because she was a princess. A farmer let her in, but soon demanded she would work for her food. At first Mayonaka refused, but when she realised that she could only let her hunger vanish by working, she reluctantly obeyed.

Only a few good things had come out of her kidnapping. She had finally learned some modesty and she had found a new family... but what would they think of her now? She had lied to them!

Suddenly Mayonaka noticed something in the corner of her room. Curiously, she walked towards it and saw it was a mannequin. In the rising sun, the dress it was wearing looked enchanting and mystical. Mayonaka recognised the fabrics; Sushi had bought them a while ago. Mayonaka took the card that was hanging from it. It had spelling mistakes all over it, but Mayonaka knew what Sushi wanted to say.

'I don't now wen your birtday is' it started, 'but you always reminded me of a prinses. So, happy birtday, Mayo-nenba.'

Mayonaka got tears in her eyes. Damn you, Sushi! Why did she do that?! Mayonaka never asked for it! She threw away the card and crashed on her bed, crying again; now and then staring at the beautiful gown. How could she? How could she!?

It was very late that same day when everyone gathered again. “This sure was a short day.” Ao complained. “I'm already ready to crash into bed again.”

Grasshopper played with Shadowhunter's tail and Clover looked at them, smiling. Her carefree appearance changed when Ancule entered the room. Silence filled the room.

“I wish to apologise for my behaviour last night.” He bowed.

“Your ten seconds have passed a long while ago.” Clover sneered.

Ancule nodded. “I jumped to conclusions too fast.”

“No kidding..” Kai sighed.

Naraku wanted to speak, but then the door opened again. Everyone stared at the girl that walked inside. Her skin was brown and she wore a beautiful gown. She walked with so much dignity and grace, it startled everyone within the room. Mayonaka bowed before Naraku. “My chieftess...” She whispered. “I ask your permission to return to my homeland...”

Episode 78: To the land of fire

“I still disagree with this.” Ao sighed.

Kai nodded in agreement. “It’s a bad idea.”

Sushi finished packing Pear. “Then you come along!” She suggested. “Come along or stop whining that this is a bad idea.”

“I agree with them.” Rain said and looked at the Elfin girl. “We finally found peace!”

Blade growled. “We are not set on getting ourselves into trouble again.” He spoke.

“We are just escorting Mayonaka home.”

“I agree with that.” Hane said. “It’s too dangerous for Ancule and Mayonaka to go alone, but why do you have to take Naraku along?”

Mayonaka smiled. “This is the best way for her to learn what the tasks of an actual leader are. She may be our leader, but she still acts by instinct and not by thinking things over.”

“And where Naraku goes, I go.” Matsuru ended the discussion. “But has anyone seen her?”

“I believe she’s saying goodbye to Clover.” Rain pondered.

Naraku was walking through the long and high hallways of MorningSnow. She finally managed to find Clover, sitting near a window, sharpening her sword like she always did. It had almost become the deadliest thing around and yet Clover never stopped sharpening it.

“We are leaving.” Naraku whispered.

“Have fun.” Was the only answer.

Naraku couldn’t help but feeling sad. Why couldn’t she get closer to Clover? “Are you sure you don’t want to come along?”

“Yup.”

“Ao, Rain, Kai and Hane will stay here as well. They will prote-...”

“I don’t need protection from those wimps.” Clover snapped.

“Of course you don’t.” Naraku felt so stupid; how could she forget such an important thing? “I guess... goodbye, then.”

“Bye.”

Naraku turned around and walked away. How she would love to get a little bit closer to Clover. However, each time she was alone with the girl, she felt a strong coldness coming from her. Why? Had she done something wrong? “Clover?” She then asked. “Please take care of Shadowhunter... Mayonaka says she can’t come along.”

Clover looked up curiously, but only nodded.

Outside, Kai was holding back Shadowhunter. “You’d better hurry. I don’t know if I can hold her much longer.”

Everyone nodded and went towards the gate. Shadowhunter released a piercing howl. Naraku wanted to turn around and run back, but Matsuru stopped her. “Be

strong, Nara.” He encouraged her. “The desert is too hot for her. It would kill her! It’s best for her to stay here.”

Naraku nodded and with pain in her heart she turned around. The small group was ready to go as the gate closed behind them. Blade, Matsu, Naraku, Sushi and Mayonaka followed Ancule, only assisted by Pear and Dusk. Apple would stay behind to take care of Snowdance.

“So which way are we heading?” Blade asked Ancule.

Ancule pointed South. “It shall be a long journey.” He confessed. “It took me years just to come here.”

“Years?” Sushi whined. “We don’t have years! I was thinking more about... oh, I don’t know... tomorrow or so!”

Matsu stared at her with a bored face. Then he noticed Mayonaka’s sad face.

“Anything wrong?” He asked.

“I... I’m scared.” Mayonaka confessed.

“Why are you scared?” Naraku asked. “Don’t you want to go home?”

Mayonaka shook her head. “I would love to go home.” She admitted.

“Then why are you scared?”

“It’s my father.”

“What?!” Ancule burst out. “My princess, your father is the greatest man alive!”

“I know.” Mayonaka replied. “I love him with all my heart!”

“And he loves you.” Ancule said. “Then, why are you worried?”

Mayonaka fidgeted with her hair. “I’m afraid... of what he will say... if he finds out I brought disgrace to our family.”

Sushi placed a hand on Mayonaka’s shoulder. “I think you don’t have to worry so much.” She smiled. “I even think he will be very proud of you, because you learned so much!” Mayonaka released a faint smile. “Don’t worry.”

“You said you had a little brother.” Blade interrupted. “What’s his name?”

“Hihoshi.” Mayonaka smiled. “He was born seven years after me. When I... left... home, he was still a small boy. He should be almost fifteen years old now.”

“Hihoshi...” Naraku repeated. “It’s an odd name...”

“Says the girl who named horses after fruits...” Blade said underneath his breath.

Mayonaka giggled; for the first time in three days. “To outsiders it may sound strange.” She smiled. “But to my people it is a beautiful name. It means ‘Day Star’.”

“It’s a beautiful name.” Sushi sighed. “Does your name have a meaning as well?”

Mayonaka nodded. “It means ‘Midnight’.”

“Awesome.” Naraku gasped. “And what does Sushi mean?”

Mayonaka doubted. “Eh... I don’t know a translation actually.”

“Isn’t it a dish with raw fish in the Far East?” Ancule pondered and Sushi suddenly tripped over a rock from being flabbergasted.

“I’m going to kill my dad!” Sushi hissed while crawling up. “He named me after raw fish!”

The others were smiling and laughing. Matsu offered her a hand. “I have a feeling he didn’t know that.” He said. “Parents often give children a name without realising what it means.”

“Oh yeah?” Sushi was a tad annoyed (after all, it’s not every day that you find out that your name means something close to raw fish). “And what does your name mean then?!”

Matsuru looked at Mayonaka, who pondered. “I’m not sure.” She mumbled.

“Ancule, do you know it?”

Ancule shook his head. “Matsuru means ‘to enshrine’. But I don’t think that makes any sense.” All nodded in agreement and Sushi grinned, poking Matsuru because she thought he was worse off. “However, his name could come from Matsuro. That means ‘fate’.”

Again Sushi dropped to the floor. “Well, my name is obvious.” Blade smiled. “And doesn’t Ancule come from Anculus?” Ancule nodded. “Then your name means ‘servant’, right?” Ancule nodded again.

“And I wear my name with pride.” Ancule smiled.

“And me?” Naraku jumped up and down, eager as a little child. “What does my name mean?”

Mayonaka looked shocked; she hadn’t expected Naraku wanting to know the meaning of her name as well. “Your name?” She hesitated; should she tell her? However, Naraku looked so pleading. “Eh... as far as I know... your name means... ‘hell’...”

Naraku eyes grew. Hell. She didn’t know exactly what it was, but she had heard enough stories about it to know it was far from good. Matsuru placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Nara...” He whispered. “I didn’t know...”

“My princess,” Ancule started. “it’s not in my place to disagree with you... but doesn’t Naraku also mean... abyss or... eternity?”

Back in MorningSnow, Shadowhunter lay in a dark corner. “This shall be a rough time for the poor thing.” Hane scratched behind his ear. “They have never been apart before. They did everything together, even hunting!”

“It was wrong to tear up that team.” Rain agreed. “But Mayonaka is right, a desert is far too hot for a wolf. Especially ones with black fur.”

“She’ll get over it.” Kai smiled and took a bow and arrow. “Wolves usually only think about what counts this moment. They never think about the future or the past.”

“Agreed.” Ao said with his arms folded. “But Naraku’s magic gave Shadowhunter a memory and sense of presence. It will take some time, but the she-wolf will adapt. I’m positive.”

“Well, I’m off for a hunt.” Kai stepped forward and waved. “Anyone wants me to bring something along?”

Hane nodded. “Could you bring some nuts and roots along? I’m running out of those.”

“I’m a hunter, not a farmer!” Kai sulked.

“You asked if you could bring something along!” Hane spread his arms in defence.

Kai sulked on while walking away. “I can just hear the stories to my grandchildren.” He hissed. “The mighty Kai fought a dangerous battle against a tree with nuts, while roots attacked him from behind.”

He opened the gate and walked out. All of a sudden, a black shade rushed over the white courtyard towards the gate. "Look out!" Rain warned, but it was too late. The black wolf rushed out of the castle, towards the forest. "Boy, she's hungry..." Kai gasped.

Rain, Ao and Hane hurried towards him and stared at the forest. "Oh, man, Naraku is not going to like this!" Ao shook his head.

"You can tell her." Hane pointed at Rain.

"What are you guys talking about?" Kai asked.

They ignored him. "For our sake I hope Shadowhunter will find them, otherwise Naraku will surely kill us!"

From a tower, Clover looked outside. She didn't see what was happening within the forest, but she knew it anyway. The black paws rushed over the hard soil, on a quest for the one the wolf loved most. And, Clover actually wished she was near that wolf now as well.

Tears rolled over her cheeks as she looked out the window. She looked down and saw the courtyard. It was far away enough. She could just... "He was mine..." She cried whispering and angrily. "He was mine... and you stole him from me!"

She then turned around and ran out of the room. The door slammed shut, letting a small rumble vibrate through the walls.

Already quite far away from them, Naraku and her friends had no clue what was happening back in MorningSnow. All they knew was that it was going to be a long journey. They had to walk South, a direction unknown to them. According to Ancule's reports, it would take them at least seven or eight months just to reach Mayonaka's home. More than a year would have passed until they would finally be home again.

Blade opened the compass he had received from his father. The arrow pointed South and only Blade knew they were going in the right direction. In the compass he saw his own reflection... How it reminded him of his father and what his father had said when he laid the compass in his hands for the first time.

'This compass, my son, is of great value to our family. It belonged to my father and his father... and his father before him. One day it shall be yours. And one day, it shall belong to your son...'

Episode 79: Missing you

“I’m cold! My toes are cold, my feet are cold, I AM COLD!” Sushi complained.

“And I’m tired! My feet are tired, my legs are tired, I AM TI-...”

“Sushi, shut up!” Blade snapped.

The others grinned. “I guess we aren’t used to travelling anymore.” Mayonaka thought.

Naraku looked up surprised. “But I’m not tired at all.” She mentioned.

“That’s because you often went hunting with Shadowhunter.” Maturu smiled, but Naraku’s face saddened. “Oh, I’m sorry, Nara.” He apologised.

“I’m not feeling well.” Naraku admitted. “I miss Shadowhunter. A lot.”

The wolf ran through the forests. Her tongue dangled from her mouth and she didn’t pay much attention to the road. The scent around her was not that old; she was getting closer! She had to find her!

However, fate decided otherwise. Sharp metal trapped her paw and Shadowhunter crashed onto the ground. Dust danced around and it took a while before Shadowhunter moved again. She raised her head and looked backwards. Sharp metal around her paw... and blood painting the ground red.

Silence fell. “Maybe you should go back?” Mayonaka suggested.

Naraku shook up. “No, no, I want to come!” She said. “I want to see your country, Mayonaka.” She looked at her with pleading eyes. “Please, tell me more about your country.”

Mayonaka was a bit startled. “Well, I’m not the storyteller Kaiyou is,” She mentioned the young man that could control fire and had a passion for telling stories. In the beginning it had seemed as if he couldn’t tell a good story at all, but his stories turned out to be surprisingly good. “but I’ll try. Though Ancule, you’ll have to fill me in on the recent developments.”

Ancule nodded. “As you wish, my princess.” He agreed.

Mayonaka tried to remember her homeland. Six years had passed since she had been there. In this world called Seken, six years was nothing compared to the eternal youth people could have. Some grew old, but still most seemed to live forever. Though to Mayonaka, those six years had seemed more than a hundred years. Still, she loved her country with all her heart, no matter what.

“They call my land ‘The land of fire’.” She chuckled when she saw the gasping faces of her friends. “It’s not because there is actual fire there, but because the sun has dried out the land.”

“Land can’t dry out, can it?” Naraku wondered and looked at Maturu, who looked at Mayonaka for an answer.

“It can.” Mayonaka replied. “Sometimes it’s done by nature and sometimes done by man. If humans take away the green life, desert takes over.”

“You live in a desert?!” Sushi exclaimed and almost dropped her spear. “How can anyone live in a desert?! It’s just one plain valley, filled with sand. Just miles and miles of sand, with no hills, no green, nothing!” The Elf couldn’t believe it. Even though she didn’t share the same Earth powers as the rest of her ancestral tribe, she did feel a close bond to nature. And a place with no green life...

“You are wrong, Sushi.” Mayonaka replied. “The desert is not empty. As a matter of fact, those miles and miles of plain valleys you mentioned, only exist in a small part of the desert. If you disregard the oases we have, the desert mostly consists of sand dunes.”

“At most oases, people have built their villages.” Ancule filled in. “However, if a village becomes too big, an oasis can dry out as well. People are encouraged to migrate often. We mostly live off sheep and goats. They provide us with almost everything.”

Blade scratched his head. “But if people are encouraged to move, how do you know where you live now, Mayonaka?” Mayonaka started to laugh; a hearty laugh that nobody had ever heard before. “What, did I say something stupid?”

“No, no!” Mayonaka apologised. “I just realised how odd my culture must seem compared to the one you are used to.”

“And one you are used to now as well!” Blade pointed out, a bit annoyed by the fact she laughed at him.

“True.” Mayonaka smiled. “I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to meet two cultures and learn the best from them.”

“Then I can imagine the trouble we’ll be encountering.” Sushi folded her arms.

“What do you mean?” Naraku asked curious.

Sushi looked at Naraku. “Mayonaka is now used to our culture as well. Her people are not. Maybe they won’t accept her because she has changed.”

“That shall not happen!” Ancule seemed angry. “She is our Rose of the Desert and everybody knows that!”

“We’ll see what happens and adapt if needed.” Naraku decided and everybody agreed. “That has been our way of life before.”

They all nodded. “Now, for my question?” Blade asked.

“Oh yes, your question.” Mayonaka remembered. “My father lives in the largest oasis of the desert. It’s sometimes hard to encourage people to migrate, but thus far we’ve managed to preserve the oasis.”

“Isn’t that unfair?” Matsuru asked. “You encourage your people to migrate, yet at the same time you don’t do it yourself.”

“He has a point.” Blade agreed.

Mayonaka had to agree as well. “That is true. I’ve never thought about it that way.” She said. “But since my country has many different tribes, it’s best to have the king at one spot. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be very handy.”

Sushi grinned. “I can imagine what would happen.” She stretched her hands and acted as if she was an over-dramatic performer. “Oh, people of this brave village, please let me know... Where does the king live nowadays?! A neighbouring tribe has put our houses on fire! We must get help!”

Everybody but Ancule laughed. “Something wrong?” Mayonaka asked.

Ancule swallowed. "Ever since... your father... has gone sick, things like that have been happening." He confessed. "The leaders of the tribes pledged loyalty to him... but not to The Council. They simply don't listen to them!" Mayonaka gasped, shocked. "That's why I was so relieved when I found you, my princess." He continued. "You can bring unity. Your brother is too young, but you... you must take your father's place!"

"When did this start?" Mayonaka barely managed to get the words over her lips. Ancule looked towards the ground. "About four years ago... Your father is near death for almost four years now... if it hasn't been already too la-..."

"Stop that!" Mayonaka ordered. "He is not dead! You hear that?! He is not dead! Not dead, I tell you!"

Ancule bowed. "Yes, my princess, please forgive me."

Sushi placed a hand on Mayonaka's shoulder. "Calm down." She said. "Don't worry yet. We've only been on the road for three days now."

Mayonaka wanted to say something in return, when shaking bushes suddenly interrupted the conversation. Everyone stared at the bushes, surprised, stunned, though also worried.

Sushi almost jumped into Mayonaka's arms and Ancule drew his sword to protect his princess. Matsuru and Blade stepped in front of Naraku as well. Ready for whatever may come, they all waited patiently.

The black shade fell onto the ground, panting heavily, with shining metal following it. Astounded, they gasped at the eyes looking happy yet filled with pain.

"Shadowhunter!" Naraku pushed Blade and Matsuru away. She took the exhausted wolf's face in her arms. "What are you doing here?" Then she noticed the metal wrapped around the leg of her beloved friend.

Blade knelt beside it. "A wolves' claw..." He mumbled. "Haven't seen those in ages."

"What is it?" Naraku asked worried. "It's hurting her!"

"A trap designed to kill wolves." Blade answered and then, with help from Matsuru, he carefully opened the claw, taking it from Shadowhunter's bleeding paw. The wolf whimpered in pain, but Naraku hushed her and started healing the wolf's leg with her magical powers. It was hard, because she had never done it before, but she tried. For Shadowhunter, she tried.

Ancule gasped in amazement. "She's a Magic User?!" He gasped, astounded.

Mayonaka nodded. "Another reason why she should travel." Mayonaka looked at the young girl that was slowly doing what was needed. "She needs to find her limits."

Sushi looked at Blade destroying the wolf claw. "I'm amazed she managed to get here, especially with that thing on her leg. Must have been really painful."

"What amazes me, is that she's here at all!" Matsuru looked at the leg. The wound was slowly vanishing, but it would take a long while before the fur would grow back. "What is she doing here?"

>Shadowhunter... misses Naraku...< He heard in his mind. He sighed. Matsuru knew Naraku felt the same as Shadowhunter... but she couldn't...

“That doesn’t make it okay!” He said to the wolf, not noticing Ancule staring at him. Obviously he couldn’t pick up the telepathic message. “It’s too dangerous for you to come along!”

Sushi knelt before Shadowhunter and gave her some herbs. “Here, this will make you feel a bit better.” She said.

“She’s not going back!” Naraku suddenly said. “Shadowhunter is here and she will come along now!” She finished her healing and stepped back up.

“The desert is too hot for a black wolf!” Matsuuro threw back. “She could die out there!”

“She will not!” Naraku yelled back. “She’s strong!”

“She’s not used to it!”

“Neither are we!” Naraku suddenly said and silence fell. “We are not used to a desert either! All I’ve ever seen was ice and snow and forest! *I’m* not used to it either. I guess that means I could die there as well!”

“We are humans, that’s different.” Matsuuro sighed.

“Reminds me of...” Sushi pondered, not paying attention to anyone else. “I should make suitable clothes...” Blade smacked her so she would pay attention to the discussion again.

However, the discussion had already ended. Naraku and Matsuuro both stared at each other. Both were convinced they were right.

“Oh, man, not again!” Blade sighed. “Sometimes they both just act like little children!”

Mayonaka stepped between them. “Enough!” She decided. “Fighting is of no use. We have to decide what’s best.”

“You know the desert better than any of us.” Matsuuro turned to Mayonaka. “A black wolf can never survive there, right?”

“She’ll adapt!” Naraku said back. “She’s an IceHunter and IceHunters always adapt!”

“I must admit it’s too late to send her back.” Mayonaka thought out loud. “And even if we do, knowing Shadowhunter, she won’t go home.”

“One more reason to let her come along.” Naraku said. “She will adapt!”

“I know she has the willpower to do it.” Blade pondered. “But is it possible? I mean, can a wolf adapt?”

Mayonaka looked at the wolf. “She’ll have to.”

>I will.< Shadowhunter replied, determined.

“Then it’s decided.” Naraku added firmly. “Shadowhunter goes along.”

Matsuuro sighed and couldn’t help but smile. “I can never win from you, can I?”

Episode 80: Teddy bear

Snow was slowly melting. They were still quite up North, even though they had been walking for more than two weeks now. The wounded wolf had slowed them down in the beginning, but now that she had recovered they were travelling at full speed again.

New green showed itself courageously to the world outside and in certain places, people could see the bulbs of early blossoms.

Following Ancule's memory and Blade's compass, they continued their path with a good feeling. Sushi walked around Naraku with a measuring tape. "Are you almost done?" Blade sneered. "You're in my way."

"Then you try walking and measuring at the same time!" Sushi snapped back.

Naraku stopped walking. "Maybe I should stop walking for a while?" She suggested.

Sushi thanked her and measured her height. "My, Naraku, you've grown!"

"I've grown?!" Naraku gasped, but then her entire body got filled with joy. "I've grown!" She jumped up and down and hugged Matsu and Blade.

>I thought she was a Full Grown¹ already...< Matsu said telepathically to his friend.

"I've grown!" Naraku danced. "How much have I grown?" She then asked.

"A whole centimetre..." Sushi answered.

"A whole centimetre!" Naraku jumped up and down again. "Wait, that's not much, is it?"

The others laughed. "It's more than we expected anyway, Nara." Matsu admitted.

Blade nodded. "And it tells us more about your age." He said, recalling they didn't know how old Naraku was. "Humans will grow until they are about twenty-five; then they are a True Full Grown²."

"It must mean you're younger than twenty-five years old." Mayonaka smiled.

"Who knows, maybe you'll get even taller than Blade!"

"Taller than me?!" Blade grinned annoyed. "Yeah, right, that's never going to happen."

Sushi tucked away the measuring tape and continued to walk. "Well, that just means I've got to take that into calculation when making new clothes." She said.

"But I need your help with the designs, Mayo-nenka."

"Stop calling me Mayo-nenka." Mayonaka sighed, but Sushi ignored her.

"I have no clue what is best when it comes to desert-clothing." She continued.

"But I can imagine it will have to be light and cool."

"I'm just going to give up." Mayonaka whispered. "She's hopeless!"

After walking a while, the group entered a forest. The pale sunlight danced through the leaves and light shone onto the path. It looked quite enchanting, those little spots of light on the ground.

They all enjoyed it... until a loud grumble filled the forest. Birds flew up and squirrels went into hiding in their small lairs in the trees. The group stared at each other, shocked.

Sushi sweated. "Eh... is anyone else hungry as well?"

"Leave it to the Elf to slow us down again." Blade sighed.

"Again?!" Sushi snapped.

"Okay, let's take a break." Matsu quickly stepped between them. "But someone will have to get us lunch."

"Leave that to me." Naraku smiled and Shadowhunter was eager as well.

"Correction, leave that to us!"

"You're not going alone." Matsu took his bow and arrow as well.

Naraku giggled and turned around. "You think you can keep up with me?"

"Don't worry about me." Matsu smiled back and together they left for the hunt.

Blade watched them go. For a second he felt sad, but then smiled. Naraku had made her choice; both Matsu and Blade were equally important to her. There was no reason left to be jealous. "What, no snappy remark?" Mayonaka asked Blade.

"What? Eh, oh, yeah." Blade quickly said. "Prepare for a night of little sleep."

"Huh, why?" Ancule asked.

"Because we'll have to spend it looking for Matsu."

Sushi looked around. "I'm going to look around here a bit." She said. "Maybe I can find some mushrooms or nuts. Or maybe something for a new potion."

"What is the use?" Mayonaka yelled after the witch-in-training. "You still suck at reading!"

"Just keep that spell-book ready!" Sushi winked and left the group as well.

Sushi enjoyed walking through the forest. As an Elf, she felt more connected to the earth than any other creature. Yet, it also made her sad. Sushi placed her hand onto a tree and then leaned close to it. "One day," She promised. "one day I'll control the earth as well. Just like Ao!" She actually missed her brother; how strange. He was always picking on her!

It was just like the days when she had just left home. She knew where Ao was, but she couldn't return. At least, not yet. How she loved her brother, even though he sometimes acted so... so... annoying! She could just simply kill him sometimes!

Sushi then chuckled. Ao was just protective. He loved her and she knew that.

Suddenly Sushi's eye caught something. Between the grass and some flowers, Sushi noticed some reddish leaves. "By the High Ones..." She gasped and hurried closer.

"Impossible!" She knelt beside the plant. "Raven's Claw!" She carefully cut the plant loose.

"This is incredible! Finally, no more carrot-extract as a pathetic replacement. I finally have Raven's Claw!" Sushi looked around, hoping to find more of this rare herb. She stood up and went through the bushes. Looking around, the Elf tried to find more. "Ah!" She exclaimed and knelt next to another small plant.

Suddenly Sushi's ears twitched. Carefully she looked up. She had heard something... and suddenly... the forest was so silent! No bird was chirping, no leaf was rustling. Nothing could be heard. At all.

All of a sudden, a sound did fill the forest! It was very soft, but it was loud enough for Sushi's great hearing to pick it up. Trembling lightly, she turned around and looked at the bushes.

A pair of eyes shone in the darkness. Within the blink of an eye a large brown bear jumped through the bushes towards Sushi!

"AAAAAIIIIIIIIIIII!" Sushi screamed and started running. Faster than she had ever done, her feet flew over the ground. "WHY DID I LEAVE MY SPEAR BEHIND?!" She accused herself, but then had to jump away in order not to be hit by a large paw. "LIKE THAT WOULD HAVE MADE ANY DIFFERENCE!"

Back in the camp, Blade snapped up. "Did you hear something, Blade?" Mayonaka asked.

Blade just stood up and started using his telepathy. >Sushi, are you okay?< He asked wondering.

>No, I am *not* okay and if you don't mind, I'll continue running for my life right now!< Sushi leaped over a dead log, but the bear just burst right through it.

Blade was shocked. >What is wrong?!< He demanded to know.

>Nothing big.< Sushi replied, looking around for an exit, but how can you escape from a bear which is almost three times bigger than you and has very sharp claws?

>I just stumbled on the cutest little teddy bear... AND THAT THING WANTS TO PLAY!<

"Holy shi-..." Blade gasped. Then he turned around, grabbed his sword, bow and arrow and ran into the direction his senses guided him.

"Where are you going?!" Mayonaka yelled after him.

"Stay here!" Blade ordered. "And climb into the trees!"

At that moment the bear's claw hit Sushi's back. She screamed with agony and rolled down a cliff. Injured, she looked back and gritted her teeth. "I'm not going to lose to an oversized carpet!" She growled and stood up before the bear reached her.

The chase started again. Sushi knew that it wouldn't take long before the bear would win this cat-and-mouse game.

Suddenly Sushi noticed the bear was chasing her to a dead end! The road suddenly stopped and after a large hole, it continued. A ravine!

However, Sushi kept on running. "High Ones, I put my fate into your hands..." She prayed... and jumped.

The agile Elf flew through the sky and just in time she managed to grab a thick branch. However, she slipped away and fell down. Quickly she grabbed a vine to stop her fall. She sighed relieved, but then heard a growl.

Sushi looked aside and grinned. The bear was too far away from her and the ravine was too deep to just take a gamble and jump. "Heh, heh." She grinned. "I guess the High Ones want you to find something else for dinner."

With all her strength, Sushi climbed up the vine again and crawled onto the thick branch. She took a few deep breaths and then lay down on the branch. Her back was hurting and Sushi took off her bag. She hung it not too far away from her. Sushi bit her lips; she couldn't remember the last time she was hurt this much! Suddenly it seemed like nightfall had arrived sooner than ever and Sushi lost consciousness. Her arm slipped from the branch and slowly... very slowly... her body followed.

Not being aware of it at all, Sushi fell from the branch, plunging into the deep ravine. Suddenly she started glowing green and vines shot down. They wrapped themselves around her legs, capturing her before she would fall towards her death. Then the green light died down... but Sushi did not wake up.

Frightened, Blade rushed through the woods. He had easily found the bear tracks and hoped that following them would lead them to Sushi.

>Blade, where are you?< It suddenly sounded through his mind. >Mayonaka said there was something wrong!<

>There is, big time!< Blade's answer was short. >Find me as fast as possible and bring Naraku along!< He then swallowed. "Let's just hope we won't need her..." When Blade closed the connection, he reached the ravine. At first, he only looked towards the ground. Good, the bear had turned. Sushi had probably tried to trick the bear so he would fall down. That would mean she was still safe.

Suddenly his breath stammered. In that tree... on the other end... Sushi's bag! But where was the Elf? He couldn't believe it! She couldn't have...

Then he spotted her, hanging down in the ravine! How did she get there? That didn't matter, somehow Blade had to get her out of there! >Sushi!< He called out for her. >Sushi, say something!< However, it stayed silent.

Blade looked around and spotted a thin log across the ravine not that far away. It was tricky, but it would have to do. He ran towards it and carefully yet quickly walked over the log.

Not much later Blade knelt before the edge of the ravine. Sushi was hanging not that far away from the wall... if he could climb down here... >Sushi!< He tried again, but again no response.

Blade looked around and saw some long thick vines. He took off all his unnecessary weight and grabbed a vine. He pulled it loose and tied it to a tree. 'Let's just pray it holds...' He thought and tied the other end to his waist. Carefully, he started crawling down the wall. 'I feel like a dammed spider', Blade thought again, 'But right now I wouldn't mind being one at all!'

Episode 81: Priorities

Blade carefully climbed down the ravine wall. He almost slipped away a few times and the wind howling around him didn't make his job any easier. "I still wonder how she got there..." He whispered, looking down.

Sushi was not that far away from him anymore, but the wind made her swing back and forth. It was only a wild guess whether the vines would hold her much longer. Suddenly Blade spotted Sushi's back.

"That damned bear!" He cursed when he saw it had injured Sushi severely.

Through the cuts in her clothes Blade could see dried blood. It was a miracle she had survived that... if she was still alive at all! Each time Blade tried to use his telepathy, there was no answer...

Finally Blade had reached the Elfin girl. Pain was written all over her face and Blade didn't wait any longer. He carefully took her in his arms, praying the vine would keep their weight and cut the vines surrounding her. However, the most difficult part would be next. How would he get back up there? He needed two hands to climb up and one hand to keep Sushi on his shoulder... He needed just one more freaking hand!

"Okay... I can think about one more thing." He hissed. "I hope you'll forgive me for that." Blade carefully put Sushi on his shoulder, hoping he wouldn't drop her. Then he used the vines to tie her to his body.

The whole process seemed to take hours, but finally Blade was ready to climb back up again.

"By the High Ones, Blade!" Blade heard Naraku's voice through the ravine.

"It was about time..." Blade hissed, but focused on climbing again. His hand went from rock to rock, praying with all his might he wouldn't slip away or that Sushi wouldn't fall from his back.

After several more minutes he finally reached the edge of the cliff again. Matsu and Naraku helped him over the edge and dragged them onto ground level again. Quickly Matsu cut Sushi loose. "What happened?" Matsu asked worriedly, seeing the wounds on her back.

Naraku started to use her healing powers again. The magic flowed through the wounds and slowly they vanished.

"A bear." Blade answered in the meantime.

"There is a bear here?!" Matsu gasped.

Blade carefully climbed into the tree and retrieved Sushi's bag. "That's what she told me." He answered.

"Then we have to get out of here right away!" Matsu saw Naraku had finished and took the Elfin maiden into his arms. "Straight back to camp and out of this place!"

Blade helped Naraku, who had been weakened by the healing progress. "What is a bear?" Naraku asked. "I've never seen one before."

"Trust me, you really don't want to see one either!" Blade answered truthfully and they headed back to camp.

“Oh, High Ones!” Mayonaka gasped when she saw Sushi in Matsu’s arms.

“She’ll be fine...” Matsu whispered and placed her onto the ground.

Mayonaka released tears of anger. “Who did this to her?!” She cried.

“A bear.” Naraku replied. “But what is a bear?”

At the same moment Ancule wanted to explain it, screams filled the forest.

Alarmed, Naraku, Blade, Matsu and Shadowhunter instinctively ran towards the screams, leaving the others behind. “If you see the bear, climb into a tree!” Blade yelled back.

“But bears can climb too!” Ancule screamed at Blade.

Mayonaka took Sushi into her arms. “Let’s pray that this bear doesn’t know that then...”

A bear was a dangerous creature, especially if it was in a bad mood. Since it already lost Sushi, anyone could imagine the mood this bear was in.

Suddenly they stopped running. Their mouths fell open. Blood and colour vanished from Matsu’s face, adding a feeling of sickness, while Blade got dizzy from this sight. Naraku was the only one that didn’t seem to be affected that much and walked towards the path.

Carnage. There was no other word for it. Blood was simply everywhere. Naraku stopped near a body. It was a woman... at least, she thought it was. She couldn’t tell it that well anymore.

“Haria...” She heard from aside and saw a man with a stretched arm.

Blade walked towards the man and helped him up. He was covered in wounds, but he was still alive. “Don’t look at her.” He ordered. “Think about how she was...”

Matsu looked around. Three more girls and a young man stepped up. Injured, but not severe. “Oh, High Ones... Haria...” A woman sobbed.

“No, it can’t be!” Another cried, hiding in the arms of an older girl.

Naraku looked around. Her feelings told her it was a miracle only one was killed.

“Did the bear do this?” She asked.

One of the men nodded. “We are peaceful pilgrims!” He replied. “What did we do wrong to get punished so severely by the High Ones?”

No one knew an answer. “Let’s take them to our camp...” Matsu suggested and guided them away from this sight.

Naraku was last to leave. She looked at the body one more time and then made up her mind.

Back in camp, Sushi had regained consciousness. She was sitting next to a large tree, far away from the mourning travellers. “What is wrong?” Naraku asked her. “I’m cold.” Sushi whispered.

Naraku gave a blanket to Sushi. “Why do you feel sad?”

Shadowhunter came closer as well and placed her head on Sushi’s lap. As if she wanted to say: ‘don’t cry, that makes me sad as well’.

“If... if the bear had taken me... then Haria...”

“Don’t blame yourself for that!” Naraku said. “It’s not your fault!”

“I know... but if...” Sushi pulled the blanket closer and stared in front of her.

Naraku stood up and walked towards her other friends. "We can't just leave here." Naraku decided.

"I agree with that." Blade said and Matsuuro nodded as well.

"You want to stay here?!" Ancule burst out. "You are putting the princess..."

"That bear killed a human being!" Naraku snapped back. "He's too dangerous!"

Ancule turned to Mayonaka. "My princess, your kingdom is waiting! Please, reason with them!"

However, Mayonaka didn't listen. She stepped towards Naraku. "What is your plan, *chieftess?*?" She asked.

'Why is she calling that girl her chief?!' Ancule didn't understand. 'She should be the leader; she has royal blood!' Though, Mayonaka had said Naraku's title for a reason. She wanted to make clear to Ancule she was now part of a different group and that she had other responsibilities now as well. And right now her priorities were here...

"That bear must be stopped." Naraku decided. "We'll hunt him." She turned to Mayonaka. "We could use you."

Mayonaka nodded and smiled. "You can count on me!"

Ancule grabbed her arm. "You are going along with her?!" He burst out. "It's too dangerous!"

Mayonaka pulled herself loose. "I have to!" She replied. "I need to cover their backs!" She took her bow and arrows. Before she followed the others, she looked back one more time... Sushi was still sitting next to the tree.

>She can't come along.< Naraku said to Mayonaka. >She might hesitate and we can't use that right now.<

"Yes, but..." Mayonaka tried, but silence fell. She turned around and joined the hunt.

It was going to be a very dangerous hunt. Two young men, two young women and a wolf; hunting down an enemy they knew nothing about. They didn't know his size, they didn't know his strengths or weaknesses... It was a clear disadvantage. Mayonaka was assigned to shoot the bear with her arrows as soon as she had a clear shot. Matsuuro had taken along Sushi's spear and would try to get as close as possible to the heart. Blade had his sword and Naraku had her sword and knife ready for action.

>We must return to where he was last seen.< Blade suggested and the others nodded.

>You may want to skip that part, Mayonaka.< Matsuuro said to her. >It's not a pretty sight.<

Mayonaka shook her head. >I want to see what he did.<

>Really certain about that?< Blade asked and pushed away the bushes.

Mayonaka turned as white as a sheet. "High Ones..." She gasped and the group was silent again.

>Are you okay?< Naraku asked concerned.

Mayonaka nodded. >This was not done out of survival.< She growled. >This was a meaningless kill!<

>I thought only humans did that...< Matsuuro pondered, but then focused back on the hunt.

>If it's a male, he could do it because of territory.< Blade ended the discussion and followed the tracks.

Naraku knelt and placed her hand in a large paw print. "He must be quite big..." She whispered when she saw her hand could almost fit twice into the paw print! Shadowhunter sniffed at the ground and Naraku followed her example; showing she herself had a scent more advanced than any other human being, most likely due to her magic. Her eyes narrowed and she released a soft growl. >He's not far away.< She raised herself.

>Wait!< Blade suddenly stopped them. >We can't just attack him.<

Matsuuro agreed. >Blade is right, that bear is much stronger than we are; we must trick him!<

>But what if he already found us?< All turned around and saw Mayonaka pointing. A growl. They knew what he was saying. 'Out. This place is mine!'

"Okay... it's a male all right." Matsuuro did one step back.

"Split up!" Naraku ordered.

The bear jumped forward and they all jumped aside. Everyone ran into a different direction. The bear was confused for only a second, but then picked his target... Mayonaka.

Suddenly a hand of mud flew into his face. "Hey, big guy, I've never hunted a bear before." Naraku stood there firm and smiling, with Shadowhunter next to her.

"Want to make my day?"

>Naraku, are you nuts?!< Matsuuro yelled.

>You don't want to mess with a bear!< Blade added.

However, Naraku was determined. >You guys get ready. I'll lead him to where we found Sushi.<

>But...< Mayonaka was worried.

"NOW!" Naraku ordered as the bear stormed towards her.

Fast as ever, Naraku did her best to outrun the large bear. Shadowhunter accompanied her and both were almost running at the same speed. To lead him even further away from the others, Naraku decided they would turn left; abandoning the path and into the woods. The black wolf used a rock to help her turn by leaping against it, while Naraku slid a bit in the turn and then followed Shadowhunter.

The bear was much larger, crashing against the rocks, but did not plan to give up on the chase. This girl wanted a challenge? Well, she would get it! Everything included!

Episode 82: The things you shouldn't do...

Bluntly Shadowhunter burst through the bushes. Agile like a deer Naraku followed soon after. And then, comparable with a raging bulldozer (if there would have been any on Seken), the vicious old bear crashed into the scene. He didn't look where he placed his gigantic paws. The few brave mushrooms that still lived, were now killed by a cranky creature that wanted to kill this girl standing before him, no matter what!

>He's gaining!< Shadowhunter panted.

>I know!< Naraku didn't dare look back. Sure, she had offered she would play bait, but she didn't expect the darn bear would be this fast! >How can such a large creature be this fast?!< She wondered.

>Don't worry about his speed, worry about his claws!<

"Oh no!" Naraku suddenly exclaimed when she saw a large wall of stone rising from the ground before her. She hadn't seen that on her first time she went to the ravine! "Turn!" She ordered her wolf companion.

>What?!< Shadowhunter gasped.

"We went wrong, now turn!" Naraku jumped up, grabbed a branch and twirled around it. At the right moment, she let go and landed right behind the bear! The bear turned as well, leaving a deep and dusty trail.

Shadowhunter dove into the bushes and tried to run faster than the bear, but she was simply too tired! >Naraku!< She pleaded, but her friend was already gone...

At the ravine, Mayonaka, Matsu and Blade were hiding in a tree. With some strong vines in their hands, they waited for their leader to come as promised. "Too long..." Matsu said. "She's taking too long..."

"She'll make it." Mayonaka assured him. "We're talking about Naraku! She defeated Lord Zashjan!"

"Lord Zashjan wasn't a bear!" Matsu snapped back, but immediately apologised. "I'm sorry, Mayonaka." He sighed. "This is just not good for my nerves."

Mayonaka nodded; she understood it. >She'll come.< She said. >Don't worry. She always keeps her promise.<

Sweat pearls danced on Naraku's forehead and Naraku was breathing heavier and heavier. If she didn't find that darn ravine soon, she would surely get killed! Naraku had already realized it. This bear, this cranky old bear... he wanted her out and she was defying his authority! It would have been so much less trouble if she would just leave, but Naraku couldn't! The bear had almost killed Sushi and had already killed an innocent being.

This bear had to go down, or this place wasn't safe for anyone.

>Naraku, where are you?< She heard in her mind.

>Almost... there...< She didn't use more energy than needed. She had been on exhausting hunts, but this time, being the chased one, she couldn't give up the chase if she wished.

All of a sudden, a black shade leaped from the air and landed on the bear's head. The bear fell down and rolled a bit, but immediately stood up again. Oh, he saw the black creature that was now running aside the purple haired prey again, but he didn't care about the wolf. The girl was the one he wanted!

"Not again!" Naraku could simply kick herself! She had finally found the ravine... but she was on the wrong side of it! Her friends were waiting on the other side! Shadowhunter had already spotted the log Blade had used to cross the ravine to get to Sushi and quickly she ran towards it. She took a jump and only landed in the middle of the log before reaching the other side. Then she stopped and turned around.

"What are you waiting for?!" Naraku yelled, waving her arms.

>You.< Shadowhunter simply stated.

Naraku took a jump and landed onto the log as well. As fast as her feet could carry her, she tried to cross it, but the bear did not want to give up. He too took a jump! With horror, Naraku's friends could hear the log crack. With one last jump, Naraku tried to reach the other side. Soaring through the sky, Naraku made it, but miscalculated her landing and hit the ground hard. Dizzy, she rolled over the floor and didn't move anymore.

However... she was not the only one who had made it. With a trembling thud, the last large paw placed itself upon the green grass and with a loud growl the bear stepped closer...

Moaning, Naraku tried to get up, but exhaustion and the bad landing had taken its toll. She lay defenceless on the ground.

Shadowhunter jumped between them, flashing her sharp teeth. However, even the wolf knew that this bear could take her out with one blow. Still, Shadowhunter had made up her mind. She would protect Naraku, no matter what.

>Shadowhunter, go left!<

The order was firm and Shadowhunter knew she had to obey. She leaped away and less than a second later an arrow implanted itself into the shoulder of the bear.

"I missed!" Mayonaka hissed, seeing the bear roaring and raising himself.

Blade and Matsuru jumped out of the tree and nodded at each other. Matsuru took his spear and stepped in front of Naraku. Blade quickly picked up Naraku and put her down, out of the way. "You wait here!" He ordered. Naraku had no time to disagree with him.

Matsuru tried to hit the bear with this puny pin he called a spear. Matsuru stayed out of the bear's range no matter what and tried to make sure Mayonaka had a clear view to hit the animal again.

Blade ran towards a tree and tied a vine to it. "This was not the plan!" He hissed, but knew there was no time to waste. Then he ran towards the bear, rolled over the ground so he would not be hit by the claw snatching at him and jumped back up.

He took a few steps backwards and pulled the vine.

It snapped. The vine had simply snapped. "This was not the plan either!" Blade complained, but saw the bear had turned towards him. Matsuru took his chance and dove forward. The spear went into the body, but missed the heart.

Raging, the bear slammed Matsuru away. He shove over the ground, but was not as injured as he expected. He looked up and saw Blade trying to kill the bear with his sword. Yet all Blade could do was give him a haircut.

Another arrow shot through the air. Now it got stuck into his back and the bear made a circle, releasing a deafening roar! Blade jumped and grabbed the hair on the back of the bear. Quickly he pushed the sword into the bear's back.

Still, it wasn't enough. The bear slammed Blade away and even got rid of the spear. "Don't worry." Blade smiled. "He won't be able to hold on much longer."

"That takes too long." Naraku suddenly said and passed him. She took Sushi's spear from the ground and looked at the bear. He looked at her, still standing on his hind legs and panting heavily. He knew his end was coming, but he did not want to give up. He lowered himself and with awesome strength, he dove at Naraku.

That was what she was hoping for. The spear went deep into his body. Naraku had to let go and jump in order not to get squished by the large body. The bear went down... and released a last sigh.

Silence filled the forest again. Far away, Naraku and her friends could hear birds chirping. As if nothing had happened.

Mayonaka jumped out of the tree and ran towards her friends. Everyone was crawling up again. Matsuru's biggest injuries were a few small wounds; most of him was covered by dirt, making it look worse than it was.

Blade had landed badly on his arm. Even though it was not broken, it would be a few hours before he could use it again.

Naraku too had nothing more than bruises. Mayonaka approached her. "Well done." She said.

Naraku shook her head. "I didn't do it." She spoke. "Without you all, I would have surely died here."

Matsuru came closer as well. He wanted to say something, but then noticed something else. He moved Naraku's bangs a bit. "You have a cut on your face..."

Naraku touched her forehead. "I guess." She admitted. She looked at her red painted fingers. "It's not that bad." Naraku then said.

Matsuru nodded. "So, what will we do now?" He turned towards the bear.

Blade smiled. "I guess we won't be hungry for a while..."

Back in camp, the travellers were disgusted by the fact that Naraku and her friends had decided to take the meat. "You're eating a killer!"

"Then what should we do?" Naraku asked them. "Wouldn't it be worse if we left him there and let his gifts go to waste?"

"GIFTS?!" A woman yelled. "That creature does not deserve..."

"Anjano." A man placed his hand on her shoulder. "It's their way of living. We are sophisticated pilgrims, they are just hunters."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Blade and Matsuru jumped up.

"What does 'sophisticated' mean?" Naraku asked Mayonaka, who motioned the girl to be silent.

"We risked our lives just to protect you!" Matsuru said.

The oldest man folded his arms. "So now we should thank you?" He asked. "You were too late to save Haria!"

"That's not fair!" Sushi joined them. "You arrived when they just found out there was a bear in this forest!"

Naraku nodded. "Each creature has a right to live. We needed food and leathers for clothes. Should we have left the bear and killed other creatures, while the bear could provide us all that?"

Ancule came between them. "Look, it's no use fighting about this." He decided. "Obviously we can't agree on this matter, because we see it from too different viewpoints."

"Ancule is right." Mayonaka said. "Hate us if you want, but it's not worth fighting about."

These were the words the travellers actually needed. They calmed down. They knew why they were acting like this. That bear had killed one of their loved ones and now these hunters were eating it. However, if the bear hadn't killed one of them, they probably wouldn't have cared at all.

"We apologise." The oldest one said. "It's because of Haria." He admitted what they all were thinking. "It's hard for us to think you welcome his... what you call... 'gifts'. To us he's not a blessing."

"We understand that." Matsuru had calmed down as well. "If you wish though, you can eat along."

The man looked at his companions. "Rather not, but thank you for offering."

"We do wish to repay you." Another man said. "After all, you stopped this bear before he could hurt anyone else. You could just have left and save yourselves."

"That's not needed." Blade touched his sore arm.

"But it is our wish!" A woman said. "Please tell us how we can repay you. Haria would have done the same." Saying that name again caused silence among the people.

Naraku was the first to stand up. "I hope I'm not rude, but... could you please tell me something about your journeys?" She asked. "I would love to hear about the places and creatures you saw."

The old man nodded and smiled. "Of course. And especially for you, I'll tell you the most special adventure we had." From his bag he took some sort of dusty golden stick. "You see this, my dear?" He asked. "This is a true horn from a unicorn, covered in pure gold."

Episode 83: Stories from beyond

Naraku stared at the golden horn in the man's hand. She didn't know the man's name, but she felt that what he held in his hands was a rare thing. Magic just emanated from it, even though it was not visible.

Naraku carefully touched the horn. For a second images flew through her mind. She saw a young man with a sword and he dove towards her! It was as if she was somewhere else; but she was not. However, she did feel it: fear, pain and anger. She snapped up and looked around, confused. She then looked at the man before her... and recognised him as the man with the sword! Could it be...? No, it was impossible!

>Are you all right?< She heard Maturu ask and noticed a hand on her shoulder. Naraku nodded as a reply, not sure what to make of these... visions.

"A unicorn... what is it?" Naraku then asked curiously.

The man placed the horn before him on the ground, as if it would give him inspiration by just looking at it. "A unicorn is a horse with a horn." He stated.

"However, not an ordinary horse. It's the most beautiful kind of horse you have ever seen! Slender and fast, the unicorn looks like a fragile piece of glass. The skin is of a pearly white kind, shimmering like a rainbow and... well, it's beyond words."

"So, you've seen one?" Blade was not really impressed. A peaceful pilgrim and he got a unicorn's horn? Sure... "I heard unicorns are dangerous creatures."

"Oh, they are." The man smiled. "But I wasn't a pilgrim in my youth. Before I saw the path of the High Ones, I was a skilled swordsman. I would love to challenge you, but I swore against violence."

Blade still didn't believe a thing of it. >Sure, of course he swore against violence. I say it was a lucky catch.<

>Shh!< Mayonaka poked him.

"Actually, the day I saw the light of the High Ones, was the same day I got this horn." The man continued. "Walking through the dense forest, it was as if she was calling me." He looked skywards. "She was more beautiful than a diamond. Her silk manes danced in the wind. Oh, she was challenging me, I could feel that." The man chuckled.

For a second, Naraku could see it all before her. However, she didn't see the unicorn. All she saw, was a younger version of the man, who was carefully walking towards her. She felt... uneasy.

"Every move of her body just told me she wanted me to catch her, like all unicorns do." The man touched the horn, letting his fingers slide over all the carvings it had. "Unicorns are the best prize a hunter can get. They are swift, agile, playful creatures."

Again Naraku saw the other forest. She felt like she was running fast and when she looked down... she saw hooves! The man was following her and... she was scared! 'Get away! Leave me alone!' These and other thoughts of fear shot through her mind.

“The chase was grand, bigger than any I had before.” The man continued once more. “I’ve fought many battles and went along with many hunts, but this... I could feel the High Ones wanting me to catch her. Even when she went down, she never gave up. Just like a true unicorn! Grand and pride, but with eternal...”

“EAAAAARHG!” Naraku suddenly screamed and grabbed her head. Visions, scared visions went through her mind. And then, incredible pain! It felt like something important got cut out of her and then... everything turned black. Darkness. Everything suddenly felt... dead.

“Naraku!” Blade and Matsu shot forward, both on a side. “What’s wrong!?” Naraku looked up and then stared at her hands. For a second she thought they were covered with blood, but they were not. “The unicorn!” She suddenly said. “You killed her!”

“Naraku!” Mayonaka stopped her. “You shouldn’t accuse our guests!” The man looked estranged at her. “I never killed a unicorn! I wouldn’t dare!” He was surprised by this accusation. He, a peaceful pilgrim and believer in the path of the High Ones, would never dare to kill something given by the great gods! “But he...” Naraku tried.

“Naraku!” Mayonaka corrected her.

“You don’t have to worry.” The man assured her, understanding Naraku didn’t know anything about unicorns. “Unicorns are magical beings. The High Ones made their horns as a prize. If you cut it off, it will grow right back.”

“No, it does no...” Naraku started.

Matsu sat before her. “The legend goes that if a unicorn loses his horn, he will sleep until the moon will shine over his body. Then another horn will grow back.” Blade nodded. “Unicorns can’t be killed.” He assured her. “The High Ones made them this way.”

Naraku looked down and then back towards their faces. “But... what if...?”

Sushi joined them as well. “I’m an Elf and feel connected to each earth creature and plant life. I can assure you; I’ve never felt a unicorn dying!”

>You saw a unicorn?!< Mayonaka gasped.

>No, but she doesn’t need to know that.< Sushi showed a bit of embarrassment.

The night had already started to fall when Naraku and her group said goodbye to the pilgrims. They bid each other farewell and the pilgrims said they would pray for a prosperous path for them. Blade and Matsu then wished them a safe journey and that the High Ones would guide them.

Now, the group of friends were taking a break in the nearby spring together, enjoying the bathing-suits Sushi had once made for them. Sushi was scribbling something in the sand on the shore with her finger, making some patterns.

“Why aren’t you joining us, Ancule?” Matsu asked the tall dark-skinned servant. “It would not be right for a servant to share his bath with the Rose of the Desert.” Ancule only replied, holding his sword ready for action.