



Forever Young  
Eternity 4: The Four Chosen Ones

Kim Houtzager

*'A heart, adventurous and bold,  
may sometimes lose the light.  
Two paths share one heart,  
no matter the distance.'*

*'Hanque obo potan gan,  
panané ello matané danooh.  
San dayath cohmin io gan,  
nakin ohalobe.'*



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## The story thus far...

There's a planet far away from us; bigger and greener than ours. It has three moons instead of one. 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 woke up in a forest. She knew nothing of the world around her and people considered her new to this world, despite her looking like a young adult. When Matsuuro met this girl, he decided to take care of her and raise her as if she were his own. He taught her how to speak, how to behave and even how to fight. This girl, named Naraku, seemed to have amazing magical powers, which becomes the source of their many adventures.

Magic attracts Magic, so Naraku attracts both friends and enemies. During their adventures, they find a home in the mysterious castle MorningSnow. Naraku has become the Chieftess of The IceHunters, a small tribe with both Magic Users and Non-Users.

After a journey to the desert and back, Naraku found out who she is: left behind Magic of the High Ones, the eternal gods of this planet. She was supposed to die, but against all odds, she survived everything one of her mothers, Yunakara, threw at her.

Naraku's greatest adversaries were the Yami, a small but highly skilled tribe. Due to an accident, the Yami killed two of The IceHunters, resulting in a hopeless war between the two tribes. Nothing seemed to bring the tribes together, not even when Naraku found her Sonai within the Yami's ranks. However, when a bloodthirsty monster attacked MorningSnow, the Yami and IceHunters were forced to work together and finally, they ended the war.

The IceHunters are now at peace: they have their home and their families. Surely, their happily ever after can now begin... right?

## Chapter 10: The Promise



## Episode 226: A new dawn

The beautiful sound of fingers softly touching elegant strings filled the morning dew. The sun was still rising, as the three moons that had guarded the night left in the western sky. As if the entire world was still awakening, an embracing mist captured both valley and forest, like a blanket slowly being lifted. In the heart of this valley of snow, a lonely castle stood proud and tall, carrying the name it fit best: MorningSnow.

Despite the early morning, a young woman had left her warm bed, just to fill the sky with these melodious tunes. Her dark-toned hands went over the strings of a tall yet beautiful harp, carved from dark ebony. The elegance she used to kiss the snares with her fingers proved she was not an ordinary girl. Royal by heart, the girl practised her skills, but she was not the ruler of this castle. Her duties lay elsewhere, allowing her to fill the waking morning with a song that showed the purity of her heart...

...until the sound of a crying rooster pierced itself through the sky with a blunt force. The music stopped abruptly, as the rooster cried on, waking not only the animals inside the castle, but also the humans.

“Sushi!” An angry voice bellowed over the courtyard. “Teach that beast some manners, or High Ones, I swear I will!”

“[Mou!],” a voice from the stables complained. “Branch just wants to tell you his chickens laid their eggs!”

“I don’t give a beehive about eggs!” The dark-skinned girl stomped over the courtyard, ending up before a young woman with long pointy ears. “Mornings are the only time I can practise in peace and those hideous animals keep on disturbing me!” The sound of mooing filled the stables. “Awe, you’ve upset Milky!” Sushi defended the animals. “Branch is her best friend. You know Kai left me in charge of his animals.”

“We should have never let him get that cow... nor those chickens!” The young woman replied.

“Will the two of you be silent?!” A new voice screamed. “Some people are trying to sleep here!”

“You weren’t sleeping.” A softer, but equally annoyed voice pulled the young man back inside. “I was. And stop screaming at Mayonaka; Kai’s rooster is the one to blame!”

“Good morning, Blade!” A cheerful sound went over both courtyard and battlement. “I didn’t know you were up already!”

“Naraku, please...” A blue-haired man called her back. “It’s too early...”

In the meantime, Sushi had grabbed a basket and gathered some eggs. While leaving the stables, she patted the cow on the head and walked towards the castle. “Breakfast in half an hour!” She yelled, smiling.

“I want an egg!” The girl named Naraku declared.

“Don’t forget my glass of milk.” Mayonaka instructed Sushi. “I need it, so my skin will stay as soft as it is.”

“As you wish, my princess.” Sushi grinned while leaving the courtyard.

About half an hour later, a group of seven people sat around a table, filled with breads, boiled eggs, vegetables and more. Chattering happily, one more awake than the other, the day begun for this group called The IceHunters.

They were a small tribe, but a strong and unique one. One that proved you didn't need to be physically strong, to show your true strength. Together they had faced warlocks and wars, but were granted peace after their struggles. For three and a half years, The IceHunters had time for other things than the battle of life. A time of plenty was not wasted and the storage room was filled to survive years of scarcity. At the head of the table, claiming at least three eggs, was the purple-haired Naraku, the Chieftess of the tribe. Her nickname, 'The First', was rarely used, but known by all. She was the one who had formed the tribe, as well as being the first and only one of her kind. Naraku was not human; not at all... She was silently called 'The Secret Child of the High Ones'. Formed out of an abundance of magic by the everlasting gods of this planet called Seken, she chose the life of a human, instead of a life of magic. Still, her magical skills were amazing as well as unpolished, as she was in fact... not even eight years old.

On her right side, a blue-haired man tried to distract her by not only stealing a kiss, but also an egg. His name was Keiran, and he was the one that belonged to Naraku's heart. Royal by heritage, he joined The IceHunters after discovering his love for the young girl. His ancestors were born in this castle, but instead of him, it was his love who had taken the reign.

Sitting on Naraku and Keiran's left side was Matsuru, a young man who had found and raised Naraku when she knew nothing of the world around her. Carefully nibbling his bread, he disliked Keiran even more from the moment he found out about their love. Naraku may look like a young adult, because she was created as one, but in his heart Matsuru would always see her as 'his little girl'. Naraku still held him dear, cherishing all the days she spent with him, but Matsuru sometimes wondered if she still needed him.

"Sushi, can you hand me the carrots?" Mayonaka, who sat next to Matsuru, asked the girl on the other side of the table. Mayonaka was a princess from the Desert Kingdom but preferred the life of an advisor and librarian over the life of Lovely Side Decoration the palace life held for her. Worried about appearance, she held wisdom and capabilities most people on Seken did not have. Not only that; she had mastered the skills of reading and writing, often spending her time to teach others. "Sushi, hello? Anyone home?"

"Eh, what?" The red-haired girl on the other side of the table shook up from her thoughts. Her ears were long and pointy, like all Elves had, yet Sushi had something that made her different from other Elves. She was a witch, because she could not use Earth Magic like other Elves. While potions were her weakness, summoning spirits to protect herself and others were her forte. "You said something, Mayonaka?"

"Carrots, please?" Mayonaka asked again. Gloomily, the girl handed them over.

"What's with you today?" Mayonaka put some carrots on her plate. "Look, I'm sorry I yelled at you, but I really wished Kai was back, so he could teach those creatures to behave themselves."

"We could always eat that rooster and tell Kai that his blasted beast took off." A black-haired young man grinned. "Problem solved."



“Honey,” A dark blue-haired girl put two little buns on his plate. “...you’ve been suggesting that for almost three years now... It’s not going to happen.”

“But Mah-Lin, he screams every single morning!” The man complained.

“And he will keep on doing so, Blade.” The woman cut the buns in two, completely ignoring him. “Because that’s the only way you get out of bed. I swear, if I would have known marriage would make you lazy and slow...”

“Who are you calling lazy and slow?!” Blade fumed.

“My husband.” The Eastern girl named Mah-Lin licked her fingers. “Come on, eat. We have to hunt today.”

Grumbling, Blade took the bread and stuffed his mouth. He didn’t dare to disagree with her, knowing her all too well. Before Blade met Mah-Lin, he was the tribe’s most prized hunter and warrior. While he was still the top hunter, he had to step aside for his love, who became the best warrior of the tribe. Not only that... she was the only one who regularly defeated him in battle. Such defeat was both prized... and dreaded. “You just wait.” Blade mumbled. “I’ll get you at practise one day.”

“Sure, Blade, sure.” Mah-Lin took some vegetables. “Please, let me know when you wake up.”

Mayonaka couldn’t help but notice Sushi playing with her food. “You were so bouncy this morning.” She said to her best friend. “Don’t tell me you’re tired already. The sun is barely up.”

Matsuru leaned back. “I don’t think it’s that.” He observed. “You miss Ao, don’t you?”

Sushi looked up shocked, but then looked back at her plate, poking the food with her fork. Her nod was almost invisible, but enough to silence the table.

“Don’t worry.” Naraku smiled. “They said they were on their way back.”

“I know... I know...” Sushi took a carrot and waved with it, instead of eating it. “I’m really glad Rain taught Ao that long-range-telepathy stuff... but the only one those Magic Users can talk to is you... And I know he’s fine and all, because you said so... but I haven’t spoken to my brother for over a year!”

“We miss them too.” Mah-Lin tried to cheer her up. “When they left, we didn’t expect them to be gone this long... or that the kingdom of MorningSnow would be this big.”

“If I had known reinstating the kingdom would have been such a harsh task,” Naraku started. “then I would have left myself. After all, I’m the one who proclaimed herself queen to this lost kingdom.”

“As a High One, it’s your right.” Keiran smiled at her. “I mean, I’m only a prince of this kingdom, but when we marry...”

“If you marry!” Both Blade and Matsuru exclaimed at the same time.

“Oh, come on.” Naraku sighed. “I’m not two years old anymore. I love Keiran and you know it.”

“Oh, we know it.” Matsuru said.

“We just don’t like it.” Blade finished, but got an elbow from his lovely wife.

“You are only reminding the people of these lands what their heritage is.” Mayonaka smiled. “Besides, you’re not asking for taxes or anything like that. Not only that, you offer to help them if they need it. If needed, MorningSnow can be their haven.”

“You’ll be a wonderful queen.” Sushi tried to smile. “And I think it was wise not to tell anyone you are a High One, just some big Magic User.”

Naraku looked up, sadness filling her heart. “Maybe...” She said. “But despite all my magic, I can’t seem to make one of my dearest friends happy.” She looked at Sushi. Sushi took Naraku’s hand. “My brother will return, along with our silly Fire User and our voice of reason, the Water User. If anyone can restore the union in these lands, it’s Ao, Kai and Rain...” A soft smile was painted on both faces. “...Can I let go now?” Sushi suddenly asked.

“Oh, sure.” Naraku replied, confused.

Sushi pulled her arm back and looked at her sleeve. “The only puddle of gruel on the whole table...” She mumbled annoyed. “And I put my arm right in it. It just had to be me.”

After breakfast, everyone went to do their chores. Even though they missed three of their friends, work would not wait. Blade and Mah-Lin, walking hand in hand, had already made up again and went off on a hunt. While meat was not really needed, there were other things The IceHunters could use: vegetables, herbs and fruits. Blade was often too proud for such a quest, leaving his wife to do the gathering, while he hunted.

Keiran would venture underground; there was a secret passage from the underground hot spring towards the forest, where quite some mushrooms grew. These mushrooms had the nutrition value of a shoe, but when ground gave a solid kind of flour that could be used in various recipes. Not only that, at the end there was a small spring where fishes often got caught in, making them easy preys.

Sushi would clean the stables and take care of all the animals. This not only meant feeding and cleaning, but also gathering grass for the horses and cow. Her brother, Ao, a Full Grown Earth User, had planted a patch of grass inside the castle, but this was never enough to feed the horses daily. Still, they managed.

Mayonaka had taken up cooking and cleaning. While cooking was not that much of a chore, the cleaning was. Every day she did a little piece of the castle, despite the knowledge it was a lost battle against the dust and cobwebs.

Matsuru and Naraku helped wherever they could. They took over when two or three of them left for the nearby village to buy supplies, or when Sushi needed to make clothes. Left in charge to protect the castle, they were found more than once on the battlement. In the meantime, Naraku tried to practise her skills as a Magic User, but without her mentor Rain, it went slow. Eventually, she stopped trying to explore the limits of her powers and focused on what she already could.

“Matsuru?” Naraku asked during the middle of the day. “Have you seen Shadowhunter?”

Matsuru looked up, surprised. “No, I haven’t.” He admitted. “I suppose she’s with Grasshopper.”

Naraku shook her head. “No, Grasshopper is in the stables. I saw her bringing in a hare; I guess she’s taking an after-lunch nap.”

Matsuru smiled. “Shadowhunter is a strong wolf; she can take care of herself.” He poked Naraku, teasing her. “Just like a certain someone I know.”

Naraku smiled, thinking about the black wolf. With her magic, she levitated herself to a merlon, sitting down on it. It would have amazed anyone, but The IceHunters. This levitation was nothing compared to what she could do.

On the planet Seken, humans, Elves, animals and other creatures could live forever. Being granted both eternal life as well as eternal youth, made this planet seem like an utopia. Add the romance of medieval times, and this world of swords and sorcery would be a dream come true.

However, the average lifespan of a human was, depending on the region, between three hundred to five hundred years. War and danger were always eminent on Seken, making life rough and hard. There is no story known, where a person had died of old age.

Besides the horses, cow, rooster and chickens, there also lived two wolves in MorningSnow, with the same eternal lives as their friends. One was the young Grasshopper, a white Snow Wolf that belonged to the pack that lived nearby the castle. However, as a cub, she was cast out for unclear reasons and thanks to Mayonaka she survived. The other wolf was Shadowhunter, a black wolf, whose heritage was woven with Naraku's past.

When Naraku was created, the High Ones assumed the girl would die, taking the abundance of their magic along in her demise. When Matsuru decided to take care of her, they found out about Naraku's potential. Most High Ones were rejoiced about the girl's growing capabilities, but one High One, the one named Yunakara, had decided to 'correct their mistake'. She had sent Shadowhunter to kill the girl, but the wolf changed when she touched the girl's magic. From the moment they met, a connection between the two formed, slowly turning them into soulmates.

It had been terrible on both, when Naraku had to send the animals away from the castle because of a war, but they kept on believing in each other. The reunion could melt a frozen heart... yet something had changed within the wolf, as well as in Naraku.

The girl had found her Sonai, her 'meant to be', a powerful force on the planet of Seken. He was the one whom she loved with all her heart; a place that was once owned by Matsuru, Blade and Shadowhunter. Still loving them, but now also having someone she would share her life with, it had drifted her away from the ones she always turned to, no matter what happened. Just like children grow up and find their own path, Naraku had become used to dealing with things on her own and sharing her life and room with Keiran.

The wolf had been away from the girl for so long, that the magic Naraku had emitted was wearing out. Even though the magical connection got renewed at their reunion, some of the basic instincts had emerged again. Grasshopper didn't have them; she was not used to living in a pack.

Shadowhunter was... and the wolf started to get drawn to the white Snow Wolves in the forest.

"Blade said he saw her running with the pack." Naraku said, avoiding eye contact with Matsuru. "I didn't think they'd let her in." Matsuru was silent and looked at the valley. "Or maybe I hoped..." She then admitted. "because then she would come back to me."

“Naraku,” Matsuuro started. “she’s a wolf. I’m not saying she shouldn’t be running with that pack, but think about it... Everyone changed when they met you.” Naraku still didn’t look at him. “When the two of us met, you couldn’t speak or think. You didn’t know how to dress, how to eat... and look at you now. You’re the Chieftess of a tribe.”

“I should have never sent her away.” Naraku accused herself.

Matsuuro touched her hand. “That wouldn’t have stopped her.” He tried to make clear.

“She is a wolf that longs for a pack. A pack of wolves, not humans. You chose your path when you chose for Keiran. Wouldn’t it be unfair if you deny her that choice?”

Naraku’s silence showed Matsuuro that she agreed but didn’t want to. “As long as she returns here, she is still the same one that lives in your heart. She just... goes out a lot, to be with her friends. Friends come and go, but their friendship will always remain in your heart.” He wanted to say more, but realised Naraku had to deal with this on her own. “Hey,” He suddenly noticed. “Looks like Blade and Mah-Lin got some help.”

Naraku turned around and a genuine smile banished her sadness. Using her magic to teleport away from the battlement and into the valley, Naraku ran towards the black wolf that accompanied both hunters.

>Shadowhunter!< Naraku used her telepathy to talk to the wolf and knelt to embrace her.

The wolf, in return, wagged with her tail and gave the girl a lick in the face.

“Turns out we were after the same prey.” Blade smiled. “She’s pretty fast; I can see why you like hunting with her.”

Naraku looked back and saw the large deer Blade and Mah-Lin were carrying, alongside some birds and hares. “Could you take this bag?” Mah-Lin asked Naraku.

“It’s been killing my back.”

“Sure.” Naraku smiled and took the bag. “Wow, what did you put in there?”

“Rocks.” Mah-Lin said with a straight face. As a reply, Naraku looked up shocked. “I can’t believe you still fall for jokes like that.” The Eastern girl grinned. “You are easy to fool.”

Naraku smiled, turning a bit red. “I’m starting to get irony.” She admitted and followed along. >Shadowhunter, where have you been lately?< The telepathy she used was open, allowing Blade and Mah-Lin to hear it as well. Telepathy was not restricted to Magic Users; anyone could learn it, as long as they remained close enough to someone with magic.

>Hunting.< Was the only answer from the wolf.

>And what more?< While the wolf also understood the human tongue, Naraku preferred to use telepathy with animals. >What did you do as well?<

>Sleeping.< Shadowhunter admitted. >Hunting.<

“So, I guess the pack accepted you?” Blade mumbled, a bit annoyed by the short answers, as well as making her life seem like a piece of cake compared to his.

>No.< Was the reply of the black wolf. >Shadowhunter hunt with wolves.

Shadowhunter sleep alone.<

Naraku felt sorry for the wolf. >But you can always come home...< She suggested, but the wolf did not reply. Looking at the way the wolf walked and talked, Naraku knew that Shadowhunter wanted to be a ‘real’ wolf, like she had been many years ago.

With pain in her heart, Naraku knelt before the wolf, letting her knees touch the snow. >Do you want me to talk with them?< She suggested.

The wolf looked at the girl and gave her a lick in the face. >Wolves no Shadowhunter. Wolves hunt Naraku. Shadowhunter protect Naraku.<

Naraku looked at the eyes of the wolf. ‘If you are worried they will be mean to me... then why do you want to join them?’ Naraku thought. ‘Why do you want to leave me... for them?’

“Your powers may be grand,” Blade started, “but do you think they will take her in just because you said so?”

“Shadowhunter just has to prove what she’s worth.” Mah-Lin tried to cheer both up. “She’ll manage. And don’t you get all gloomy, because Shadowhunter will always be close to you. It’s just like a village. She’ll just move to the other side of the town. Friends come and go, but friendship lives on forever.”

“That’s something Matsu always says.” Blade noticed.

“Really?” Mah-Lin replied.

Naraku nodded, as they walked on. “He said it to me as well, right before you returned.”

“He said it twice to me this week as well.” Blade pondered. “I guess he misses the others more than he wants to admit.”

“Well, according to Naraku the guys aren’t that far away anymore.” Mah-Lin turned to Naraku, who had observed Shadowhunter. “What was their last estimation?”

“Oh, maybe a month or so.” Naraku looked up from her thoughts. “They said they would stop by the village to get some supplies, while they were at it.”

“Did they tell you anything about their adventures?” Mah-Lin asked, curious.

Naraku shook her head. “They had to send out their spirit, just to reach me telepathically. The longer the distance, the harder it gets. They could only tell me if they were fine and that they miss us, or some minor things like finding a village.”

With the help of Naraku’s magic, the gate to Castle MorningSnow opened at will. Naraku noticed Shadowhunter immediately looked for a quiet spot. Accepting all strokes and hugs, she awaited the final greeting with patience and a polite nature... only to leave right after.

She did, however, not expect a sudden attack from Grasshopper, who seemed to come out of nowhere. Challenging the black wolf to a game, Shadowhunter couldn’t resist the playful she-wolf, starting a chase throughout the castle grounds.

“Isn’t Keiran back yet?” Naraku noticed.

“Who?” Blade replied accidentally, but luckily Naraku hadn’t heard it.

Naraku looked around, trying to locate him, but then started to use her telepathy to find him. >Keiran, where are you?<

There was silence for a moment, but then an answer came. >I’m almost home; I just slipped and dropped everything.<

“Figures.” Blade rolled his eyes, but got a slap to his head from Mah-Lin.

>Need any help?< Naraku wondered, completely oblivious to Blade’s cold remarks.

>No, don’t worry... on second thought... I think I just fell onto a fish and that fish is now a pancake.<

>Please, shield your telepathy!< Mayonaka instructed him. >Those are things I do not wish to hear!<

>No, no shielding!< Matsuuro disagreed. >There should be no secrets between us and especially the two of you!< He looked at Naraku.

All of a sudden Naraku turned red and started giggling. "What?" Sushi wondered.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing!" Naraku smiled. "Nothing at all!"

"He shielded his telepathy!" Blade pointed at Naraku. "What did he say? Spill it!"

"Nothing at all!" Naraku repeated. "But I'll go and help Keiran."

"You are not going alone!" Matsuuro decided and followed her. "I'm not leaving you alone with that guy!"

"Oh Matsuuro, please, let it go!" Naraku sighed.

"I won't!" Matsuuro followed her down the stairs towards the underground hot spring.

"He's a Yami and the Yami tried to take our castle and kill us."

"That was just a misunderstanding." Naraku shrugged. "They even apologised when they left."

"They killed two of our friends, Naraku." Matsuuro made her stop. "A Yami never changes."

"They killed Hane and Clover by accident." Naraku looked back. "And Keiran is no longer a Yami. He's an IceHunter now, just like you and me." Suddenly, Naraku turned red again. "Oh, you are so not coming along!" She giggled to Matsuuro and left for the secret passage. Matsuuro wanted to follow her, but Naraku had put up a force field.

He banged on the shield once, knowing Naraku would never maintain it for long, but the bang was more because of desperation than anger.

Whatever he would do... he could never stop her. She loved him, with all her heart. Trying to ignore it, or even avoid it, had been proven useless. Naraku did not need him like she needed him before.

She had grown up and chosen her own path. All there was left for him... was finding out where he stood on that same path.

"I'm not sure..."

"Oh, come on, this is a great opportunity. It's so easy, it's off the scale."

"And yet we keep on sleeping under trees, and they have warm beds."

"You're so negative!"

"I think there are ants crawling into my boots... And I'm guessing fire ants... Yup, fire ants... Excuse me; one moment."

"After this one, we'll be rich enough to buy our own inn... and then get even richer without working!"

"Well, the last job was indeed quite easy. But a castle..."

"Oh, come on, a self-proclaimed kingdom with a tiny tribe."

"With a girl as a leader... Wait, there are still some fire ants. Man, that hurts."

"The three of us can easily pull this off! Trust me... it'll be the scam of the century!"

## Episode 227: Water-coloured skies

>Ao? Ao, are you in range? Please, if you can, answer me.<

The clouds moved away, for the first time since days, showing a pale blue sky. A telepathic plea went over the valley and into the forest, as a young Elfin maiden tried to find her brother. Her telepathy was open, because she did not know where her brother was, nor his travelling companions. If you don't know where a person is, there's a big chance your telepathy won't reach them. Open telepathy was the only chance she had, even though it meant anyone with telepathic abilities could hear it. While the valley was empty, the castle was not. Everyone stopped with what they were doing, listening for the sister who cried out for her brother... and got no reply.

>Ao, please... Or Rain, or Kai... anyone...<

Mayonaka looked at the tower in the south. Naraku had told them they would pass the village on the way back, so that tower was the closest to that same village. She stepped away from the window, looking back for a moment, but then whispered.

"She really misses him..."

"Ever since they told Naraku they found a shortcut..." Matsuru mumbled back.

"She's getting worse."

"I guess it's true then." Mayonaka turned to the young man's side. "It's harder for the heart when a loved one is near, but just beyond your reach, than when they are far away."

Matsuru nodded. "They said they'd be back in about two weeks. I don't know where they are now, but Sushi tries to catch a cloud. Two weeks... They are still too far away."

"Even for Kai's skills..."

"Even for Kai's skills." Matsuru repeated.

"Sushi?" Naraku carefully opened the door towards the top of the tower. She carefully stepped in, finding the girl near the window. She made herself small and tried to hide. "Did... did you get an answer?"

"Of course I didn't." Sushi sniffed; hiding her face between her arms. "I'm too much of a loser for that."

Naraku knelt next to the girl, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You are not a loser."

She tried to smile. "They are just really far away. They need to travel for at least fourteen more days. Don't worry; he'll come!"

"I should have gone with him!" Sushi showed her tearstained face. "He's all alone out there!"

Naraku looked confused. "But you have been without him before. We travelled to the desert, while Ao remained here."

Sushi used her sleeve to dry her eyes. "Yes, I know." She stammered. "But then I knew where he was. I knew where he was... just like when I left my Elf tribe to become a witch. I didn't worry about him, because I knew he was home."

"But he had left to find you." Naraku wondered. "He missed you too much and went and looked for you."

Sushi nodded. "I guess I'm more like Ao than I'd like to admit." Sushi whispered. "As long as we know where the other is, we can bare the distance... It's just... I don't know where he is!" Sushi got up and looked outside the window. "Did he change? Is he injured? Maybe he misses an arm or a leg!"

"If he was injured, Kai would have let me know." Naraku assured her. "Especially if he missed an arm or a leg."

"No, he wouldn't!" Sushi snapped back. "Because that's how my brother is! He wouldn't want us to worry, and therefore forbid Kai to tell us!"

Naraku sighed. "I know you are worried, but I can't speed up time, not even with my magic." She put an arm around the girl. "Maybe you need some distractions. Why don't you go and design new clothes for the boys? After a year, I can imagine they would need new clothes."

"But what are their sizes?!" Sushi exclaimed. "Did they grow? Did they lose weight? Gain weight? More muscles? Missing an arm or a leg?!"

"Forget about the missing limbs!" Naraku rolled her eyes. "They are all three still in one piece! And if you don't want to make them clothes, go make *me* an outfit or so."

Sushi looked at her Chieftess. "Yes, you could use some new clothes. You keep on ruining them, except for the shoes. How many pair of no-more-matching-outfit-shoes do you have by now?" Naraku smiled embarrassed, realising she was a danger magnet who often managed to destroy her clothes, save the shoes. "Maybe I should make something that could match them. Besides, you still need a Queen's gown. What if you get formal visits?"

"There are still some old dresses left from when Keiran's ancestors lived here."

Naraku smiled. "I can take those."

"But those are horribly out of fashion!" Sushi gasped. "I mean, high collars?! That's so not you! You look better with bare shoulders."

"See?" Naraku pushed her out of the room, following her down the stairs. "Already bursting with inspiration. Might as well use that inspiration while it's fresh."

Mah-Lin walked into the kitchen, holding three large fish. "Ah, Mah-Lin." Mayonaka smiled, welcoming her. "My, when you said you caught large fish, you weren't kidding."

Mah-Lin placed them onto the table. "Usually only the small fish get caught in the underground cave, but perhaps these three share one brain." Mayonaka giggled and Mah-Lin went on. "So, do you want to use these for dinner, or have them put into storage?"

Mayonaka shook her head. "No, let's have these for dinner. I found a pot labelled with 'Fish Marinade' in the storage room and it smells good, so let's use that."

"Did Kai make that marinade?" Mah-Lin stepped aside so Mayonaka could get a knife.

Mayonaka nodded. "Yes, and he even wrote down which recipe it is meant for." She walked to a book. "It doesn't seem too hard to make. I'm glad he wrote a matching recipe number on the jar. It makes it a lot easier to find a suitable recipe... I just wished he would also organise things more... logically..."

Mah-Lin looked at the book. "And that he would stop making up such stupid names." She flipped a few pages. "Kai's Magnificent Pancakes?"



"I decided to read between the lines." Mayonaka smiled. "So where is Blade?"  
"Oh, Blade is with Dusk." Mah-Lin snapped up. "He insists he has to ride him at least an hour a day, just to keep that horse in shape."  
"Aren't you going to ride with Larymah then?" Mayonaka wondered.  
"Larymah isn't one to go for short rides." Mah-Lin shook her head. "She likes long and fast rides."  
"Just like her owner."  
"So I take her out for a ride every three days." Mah-Lin explained. "But I must admit, I never thought that she would accept me as a rider. She's so feisty... I already noticed that when we left the desert. I thought your father had given me an untrained horse, only because I was once a slave."  
Mayonaka giggled and cut the fish. "Father gave us his best horses and I bet he knew Larymah would be suited for you." She sighed. "I just wished Crescentus was more like Larymah..." Mah-Lin looked around to see if she could help with anything, until Mayonaka handed her a knife and some carrots. "Crescentus is such a show-pony; she hates dirt. If it was up to her, she'd move into the castle, get herself some servants and never step outside again."  
"Are you certain the horse is not like her owner?" Mah-Lin teased.

"Hey, buddy." Blade patted the horse over his nose. "Ready for a ride? I bet you can't wait; it has been a week since we could ride outside."

>Rain no good.< The horse replied telepathically, telling his rider his dislike for rain.  
>Run, run! Blade hurry!<

"Anxious, I see." Blade grinned and took a saddle. "I like these storms just as much as you do, but nature is the one thing we can't control." Dusk looked at Blade. "Okay, Naraku can, but it's the one thing we *shouldn't* control. Anyway, let's get you into shape; when Foxis gets back, he'd better not see a lazy horse, but the proud father he knows!"

After putting the bridles onto the horse, Blade mounted and realised he had to sit down fast, otherwise the horse would have left without him.

Outside the stables, he almost bumped into Matsu. "Whoa, sorry." Matsu apologised.

"It's okay." Blade smiled to his best friend. "Dusk is just anxious. You want to come along? You can saddle Pear and..."

"No, no, thank you." Matsu raised his hands. "Did you plan to stay out long?"

"Not that long." Blade smiled. "Unless Dusk kidnaps me again. You'd better not do that again, mister!" He warned his horse. "Unless you want to answer to Mah-Lin!"  
As a reply, Dusk snorted, insulted. "So, eh... I heard Sushi."

Matsu looked to the ground. "Ah, yes... that." A short silence fell. "I guess she really misses him a lot."

"Wasn't that obvious?" Blade rolled his eyes. "Maybe we should have let that Yamidweep go with Rain and Kai and let him stay here."

"Then we'd have a heartbroken Naraku." Matsu sighed, looking at the young man on the battlement, who had watch duty. "I don't think that's any better."

“She’d get over it.” Blade shrugged. “As long as she has me and you, she’ll manage.” Suddenly Matsuuro looked away, sadness written on his face. “Is something bugging you?”

“Oh, no, no.” Matsuuro waved his hands. “I just... I wonder if she still needs me.”

“Of course she does.” Blade smiled. “Now if you’d excuse me, my horse wants to go and I can’t hold him back any longer.”

“Have fun.” Matsuuro greeted him.

“Be back soon!” Blade replied, but Dusk released a neigh. “Or maybe not so soon... Hey Dusk, I’m the one who is in charge! ...Stop laughing at me!”

Keiran watched Blade leave the castle on the back of his horse. He was glad Naraku had put a spell on the gates, making them magically open when one of them was near. The gates would only respond to them, except for the missing tribesmen, as it was implemented after their leave. He could remember the days Naraku first tried to spell the doors. The first seven doors accidentally exploded, burst into flames, or were locked forever... until Naraku blew them up.

However, practise makes perfect and Naraku managed to get the spell flawless after the nineteenth door.

A Magic User. The love of his life was a Magic User. Not only that, but she was also a full-blooded High One. A goddess if you’d wish to call her that. And he... he was a mere Yami, a magic-less soldier of a dwelling tribe. For a moment Keiran thought about his older brother, the leader of the Yami, who had taken away his friends and tribe to find a home. Would they have found that home and more importantly, would the men have found women? When the Yami left, the tribe consisted of men only. Suddenly Naraku appeared out of nowhere, right next to him. With a scream, Keiran leapt back, holding his hand against his chest, as if his heart was breaking out of it. “Please, save me!” Naraku begged. “Sushi wants to make me a six-layered-dress!” She looked at the pale face of her beloved. “...What are you doing?”

“Don’t you... *ever*... sneak up on me again!” Keiran gasped.

“I wasn’t sneaking.” Naraku tilted her head.

“Fine, then don’t teleport behind me again.” Keiran regained his breath. “I’m no Magic User, I can’t feel you coming!”

“Neither can Matsuuro, Blade, Mah-Lin and Mayonaka...” Naraku wondered. “Did I scare you?”

“Well... yes!” Keiran huffed. “I was raised a Yami; that means always sleeping with one eye open!”

“Now you are just babbling.” Naraku placed her hands on her hips. “I’ve seen you sleep. You always sleep with two eyes closed!”

“That’s not what I meant...” Keiran sighed. “It was a metaphor, a figure of speech. It means that I was raised to be cautious all the time and to expect the unexpected!”

Naraku tried to connect the dots. “So... you got scared because you... wait... not expected the unexpected?”

“Just shut up and kiss me...” Keiran sighed, hoping to end this endless discussion. Successfully distracting her, Naraku was most happy to oblige and wrapped her arms around him. Keiran bent over, placing his lips onto hers, letting him get lost in a second of peace...

Literally a second, as a telepathic 'ah-hum' filled their heads. Keiran and Naraku looked aside, towards the courtyard, seeing Matsuru with his arms crossed. >Aren't you supposed to have watch duty?< Matsuru sent to Keiran.

Keiran sighed. "Why does he keep on hating me?" He mumbled.

Naraku watched Matsuru leave. "He does not hate you." She smiled.

"He doesn't like me either!" Keiran grunted. "And neither does Blade..."

"They are just a little possessive." Naraku tried to make him feel better. "They raised me; I'm like a daughter to them."

"I can understand why Ao dislikes me. It was one of my tribesmen who killed the girl he loved... even though it was an accident." Keiran let Naraku go. "But even with him I think he should let it go. It happened about three years ago!"

"Clover never let anyone get close." Naraku whispered, taking Keiran back into her arms and allowing him to fiddle with her hair. "Ao was the only one she showed her true self. I don't think he blames you for killing her. I think he's more upset that he never really got to know her." She put her arms around his neck. "And to find love like we did."

They shared a short kiss, but the moment was already ruined. Keiran let go of the girl and took a few steps towards the battlement. "So... when will they come back?"

"Kai told me they found a passage between the mountains." Naraku replied. "So instead of going around them, they can save a lot of time. According to the town-elders, there were no more towns in the kingdom."

"So how much time will they save by taking that passage?" Keiran liked to know.

"They guessed about a week." Naraku looked over the valley. "But due to that storm and rain, they probably got delayed anyway."

"When will they contact you again?" Keiran didn't seem too pleased they would be home this soon.

"By the end of this week." Naraku noticed his distance as well. 'Why do you worry so much?' She thought. 'Rain and Kai don't hate you! And the others will get over it.'

However, deep inside she doubted. Three years had passed since Keiran gave up his tribe and family for her, and still Blade and Matsuru only tolerated him. Maybe... maybe if Ao forgave Keiran, then Blade and Matsuru would forgive him as well!

"I..." Naraku started. "...I'll go and see if Sushi needs some more cheering up." She mumbled and left the one she loved behind on the battlement.

Keiran watched her go, feeling his heart getting wrung inside. She did not deserve this... she never did. Yet she swallowed it all with pride; carrying a burden that should be his alone. How could she ever blame herself for all of this? It was him who was unworthy of her, not her...

"Naraku?" Keiran stopped her, seeing her turn back. A glitter of hope appeared inside her eyes; what was she hoping for? An apology? A declaration of love? A thank-you? What was it that she needed at this moment? A simple 'I love you' could never be enough, and an 'I'm sorry' would confirm her sad feelings. As for the thanks... 'Thank you' for what? Letting him know someone who hated his guts would be coming home soon?

He saw it in her eyes. The glitter of hope had vanished, and the girl turned away once more.

He had waited too long...

“I don’t agree with this scenario.”

“Oh, we’ve done this scenario before, and it always worked.”

“Hence why I disagree, it lacks style and imagination.”

“Look, we’ve been over this, but none of the other scenarios fit. Robbery, lost, an accident... No, because of the bad weather the past few days, this scenario fits best.”

“Blah, blah.”

“Hey, I’m the leader of this group!”

“You are?”

“Why?”

“Because I say so!”

“...Well, can’t argue with that...”

Gloomily, Naraku walked into the kitchen, where Mayonaka finished preparing dinner. “Oh, Naraku, you are just in time to... Oh my, that looks bad.”

“What looks bad?” Naraku looked around, trying to find what the dark-toned girl meant.

“I meant: you look sad.” When Naraku’s face went down again, she knew she had guessed right. “Did anything happen? Did you have an argument with Matsu?” Naraku shook her head. “No, I haven’t really seen him that much today.”

Mayonaka sat down next to the girl. “Then what is it about?”

Naraku swallowed. “It’s Keiran...” She admitted. “He still doesn’t feel at home.”

“Does he miss his friends?” The Desert Princess asked.

Naraku nodded. “But it’s not about that... It’s about Matsu, Blade and Ao. I mean, you and Sushi seem to get along with him, just like Mah-Lin. Why can’t Matsu accept him like you do?”

Mayonaka stood up again and took a moment to think. “I don’t really know. I do know that parents can be quite picky when it comes to the love of their child. Maybe they are worried that he might break your heart or even betray you.”

“But Keiran would never betray me!” Naraku jumped up.

“Every man and woman has his or her price.” Mayonaka told the purple-haired Chieftess. “I know a girl who sacrificed everything she had, just to save one of her friends... even though that meant a crazy warlock would get a lot stronger...”

Naraku looked back to the table. “Even though we did not know your origin back then, you chose Matsu over the safety of Seken. If Lord Zashjan would have gotten your powers, then he would have been invincible.”

“Was I being selfish?” Naraku asked. “And am I being selfish now?”

Mayonaka smiled. “Humans are always selfish. Whatever they do, they do it for themselves. Even if they seem to do something out of selflessness, there is always a deeper desire. You were the one who wanted Matsu to be safe. Clover gave her life, because she didn’t want you to die. And all those times Sushi made a fool out of herself... only because she wanted to make us feel better. And if you offer to help me out in the kitchen, don’t you expect me to say at least “Thank you”? That means you want something in return to make you feel better, even though it’s only a word.”

“So being selfish is good?” Naraku asked, confused.

“There are two kinds of being selfish.” Mayonaka elaborated. “The one where you do things to make yourself better and the one that makes you feel better because *others* are happy. The first one is a bad kind and the second a good one. So don’t you worry about it that much, since you’ve never done anything in your life to set yourself above others... at least not yet. And let’s keep it like that.” Mayonaka suddenly realised something. “So how did we manage to change the topic from boys to being selfish?”

Naraku leaned against the table, looking to the ground. “Sometimes I envy you, Mayonaka.” Naraku admitted. “You don’t have a Sonai, nor a loved one. You are not caught in the middle.”

“Well, eh...” Mayonaka quickly turned away, hiding her blush. “Oh my, look at the bread, it’s all done!”

“Mayonaka?” Naraku looked up confused. “Why are you...?”

At that moment Matsuru opened the door and walked into the kitchen. “Hey Mayonaka, need any help...?” He started, but Mayonaka was so startled by his appearance that she released a short scream and threw the bread up into the air. Naraku barely managed to catch it, before it hit the floor. Mayonaka had her hands clasped before her mouth, quickly turning red. “Whoa, I’m sorry, Mayonaka.” Matsuru smiled. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Oh, oh!” Mayonaka rattled. “It’s okay! I mean, I was just thinking about... things and then you came, and I didn’t expect you and well, oh dinner is all done, shall we bring it to the throne room?”

Naraku stared at the girl. “Eh? Mayonaka? Are you all right?”

“Of course, I am, I was just startled, that is all.” Mayonaka sweated. “Why would there be anything wrong? Ah-ha-ha-ha!” She laughed.

Suddenly, a telepathic message reached the people in the kitchen. >Everyone, we have visitors! Shall I let them in?< Keiran asked for permission.

>How many?< Naraku replied from the kitchen. >Do they seem dangerous?<

>Three men; they introduced themselves as pilgrims.<

“Pilgrims detest violence.” Mayonaka told Naraku. “But they usually travel in larger groups.”

“Well, they are with three and we are with seven, so we should give them the benefit of the doubt.” Matsuru agreed. “Smaller groups are not unusual.”

“All right then.” Naraku decided. >Let them in but be careful. Last time we met pilgrims, they were followed by a horde of robbers.<

Quickly, everyone rushed out of the kitchen, but Mayonaka left last. “You idiot.” She hissed to herself. “You just had to make a fool out of yourself in front of him, didn’t you?!”

Not much later, they all gathered in the courtyard, where three young men were greeted by the curious IceHunters.

One of the pilgrims stepped forward; he was most likely the leader. “My name is Toh, and I’m the leader of this group. We heard rumours that there was a castle nearby with a beautiful queen... but it seems the rumours forgot to mention all the women here have a dazzling appearance.” Without anyone noticing, the young man’s eyes went from girl to girl. Within a split-second, he had seen what he needed.

The Elfin maiden could not be the queen, as the information they had only talked about humans.

The dark-skinned girl started blushing, holding her hands to her face. She was flattered, but not the one in charge.

The Eastern-looking girl grinned, but the dark-haired man behind her told him she was not only taken, but also that the girl enjoyed his jealousy.

It left him with only one option: the innocent-looking purple-haired girl in the middle, who seemed to have missed the point of his remark. 'You've got to be kidding me.'

Toh thought. "This is going to be easier than expected! If we play this well, we'll be so rich, we won't have to work for an entire century!"

Toh stepped towards Naraku and bowed, followed by his comrades. "But none can compare to the beauty of a true queen." He continued. "Without a doubt, grace has blessed you, Queen of this castle. Never before have I laid my eyes on such beauty... as if you were a High One yourself?"

## Episode 228: The Dirt

“Without a doubt, grace has blessed you, Queen of this castle. Never before have I laid my eyes on such beauty... as if you were a High One yourself?”

Naraku looked shocked at the man, who had introduced himself as Toh.

>He doesn't really think you are a High One.< Keiran informed her telepathically, slightly annoyed. Was he still upset about their little disagreement earlier? >He's just kissing your...<

>Flattering you!< Matsuru cut him off. >He's just flattering you.< Matsuru glared at Keiran, as if he wanted to say: 'we do not teach her that kind of language.'

Naraku quickly recovered and looked at the three men. “A High One!” She tried to laugh. “What a thought. Well, you are welcome anyway.” Naraku bowed, but noticed from the corner of her eyes Mayonaka held a hand to her face. Oh, right! She was a queen now and queens don't bow. “Please forgive us, as we are not used to visitors just yet, but your company is as welcome as the warm sun. This is my tribe, The IceHunters. We rule over the lands of MorningSnow.” A short silence fell once more. “Oh, and my name is Naraku; I'm the leader of this tribe and queen of these lands. How may we be of service?”

Toh and his men got up, showing proper respect to the queen. “These men are my friends Behn and Rons and we are peaceful pilgrims. We follow the path of non-violence, in our quest to enlightenment by the High Ones.”

>Non-violence?< Blade remarked. >Then why have I seen three swords and four knives?<

>Benefit of the doubt.< Mah-Lin smiled. >The swords might be to deter robbers and the knives could be just tools. Don't judge a book by its cover.<

“Our journey has been long and harsh.” Toh continued. “The recent storms have worn us out. We would be most obliged if you would honour us with your hospitality.”

Naraku smiled. “Of course, you may stay as long as you like.” The Chieftess and Queen turned to Mayonaka. “Lady Mayonaka, can we invite our guests for dinner?”

“Of course.” Mayonaka smiled. “I'll make sure they have everything they need.”

This act of kindness seemed to startle the three men; obviously they didn't expect to be invited for dinner. “Your majesty,” Toh started, “we are most rejoiced you invite us for dinner, but...”

“It's not a problem.” Naraku replied. “You'd honour us.”

“It's not that, please, forgive me.” Toh tried again. “It's just... my friend Rons is allergic to carrots. If your Lady has already gone through so much trouble...”

“It's all right.” Mayonaka said. “It's good you informed us, as our dinner tonight does include carrots. However, some bread and a salad are easily made. Are there any other discomforts we should know about?”

“No, milady.” Toh bowed. “Your efforts are divine.”

“Well, if that's taken care of...” Naraku looked at Mayonaka, who excused herself with a bow. “Perhaps you would like to freshen yourself up. Sir Blade, would you be so kind and show our guests a room?”

“Of course.” Blade replied and stepped aside. “If the gentlemen would like to follow me...”

Toh nodded. “We thank you, your grace.” Toh bowed and turned towards Blade. “Your majesty.” The man named Rons bowed before the queen and followed his friend.

“Your grace.” The man named Behn bowed as well, before following his friends. The four left the courtyard, but none were at ease. “Did I do well?” Naraku asked Matsuru.

“You did good.” He smiled. “Like a true lady!”

“I’m still shaken.” Sushi admitted. “All this ‘Lady’ and ‘Sir’-stuff... I don’t like it one bit.”

“Me neither.” Mah-Lin nodded. “I keep on worrying I won’t respond if someone calls me ‘Lady Mah-Lin’.”

“I hope they’ll leave soon.” Sushi continued. “This feels like such an act! And it also means I can’t act silly for as long as they stay here.”

“You’ll act silly, even if you try not to.” Matsuru smiled.

Naraku grinned slightly. “So, are they gone?”

Keiran looked around. “Yes, they are. I guess I shall get some water for them.”

“I’ll do that, you have watch duty.” Mah-Lin offered. “Why did you ask, Naraku?”

However, the moment Mah-Lin turned to her Chieftess, the girl turned around and rushed towards the door to the castle. Stunning everyone, but suddenly realising why she was in such a hurry, they watched her go with a smile, before leaving for their duties.

In the kitchen, Mayonaka cut some lettuce and tomatoes, before putting them in a bowl. The sound of a stampede in the hall did not surprise her, nor did it alarm her when it sounded as if the stampede tripped over their own feet. With a slam, Naraku pushed open the door, panting heavily. “Took you long enough, dear.” Mayonaka smiled, mixing the ingredients, and getting some corn.

“What’s an ‘allergy?’” Naraku demanded to know, trying to catch her breath.

Mayonaka didn’t look up. “An allergy means that if you eat a certain something, you get really sick from it.”

“Can it be lethal?” Naraku wanted to learn more.

Mayonaka nodded. “Yes, if I gave Mister Rons carrots to eat, he could die from it.”

“Is it a curse?” Naraku helped placing the dinner on a cart.

The dark-skinned girl shook her head. “No, not really. For most it’s not even an illness; it’s what you call a discomfort. As long as you know about it, you can live with it perfectly. Well, most of the time anyway. Some people can die from it.”

Naraku looked around and gathered some plates. “Can you be allergic to anything, or just carrots?”

“You can be allergic to anything, and it depends on how allergic you are and for what, whether it’s a great discomfort or a small one... or deadly.” Mayonaka gathered the knives and forks. “I have a light allergy to citrus fruits; if I eat them, I get a little bit of pain in my mouth for a day or two. It never stopped me from eating them though... not that they grow around here.” She sighed sadly. “My allergy is so small, and the result is so minor, that I don’t mind getting a little bit of pain for a day or two, if it means tasting the sweet juice of a pineapple or orange.”



“Do I have an allergy?” Naraku wondered and followed Mayonaka out of the kitchen, carrying the plates.

“Not as far as we know, dear.” Mayonaka smiled. “Then again, you are a High One. If you had an allergy, your healing powers probably corrected that immediately.”

“Should I heal your allergy?” Naraku suggested.

“That’s not needed, my allergy is so light and there are no citrus fruits here anyway. Why waste your energy on something that makes me, me?”

Blade opened the door to a room. “We hope this room will be adequate.” Blade hated formality, but he realised he had to remain polite to the guests, even if he didn’t trust them. “We don’t have many rooms with three or four beds; most of them have two.”

The three men stepped inside and looked around. “It’s quite warm in here.” Behn noticed.

“The warmth comes from that wall.” Blade pointed. “We made a little ‘path’ inside the wall, so the warmth flows through the castle. It saves a lot of firewood.”

“Where does it come from?” Rons liked to know.

“The underground hot springs.” Blade informed them. “They warm about one fifth of this castle. If you wish to use them, you are free to do so. Tomorrow evening is reserved for the men, so you are welcome to join us. The other moment is [Undan-yula-hai<sup>1</sup>]. We have a schedule.”

“No, no, thank you.” Toh thanked Blade.

“Fine by me.” Blade shrugged. “If you change your mind, we have a roster by the springs, if you wish to reserve an hour. So, do you need anything? Some extra blankets?”

“We are content.” Behn smiled.

At that moment, a knock on the door sounded and Blade opened the door. He was surprised to see his wife on the other side, but realised why she had come when he spotted the two buckets of water.

“I’ve brought you some water.” She kindly smiled. “In case you wish to freshen up a bit.” She placed the buckets near the fireplace. “If you wish, you can use the fireplace, but we ask you not to leave it unattended. Last thing we want, is our castle going up in flames.” Her smile was slightly teasing.

“[Aitija, oyulle, tanoh<sup>2</sup>.]” Toh thanked both in the Seken language.

“We shall leave you to rest.” Blade decided. “Dinner is ready in half an hour. You are welcome to join us in the dining room. It’s left at the end of this hallway, second right and then... eh...”

He looked helplessly at Mah-Lin. “At the end of the hallway left again and then the third door.” She ended for him. “We hope to welcome you.” Both made a slight bow, leaving the travellers alone. >I think you need a little tour through the castle.< Mah-Lin teased her husband.

>Oh, hold your tongue.< Blade grunted. >We never use the dining room.<

>Oh, *we* did.< Mah-Lin pushed him against a wall. “And the throne room is now empty as well...” She whispered in his ear.

Back in the room, Behn, Rons and Toh looked around. “Well, this is unexpected.” Rons mumbled. “I expected a stable or a simple room, not this!” “Not to mention we got invited for dinner.” Behn said. “That never happened before...”

“Men, I believe we are about to make an almost fatal mistake.” Toh looked at his men. “We are allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed. If we lose our focus or get too close, we will lose sight of our goal.” Behn and Rons nodded. “We shall regain ourselves and resist temptation... and don’t forget to keep your eyes open.”

In the dining room, Naraku carefully observed Mayonaka arranging the table. They hardly ever used this room; usually they ate together in the throne room, at a small table or even on the floor. However, if you wish to uphold the image you are a kingdom, you sometimes must hide habits in front of strangers or guests. The large table, made from light wood, brightened up the room. The room itself had dark carpets on the walls. Mayonaka wanted to get rid of them, or at least clean them, but Sushi told her these wall decorations held historical value and that she would look for a way to safely clean them. That promise was made two years ago.

“Where do I sit?” Naraku asked Mayonaka.

“At the head of the table.” Mayonaka pointed. “That means that Keiran should sit opposite of you.”

“Why?”

“Because he is your Sonai, of course.” Mayonaka smiled.

Naraku was silent, but then looked up. “I don’t want them to know.” She suddenly said.

“Excuse me?” Mayonaka wondered.

“What if we can’t trust them?” Naraku explained. “They said they were pilgrims, but pilgrims never carry swords. We agreed on giving them the benefit of the doubt, but what if they betray us? No, I won’t give them a chance to use a loved one against me. In fact, I think I’ll make that a new rule: it may never be revealed who the loved one of the leader is, so it can’t be used against him or her.”

“That’s nice, dear.” Mayonaka smiled. “But you love us all...”

Night fell. Dinner had passed quite uneventfully. The three ‘pilgrims’ told of their journeys and what they had seen of the world. Unaware of their dark motives, The IceHunters went to bed peacefully, with Blade on the battlement as a guard. Mah-Lin was supposed to accompany him, but she didn’t feel that well and Blade had offered to do it alone.

In his bed, Keiran looked at the ceiling, while Naraku hung against him, chirping like a little bird. She was shorter than he was; almost half a head, but he didn’t mind. She was his little High One.

However, unable to sleep, Keiran got out of bed. He had an odd feeling, as if something bad was about to happen. He couldn’t tell what, but he had a feeling his fiancée would need him in the nearby future. What caused this feeling? Was it the three pilgrims? After all, this feeling had arrived at the same time as they had.

Keiran looked around the room. On one side, he saw his plans to build a ‘walk-in closet’. He had managed to calculate how many bricks he would need for this ‘room’.

Naraku had asked him several times why he demanded that ‘walk-in closet’, because they already had two closets. Keiran told her it was because it would save space as well as create more storage space, but in fact he wanted to build one so he could stash away all her shoes. He had stopped counting them after the nineteenth pair and Naraku had placed them throughout the room. They were a thorn in his eyes; shoes everywhere!

= *Baf* =

Quickly Keiran turned around, only to see Naraku suddenly on the floor... still asleep. It didn’t surprise Keiran; this happened about once every three nights. Naraku couldn’t lay still while she was asleep and often ended up asides her bed. It didn’t wake her up anymore and she often told Keiran it was because of the soft mattress. With a smile, Keiran walked at the purple-haired girl and carefully lifted her up again. With a kiss he placed her back in bed, following her example and laying down once more. “When I’ve finished that closet, I’ll make a new bed for you.” He kissed her on the forehead. “One you can’t fall out of.”

Two days later, things had calmed down in MorningSnow. The pilgrims had offered to help The IceHunters, which they happily accepted. The IceHunters looked for jobs they could do together, but Toh often said they didn’t mind splitting up. “It would give us something to talk about.” He said.

Matsuru noticed Keiran was walking to the gates. “Where are you heading?” He asked, sounding as suspicious as ever.

Keiran sighed, lowering his head. “Sushi needs some herbs.” Keiran mumbled.

“Naraku sent me to The Dirt; apparently she likes me getting dirty...”

“The Dirt?” Matsuru wondered. “Didn’t Sushi go there herself last month?”

Keiran nodded and noticed Matsuru was sounding... nicer. “She told me some herbs were still too small last month and that they should be bigger now. She actually summed up quite the list: Moonhatchings, Red Spun, Sun Cones...”

“Yup, those are at The Dirt all right...” Matsuru smiled.

“We’ve got to stop her making up names...” Keiran sighed. “What kind of name is ‘The Dirt’ anyway?”

“Actually, quite the fitting one.” Matsuru watched him doing a step or two. “...I’ll join you.”

Keiran jolted. Matsuru was not only talking to him... but also offering to join?

Voluntarily? “Oh... eh... sure.” Was Keiran’s uneasy reply. Did Matsuru have a hidden agenda? No, he shouldn’t think like that. Matsuru was now his tribemate. Sure, he was also the ‘father’ of his Sonai, but maybe this meant Matsuru wanted to give Keiran a chance. ‘Let’s not waste that chance...’ He thought.

Matsuru let Keiran take the lead for most of the way, staying silent. Keiran felt uneasy, but did the best he could to make a good impression on Matsuru. However, he felt every disapproving glare.

Eventually they ended up in ‘The Dirt’, a place that was mostly ‘The Dirt’ in the months Aqway till Seemas<sup>3</sup>. It could be best compared to a swamp, without the damp air. Because of a nearby spring and small lake, this place often flooded, leaving a rich ground for various rare herbs. A good rain shower would have the same effect, so it

could be slippery all year round. The soil was rich, but you simply couldn't get any herbs without getting extremely filthy.

The first step Keiran made, already let him sink away till his ankle. No matter how you dressed, you always got dirty. A sigh of disgust could be heard. "You'd better stay out of this... muck." Keiran advised Matsu. "There's no need we both get dirty." "I said I'd join you." Matsu grunted. "So, I'll join you." He stepped into the muddy swamp. "What did you need?"

The two men gathered the herbs as fast as they could, getting dirt everywhere, even up till their elbows. The job was done in silence, but Keiran couldn't help but observe Matsu once in a while. As a Yami, he was taught to observe his target and learn the most he could from one observation.

Matsu was digging out a fairly large plant that looked like lettuce. There was no smile on his face and somehow Keiran had the impression something was bothering Matsu. Maybe he had conflicting emotions; wanting to approve of Keiran, but not ready to let his little girl go.

"Naraku talks in her sleep." Keiran suddenly said, causing Matsu to look up. "Most of the time they are just random words, but she says your name a lot as well."

"Why are you telling me this?" Matsu sounded offended.

"I thought..."

"Maybe you need to stop thinking." Matsu bit him off. "Your brother already made that mistake."

Keiran wanted to apologise but stayed silent. Had he made a wrong observation? Probably. His brother had often told him he was no good at it. So, what was it that Matsu wanted to hear?

"Oh, Raven's Claw." Keiran suddenly noticed the plant. "That should be the last of it."

"Did you get the Pine Needles?" Matsu asked.

Keiran nodded and tried to get to the plant. All of a sudden The Dirt sucked his boot down, causing him to lose his balance and fall forward. The landing sounded more like a *splort*. In disgust, Keiran crawled back up, until he noticed soft laughter behind him. He looked back and noticed Matsu tried hard not to laugh, but couldn't help himself. 'Good,' Keiran thought, 'at least he smiles...'

The last plant was quickly fetched and both boys walked out of The Dirt. Shaking their legs and using their hands to get rid of all the mud and dirt, Matsu and Keiran tried to clean themselves up a bit. "Maybe we should wash ourselves, before heading home." Matsu suggested. "Or we'll turn the spring into one big mud-pool."

"I wonder if these clothes will ever get clean again." Keiran sighed. "I'll probably find mud the following six weeks."

"Mayonaka said some women think covering their bodies with mud makes their skin soft." Matsu plucked a leaf out of Keiran's hair. "So, I guess we can tell her now for sure."

"Shall we wash ourselves in the river, or go to the waterfall?" Keiran wondered.

"With all that mud in your ears?" Matsu grinned. "The waterfall, for sure." The young man picked up his bag, when suddenly Keiran stopped him. The blue-haired man went with his finger to his lips, motioning the brown-haired man to be silent.

>What's wrong?< Matsu asked his soon-to-be-son-in-law.

>I think...< Keiran started, but then suddenly pulled Matsuuro along. “RUN!” The moment the two men started running, three boars suddenly burst through the bushes, chasing the two. With raging hooves, they crushed both leaves and twigs, surprising the humans with their speed.

“Where in the High Ones’ names did they come from?!” Matsuuro gasped, running for his life.

“We must have run into their territory!” Keiran noticed.

“But the boars have their territory a kilometre away from here!” Matsuuro snapped.

“Something must have chased them!” Keiran sped up, leaving Matsuuro behind. For a moment Matsuuro thought Keiran was a coward, until he saw Keiran leapt into a tree, turned back, and reached out his hand. As a Yami, he was taught to move around silently in the trees, so picking a tree instead of the ground was a logical choice for him.

Matsuuro grabbed Keiran’s outstretched hand and felt he got pulled up, while at the same time he grabbed a branch to pull himself up as well. Soon both men sat in the tree; both on their own branch.

From the corner of his eyes, Matsuuro noticed how easily Keiran moved around in this tree, while he himself had to keep himself steady. His movements... they reminded him of Naraku’s. Graceful and determined, knowing exactly what he was doing.

“They are defending this as their territory.” Keiran told Matsuuro. “They won’t go away.”

“Great, so now what?” Matsuuro growled, having trouble admitting he was not the hunter Keiran was. Matsuuro could hunt, but compared to Blade, Naraku or even Keiran, his aim wasn’t as sure.

Keiran took his knife. “I guess we’ll also bring back dinner.” Keiran smiled. “I’ll take the one with the broken tusk, will you take the black one?”

Matsuuro took his knife. “And what about the brown one?” He still sounded cranky.

“He’ll probably flee as soon as he sees his friends are dead.” Keiran grinned.

“Next time I’ll bring my sword along...” Matsuuro mumbled, hating to admit his aim was not as good as Keiran’s. He’d probably miss, but if Keiran was right, the two remaining ones would probably flee. Keiran would succeed, that was for sure. This hunter once managed to hit a raging bear that was far away in a ravine. Sure, it wasn’t killed, but the hit had made sure the other hunters had a chance. Thanks to him, Naraku was saved.

“Ready?” Keiran asked Matsuuro, who nodded. “On the count of three, one... two... three!”

Both blades went through the air, where one found its lethal impact... and where the other barely scraped the target. However, before the boars could flee, a black shade suddenly dashed from the bushes, attacking a boar. The jaws were strong, and the battle was quickly over, leaving one panicking boar. Keiran jumped down the tree, grabbed Matsuuro’s knife and tossed it aside.

It missed the black shade, it missed the tree... but it hit the boar in its neck. It went down, rolled over the ground... and waited until Keiran finished the job. Making sure the animal would not suffer any more, the last boar died as well.

Matsuru climbed down as well, looking at the black shade. "Shadowhunter." He mentioned. "What are you doing here?" Then he noticed something. "Wow, you've lost quite some weight. Are you eating well enough?" The black wolf turned her head towards the ground.

Keiran joined them. "Oh great, mud, blood... What else will cover me?" Then he too noticed the wolf. "Hey, Shadowhunter. You don't look so well. Isn't the pack allowing you to eat with them?"

"That wouldn't be fair." Matsuru sighed. "They allow you to hunt, but they won't allow you to eat." He sighed. "Will you come home with us? Naraku misses you."

Shadowhunter didn't raise her head. >Must... stay.< She only said.

Somehow, the two young men understood her. This wolf truly wished to be part of a pack. If she would keep on returning to MorningSnow, they would never accept her.

"All right." Matsuru smiled. "But you eat that boar that you've killed." He ordered her. "Get some meat on those bones."

"Should we stay with her?" Keiran wondered. "Making sure she really eats it, and not drags it back to the pack?"

Matsuru knelt before Shadowhunter. "We can't force her." He touched her face.

"Shadowhunter is a wild animal... and this is nature. We shouldn't interfere." He got back up again, until a last message entered his mind.

>Not tell Naraku... Shadowhunter not home. Forest home...<

"You won't come home anymore?!" Keiran gasped. "But Naraku..."

>Shadowhunter new family. Wolf, not Naraku. Forest home...<

"She will look for you." Matsuru warned her. "She won't let you go that easily."

>Naraku may come... Not now. Shadowhunter will come.<

Keiran looked at Matsuru. "We'll have to tell her." He said to both. "We'll just tell her the pack has accepted you and that the pack went to reinforce their borders." The silence of the wolf told him she accepted this. "And we'll tell her that when you return, you'll come and get her. Okay?"

"It would buy Shadowhunter a week or two." Matsuru agreed. "And Naraku believes all we say, so even if we told her there's a secret wolf meeting, she'd believe it." He looked back to the wolf. "You be careful, okay?" He instructed her. "And you'll eat that boar, you got that?"

>Shadowhunter eat.< She promised, and the young men looked at each other. What was a wolf's promise worth? She already asked them to lie about their meeting.

Not much later, both young men were on their way to the nearby waterfall in silence, carrying the two boars on two large branches.

"Keiran?" Matsuru suddenly asked him. Keiran looked up but couldn't look back.

"You tell her." He ordered him. "And try to focus on the part that Shadowhunter is accepted... that she is where she wants to be now." Keiran nodded. "She'll need you to be with her. Don't let her go. Don't ever let her go..."

## Episode 229: The storm

“I can’t believe it! The stupidity! If I see one more smile, then High Ones, I swear I will draw my sword.”

“Rons, you are overreacting.” Toh bent down and plucked some grass.

“Toh already said it would be an easy job.” Behn smiled. “But this easy... they are so naïve!”

“Men, we are given a golden opportunity to discuss plans in all freedom, so let’s not waste this time, all right? Tell me, what have you learned?”

Earlier that same morning, the three ‘pilgrims’ were asked to gather at the stables. A part of them worried they were discovered, but when they only saw the Elf with a big smile, they knew there was no chance those IceHunters had the faintest idea they were being played. “How may we be of service?” Toh had asked the girl.

“I hope we are not too bold for asking this,” Sushi had started, “But since you are still here and offered us your service, we would ask you this one favour.”

“Share it with us, milady.” Rons had bowed.

Sushi had pulled out some bags. “Well, it’s nothing much, but very important to us. If it’s not too much trouble, could you please go to the forest and gather us some grass?” The men had looked shocked. “There’s quite a lot of it near the waterfall and while our hay supply is still enough, we wish it to grow in case of an emergency.”

“Collecting...” Behn had gasped.

“...grass?” Rons had finished, astounded.

“Of course!” Toh had smiled and had taken the large bags. “Just tell us how to get to the waterfall and we won’t return until all three bags are stuffed.”

“You are too kind!” Sushi had waved them off.

“Well, this palace doesn’t hold much value.” Rons sighed. “It’s almost a waste of time.”

“The only true value, are those gems that cover the walls in the underground spring.” Behn nodded. “But try and dig those out in silence...”

“Agreed, the gems are not an option.” Toh nodded, calmly gathering grass. “And what about that golden statue in the library?”

“Besides the fact it’s too heavy, that librarian girl often polishes it.” Rons continued.

“So if we’d take anything from that statue, she’d notice within a split second.”

“And next to that, there’s not much of value within the castle.” Behn shook his head.

“Free food, a bed to spend the night... Whatever we take, it will always be worth our time.”

“Worth our time?!” Rons exclaimed. “Have you seen the crap that castle holds?! No way we could sell any of that junk!”

“And that’s where you are wrong.” Toh mysteriously smiled. “You just need to get the right audience.” Both Rons and Behn looked up, surprised. “Ever since the kingdom of MorningSnow was reinstated, old stories have been brewing up again. This kingdom and especially this castle, has quite the reputation. Just imagine what people would pay... for a piece of this legendary castle...”

“Are you suggesting stealing bricks?” Rons asked, annoyed.

“Rons, as always, you lack imagination...” Toh placed an arm around him. “Get more creative. There are things inside this castle that even they don’t know the value of.”

“What about that rusted crown?” Behn suddenly suggested. “The golden statue in the library holds a rusted crown. All the gems are missing. That librarian-girl puts it aside each time she polishes the statue and twice she already forgot where she placed it. She once even asked *me* if I knew where that thing was.”

“A rusted crown?” Rons wasn’t impressed. “That’s even more crappy than...”

“It’s exactly what we are going to steal...” Toh decided.

Naraku stood on the battlement, looking to the forest on the other side of the valley. The valley seemed small but had faced more than one war. Much blood had flowed in that small valley, of both IceHunters and enemies. “Naraku?” A voice called her name. “Is everything all right?”

Naraku looked aside and saw Blade walking to her. “Yes, I’m fine.” She smiled.

“How is Mah-Lin doing?”

“She’s fine.” Blade smiled. “Bit more cranky than usual, but she usually feels better after taking a nap. Maybe you should take a look at her?”

“I tried.” Naraku mentioned. “But she wouldn’t let me. She said she probably has a small flu. Blade, why is Mah-Lin just as stubborn as you are?”

“I am not!” Blade huffed.

“Blade, remember when you were almost cut in two when that deer attacked you?”

Naraku recalled. “You refused me to get close to you, because you said Mah-Lin was injured more.”

“It was only a scratch.” Blade grunted.

“Mah-Lin had a scratch, you were bleeding to death.” Naraku narrowed her eyes.

“You are equally stubborn. The only reason why I haven’t checked upon Mah-Lin yet, is because she indeed seems to feel better after a little nap. Also, she has no fever and doesn’t seem to be hallucinating, so I guess it probably is an underlying flu. Besides, she already looks a lot better today than three days ago. It’s probably fading away.”

“Yeah.” Blade agreed. “She already challenged me to a fight, so I shouldn’t worry. And how about you?”

“Like I said, I’m fine.” Naraku smiled again.

“Then why have you taken watch duties for almost a week now?” Blade asked her.

Naraku sweated. “Eh... was it that obvious?”

“If you miss Shadowhunter, that’s fine.” Blade assured her. “But remember, she is with her new family now. A real wolf-pack. If they allow her to go along on their territory-march, then we should be happy for her. It’s a great honour.”

“Keiran told me she would come and get me when she returns.” Naraku looked at the forest again. “And that their journey could take about two weeks... but why does it feel as if Shadowhunter is close?”

“She is a part of you.” Blade tapped the girl’s nose. “No matter the distance, she will always stay in your heart.”

“Matsuru said that yesterday as well.” Naraku mumbled.



“He did?” Blade looked up surprised. “I guess we are like brothers.” He grinned. “We start to think alike!” Suddenly Naraku looked up. “What is it? Shadowhunter?” Naraku shook her head. “No, the sky.” She pointed. “See those clouds? Maybe it’s because of my Air Magic, but I have a feeling there will be a lot of rain.” Blade nodded. “That’s not your Air Magic, that’s plain common sense.” He agreed. “Besides, Rain hasn’t taught you ‘Weather Feeling’ yet, has he?” Naraku shook her head again. “He said he probably couldn’t either; only an Air User could teach me that.” “Well, I guess I’ll saddle Dusk and get those so-called ‘pilgrims.’” Blade mumbled. “Blade...” Naraku corrected him. “We’ve talked this through. We are giving them the benefit of the doubt.” “Then why haven’t they left yet?” Blade pointed at the forest. “Because they said they wanted to help.” Naraku defended them. “And because they want to earn the supplies, we have promised them. That sounds logical to me.” “Whatever.” Blade growled. “I’ll go and get them anyway. Maybe Matsuru or Mah-Lin wants to come along.” “And be nice!” Naraku warned him. “I’ll be nice, I’ll be nice!” Blade raised his hands into the air.

Later that day, the rain indeed started pouring. However, work would not wait. The ‘pilgrims’ had split up once more to help with various tasks. Rons helped Mayonaka in the kitchen, while Behn dusted books with Mah-Lin in the library. Occasionally, Behn got distracted by the books and revealed to Mah-Lin he could read some words. Toh assisted Sushi in the stables to feed the animals and clean up. He did wish that Sushi would stop asking him how his day was. Being nice is one thing, but this Elf was bouncing all day long!

“We sure appreciate you are helping us out.” Sushi smiled. “The horses will be grateful as well. I’m quite amazed to see how much you managed to gather; I don’t often get that much in a couple of hours. Lady Mayonaka says it’s because I talk too much, but I think she is overreacting. I don’t talk that much. Oh, just listen to me rattling around; you probably can’t get a word in. Tell me, do you think I talk too much? I bet you don’t, because otherwise you would have said so. You know, I really like talking to you, I mean-...” At that moment, the sound of thunder rolled through the sky.

“Praise the High Ones...” Toh whispered to himself, but then noticed something else. “Eh, [Oyulle Sushi]?” He asked in the Seken language. “[Quina danoooh]?” Sushi had frozen on the spot, but suddenly started to laugh. “Ah, yes, yes, everything all right.” She repeated it, as if she wanted to convince him. “[Quina danoooh].” However, Toh could see she was gripping the broom she was holding so tight, that her hands had turned white.

“Maybe we should get back inside?” He suggested.

“Oh, no, no, no.” Sushi tried to sweep once more, but flinched when another flash of light went through the sky. “Someone has to make certain the animals don’t get frightened...”

However, the next rumble was not the only sound that followed; it got accompanied by a high-pitched scream. Toh didn’t know where to look; outside because of the

rumble, or inside because of the scream. "It's all right!" He tried to comfort the girl, who seemed to be trembling like a twig in the wind. "It's only a thunderstorm; they appear this north all the time!" Though, the Elfin maiden did not seem to calm down. She seemed to be hyperventilating? "L-look, the animals are not scared; see? So, you can go inside; they'll manage!"

"Sushi!" A voice suddenly sounded over the courtyard and Toh looked at the dark shade that was running through the pouring rain. The shade only stopped running when she reached the stables, leaning upon her knees to catch her breath. However, with the next rumble, the dark-toned girl had already rushed at the Elfin maiden and took her in her arms. "It's okay, it's okay!" Mayonaka hushed her. "I'm here now!" Toh looked at the sobbing girl, that looked so fragile suddenly. "I came as soon as I saw the first flash..." Only then she noticed the staring Toh. "Let's get you inside, okay?" Sobbing, Sushi nodded. "Sir Toh, thank you for staying with her. Would you mind finishing up and then join us inside the castle?"

"Oh, sure." Toh took the broom from Sushi. "Be careful, okay?"

Mayonaka nodded and after another rumble, both girls hurried through the rain towards the castle, leaving a surprised Toh behind. "What just happened?" He wondered to himself. "Scared of a little thunder? This castle gets stranger with the second... Almost threw me off, but I won't give up now... not when I'm this close!"

Down the halls, Sushi was still clinging to Mayonaka. "Oi, you always overreact..." Mayonaka sighed.

"But thunderstorms are scary!" Sushi wailed.

"The heat-storms we faced in the Desert were far worse than this little rumbling."

Mayonaka sighed. "Why do you always have to be such a drama-queen?"

"Why are you so mean to me, when I'm so scared?" Sushi peeped.

Mayonaka sighed. "Let's get you something to drink from the kitchen, all right?" She suggested.

"Will it knock me out for an hour or two?" Sushi mumbled.

During dinner, the storm outside still raged on. The wind forced the glass windows to tremble, letting everyone worry whether they would hold. They would hold; they always had... but a whimpering Sushi didn't let them ease down. Rons, Behn and Toh observed them; somehow The IceHunters were getting nervous because of Sushi. Why? Wouldn't they be used to her panic by now? Somehow it seemed as if they had never seen her this afraid before.

"Mah-Lin, that's your third plate already." Blade noticed.

Mah-Lin sat down on her chair and started eating again. "For almost a week I could barely get anything inside." She explained herself. "I have some catching up to do."

"Don't worry." Mayonaka smiled. "There's plenty. Feel free to help yourself, Blade."

"Don't mind if I do!" Blade took his plate.

"Isn't that your fifth plate already, Blade?" Mah-Lin remarked.

"You haven't been eating for almost a week." Blade smiled. "So, I took the liberty of taking your seconds."

All of a sudden, Naraku jolted, as if she heard something. Without warning, she jumped up, grabbed Sushi, and yelled. "Come on!"

With Sushi dangling behind her, the two of them left the room within a split second, surprising all. “Eh... what just happened?” Matsu pointed at the door.

“I absolutely have no idea...” Keiran admitted.

Mayonaka turned to their three guests. “We apologise for this evening.” She said with an embarrassed smile. “It seems the storm has some unexpected side-effects.”

“It’s all right.” Toh raised his hands. ‘What a chaotic band of children!’ He thought.

‘The Elf is scared of thunder, the queen rushes off without an explanation or even an excuse... and drags the Elf along as if there’s something on fire! High Ones forgive me, but these people just beg to be scammed!’

“Where are you taking me?!” Sushi screamed, barely keeping up with Naraku.

“Come on, we have no time!” Naraku rushed towards the front door.

Suddenly Sushi pulled herself loose. “Outside?!” She yelled. “No way, girl! I am *not* going outside! There’s a storm outside!”

“Come on!” Naraku grabbed her wrist again. “We have to get to the tower!”

“And get even closer to the storm?!” Sushi gasped. “Look, maybe I was overreacting back then, but if you take me to that tower, then...”

“For crying out loud, there’s no time!” Naraku pulled Sushi outside.

“There’s a ninety percent chance that lightning hits the tallest object in the area!”

Sushi tried, but Naraku wouldn’t listen.

She pulled the girl up the stairs, while the wind raged around the tower. Each rumble was felt and each flash looked twice as bright. Sushi didn’t know what was scarier; the fact she was so close to the storm, or that her Chieftess acted so... irrational!

Naraku pushed the door open with a slam and ran to the window that had been blown open. She closed it, looked for a dry spot and pulled Sushi towards the floor.

Quickly she sat down and gave her order: “Close your eyes and link your telepathy with mine; I know we can do that if we try hard enough!”

“What?!” Sushi gasped. “But...”

“It’s Ao, Sushi, it’s Ao who is trying to contact me!”

Dinner had ended, but all looked at each other uneasily. “Right...” Mayonaka started.

“I guess... I’ll start with the dishes then.”

“Oh!” Toh jumped up. “Please, allow us three to do them!” Shocked, Behn and Rons looked up. “You graced us with this wonderful meal...”

“That’s not needed.” Mayonaka smiled. “I always do them.”

“On your own?!” Toh gasped. “But that must be...”

“It’s not that much.” Mayonaka tried again. “When I am finished with something, I always clean them right away, so it’s actually only what you see here and a few things...”

“Milady, you would insult us if you wouldn’t allow us to do the dishes.” Toh ended the discussion.

>Look at that.< Keiran said to Matsu with a smile. >It seems only Toh is eager to do the dishes.<

>How come?< Matsu asked surprised.

>Rons and Behn do smile and nod as if they agree, but their body language betrays them. They don’t like this suggestion at all!<

>Is that so...?< Blade joined the discussion. >So those damned skills come in handy after all. You know, you...<

>Be-ne-fit-of-the-doubt.< Mah-Lin practically spelled. >Mayonaka, could you please tell me where the dictionary lies? I think I need to educate Blade. With something blunt and heavy.<

>Sorry, Blade.< Matsuru apologised. >This time I agree with Mah-Lin. We are not going to spy on them. If it turns out the suspicions are just that, then we've made our very first official insult. Building up a good name takes years, ruining a good name takes a second.<

>A week without training and you already get paranoid.< Mah-Lin shook her head.

>You really need to get your butt kicked again.<

Blade looked insulted for a moment, but then turned red and played with his fingers.

>I... I could use a good fight, yeah.<

Sushi and Naraku had both closed their eyes, holding hands. Concentrating with all their might, they tried to establish a mental connection that was called 'Linking'. It was a way people could make use of other people's skills, or learn something easier. It was an open connection, meaning Naraku could 'read' into Sushi's skills and vice versa. However, Naraku was too concentrated to look for any for that. 'Spirit Telepathy'; the kind where you send out your spirit to the spirit world was hard enough for one User, let alone one User who had a second one tagging along.

>Open your eyes.< Sushi heard within her mind, and she obeyed.

>Hey, sis.<

Sushi placed her hands before her mouth, not even realising she was partly transparent and outside of her body. All she had eyes for, was the young man before her. Chestnut-brown hair, blue eyes like hers... and those long ears...

>We only have a moment.< Naraku informed Sushi. >Ao can't stay long.<

Ao's spirit took a step towards Sushi, betraying his emotions within his eyes. >You look great, sis.< He smiled at her. >Has been a while since I saw you. How's it going?<

Sushi couldn't speak for a few more seconds, until suddenly: >You still have both arms and legs!<

>Eh?< Ao replied, startled, but the embarrassed face of Naraku told him his sister was just... being his sister. >Still silly as ever.< He tried ruffling through her hair, but spirits can only touch if they leave their bodies together, when they are linked. >Can't wait to mess up your hair again.<

>Ao, you must go.< Naraku told him. >I can feel your energy, it's fading away. I'm sorry we kept you waiting.<

>That's okay.< Ao smiled. >I assume everything is still alright?< He saw his Chieftess nodding. >Then I'll tell the others that. You get some sleep, sis, you start to look as if Milky has run over you.<

Sushi saw him turning away, raising his hand to wave good bye. >I miss you!< Sushi suddenly exclaimed. >I miss you so much...<

Ao was surprised at first, but then turned back, bent over, and tried to kiss her on the cheek. He whispered his last words, before letting go and fading away.

>Let's go back to the others.< Naraku took Sushi's hand again. >Ao returned to his body and so should we.<

With a deep breath both spirits returned to their bodies and Naraku opened her eyes with a happy sigh... but then noticed Sushi was crying. A weird feeling overflowed her; maybe she shouldn't have done this? Maybe she made things worse? She thought that meeting her brother would make her feel better, not worse!

"Sushi?" Naraku asked carefully.

"Seven days..." Sushi sobbed but smiled through her tears. "He said only seven more days!" The Elfin girl plunged forward and embraced the purple-haired girl. "Thank you, thank you so much!"

"You're welcome." Naraku smiled. "It was my pleasure."

"Look, Mah-Lin..." Blade sighed. "You don't have to look up those words in a dictionary. I know what they mean."

"You do?" Mah-Lin walked to a few shelves. "Because you seem to keep forgetting what we agreed on."

"I'm just joking." Blade grunted. "You know I'd never go against Naraku's orders."

He saw Mah-Lin pulling out a large and heavy book. "Lin, you know I can barely read; why bother looking it up? Unless you want to use it to hit my head, like you said..." Mah-Lin walked to him. "Mayonaka would not approve of that!"

All of a sudden, Mah-Lin placed the book on a table and jumped at him; placing a kiss firmly upon his lips. After a moment, she let him go, resting her head on his chest.

Blade was stunned; where did that come from? Had something happened; had he make a mistake? Did she feel guilty about something? The way she held him tight showed him she was not at ease. Could it be she feared the storm and refused to let others know? While she always acted tough towards others, he knew her secret fears. "I love you." Blade said, hoping it was that what she wanted to hear. Women, even if they would have come with a manual, he would never understand them (besides the fact he would have to practise reading first).

Mah-Lin released a faint smile, but then placed her head back upon his chest. "Please, just hold me." She whispered.

"Sure." Blade smiled, but couldn't help not being at ease. Mah-Lin... she hadn't said in return that she loved him, while it was usually her who said it first. What was it that bothered her? What was it that she didn't want to share with him? "You still love me, right?" He suddenly asked.

"You silly [ruma] <sup>4</sup>." Mah-Lin smiled, teasing him, but still not letting him go. However... she still hadn't said that she loved him back. Blade couldn't help himself... as he placed his arms around her even tighter...

## Episode 230: The countdown

“Oi, I’m going to bring her a jacket.” Mayonaka shook her head. “That idiot will catch a cold if she keeps on being outside.”

Matsuru smiled. “I already decided to take over her chores today.” He grinned. “We can’t expect her to focus on anything else, so she might as well take watch duty.”

“We’d better warn Naraku.” Mayonaka sighed. “She’ll get herself a pneumonia this way.”

Blade passed the talking two. “Ah, I see, is Ao coming home today?” He looked at Sushi.

“He’d better.” Mayonaka growled. “That [ruma] kept me up all night. If you think she slept little... I slept less!”

“I was more worried about her disappointment if he wouldn’t come.” Matsuru mumbled and saw Blade nod in agreement.

“BLADE!” It suddenly sounded on the courtyard. “Get your butt over here!” Blade quickly excused himself. “Where is my punching bag?!”

“Here I am, here I am!” Blade ran towards her. “Mister Punching Bag, reporting for duty!”

“Took you long enough.” Mah-Lin cracked her knuckles. “I’m in the mood for letting you fly around today.”

“Go ahead and try.” Blade grinned. “Because I’m more in the mood for letting *you* fly today.”

“In your dreams, boy, in your dreams.”

In the kitchen, the three ‘pilgrims’ were doing the dishes. “Always the dishes...”

Rons complained. “I hate doing the dishes!”

“What matters, is that they trust us enough to leave us alone within the castle.” Toh smiled, whispering softly. “When those ‘others’ return, we’ll make our move.”

“All three of us?” Behn looked up.

Toh shook his head. “This one is for you, Rons.”

“Now you’re talking.” Rons smiled.

Today could be considered a lazy day. All were anxious to see their friends again, so only the most urgent matters were taken care of. Naraku sat down on the stairs, with her beloved holding her. Together they studied Blade and Mah-Lin, who were caught in a battle that looked as if they truly hated each other.

“Do you think Shadowhunter would already be back?” Naraku suddenly asked Keiran.

“She said she’d come for you.” Keiran quickly said. “Maybe she is, but remember, she’s part of a pack now. She can’t just simply leave whenever she pleases. Her status is probably quite fragile right now.”

“But you said they’d invited her for that march around their territory.” Naraku looked at him.

“Yes, I did, but... Ooh, that was a nice one!” Keiran pointed and Naraku quickly looked at the battle again. “Blade avoided her foot and managed to take her arm.”

“Ai, and now Blade’s on the ground...” Naraku noticed. “I think the day Blade manages to truly defeat Mah-Lin, is the day... Whoa, that was fast.” She saw Blade jump up again and try to give his wife a kick of his own. She, however, jumped backwards with a summersault, landing gracefully on the ground. “Do you think I can do that too?” Naraku asked.

“My little High One can do anything she wants.” Keiran held her even closer. “But I don’t think I’d want to be your practise partner...”

“How come?” Naraku wondered.

“I’m afraid of flying.” Keiran smiled at her.

Mah-Lin jumped up high, but Blade, noticed her coming from above. He made a quick estimation, closed his eyes, raised his leg, turned around...

Suddenly Mah-Lin was flying through the air, landed hard against a wall and slid down onto some barrels, that collapsed under her sudden weight. Silence filled the courtyard, as Blade stared at the wall. Mah-Lin didn’t move...

“Mah-Lin!” He screamed, running towards the wall. “Naraku, quick!”

Naraku reacted in an instant and hurried down the stairs, followed by Keiran. Sushi looked up from the battlement, but had trouble choosing where she should go. She then noticed Naraku had already reached Mah-Lin and decided that if it was really bad, she’d join them. As long as Naraku didn’t use her healing powers, there was no need to worry.

Inside her room, Mayonaka was standing in front of a mirror, not having heard any of the screams outside. She twirled around, letting her dress flow and allowing her dark hair to dance through the air. Then, she made a little bow. “A dance, with me?” She talked to herself. “Of course, Matsu, that would be wonderful.” She moved on imaginary music. “My, you are such a wonderful dancer; I never realised that.” Mayonaka turned around once more, looking back when she was with her back to the mirror. “Oh Matsu, you flatter me. Do you really think this gown suits me? It was just something old I pulled out of the closet...” Suddenly Mayonaka started blushing. “Oh, stop saying such silly things. Stop it! You’re making me blush... Outside, for a walk? Sure, if you wish to talk about something...” Mayonaka twirled around once more. “Oh, that would be so wonderful!” She had placed her arms around her, but then stopped. “But I guess they are just dreams...” Mayonaka mumbled more serious. “So... so maybe...” Once again, she turned red. “Maybe I need to be bold... and tell him first! ...Oh, I couldn’t! It’s so un-lady-like... Pull yourself together girl, you are a princess! You’ve been silent to him for more than three years now, it’s time you gather some courage and just do it!” She looked into the mirror again. “Yes!” She encouraged herself again. Then, she suddenly lost hope again. “I can’t!” She cried. “I just simply can’t!”

“Mah-Lin!” Blade called out, worried. “Mah-Lin, say something!”

Naraku helped the girl get up. “Gaah...” Mah-Lin gasped with a raw voice. “Which horse hit me...?”

“Be careful.” Naraku instructed the girl. “You hit the wall hard.”

“Are you alright?” Blade had to keep himself from pulling her into his arms. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry!”

Suddenly, Mah-Lin realised what had happened. Shocked, she looked at her husband. "You... hit me?" She asked, astounded. Sure, he had hit her before, but half of his victories were when she let him win and the other half were when she was tired. This time, it was neither... so how could he have won?

"It happened quite fast." Keiran informed her, while Naraku inspected her body for injuries. "I guess Blade was just lucky; he spun around at the right moment. Your attack missed and a split-second later his foot hit you."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Blade seemed to be more shocked than Mah-Lin; he obviously never expected to hurt her this badly.

"Mah-Lin is fine." Naraku smiled at Blade. "She didn't break anything. She will probably feel the bruises tomorrow, though. How do you feel, Mah-Lin?"

Mah-Lin turned from her stammering husband to her Chieftess. "Eh... yes, I feel fine. I think I sprained my wrist though..."

Naraku inspected the wrist again. "No, you haven't, but it was a close one. I'd better not use my powers for this, it's not really sprained."

"Let's put on a splint, just in case." Keiran smiled. "Shall I do it, or do you want to do it, Blade?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Blade kept on repeating.

"I think I need to calm down Blade first." Naraku smiled. "Can you give her that splint, Keiran?"

"Sure." Keiran smiled. "Can you walk, Mah-Lin? We'll first put some ice on it, to stop the swelling." He helped her towards the castle, as Blade was still lost in shock. Naraku grasped his shoulders with her hands, as if she wanted to shake him awake.

"Blade... Blade!" She yelled at him. "Mah-Lin is fine! She hasn't broken anything!"

"I... I..." Blade gasped for air.

"I double-checked her. She is not injured." Blade finally started looking at her. "Mah-Lin is one hundred percent fine... Okay, her wrist was almost sprained and she'll be bruised, but she is fine."

"I... I... I hurt her..." Blade finally managed to say,

This confused Naraku. "But... you two fight all the time. Getting hurt is like day turning into night with you two."

"Where is she?!" Blade suddenly noticed.

Naraku grabbed him to prevent him from walking away. "She is fine!" She repeated.

"Mah-Lin is inside with Keiran. He's getting her a splint for her wrist."

"A splint?!" Blade called out. "She is hurt?!" Blade jumped up. "High Ones, Mah-Lin!"

At that moment, Matsuru reached the courtyard. "I heard what happened from Keiran." He informed Naraku. "How is Blade?"

"Mah-Lin!" Blade called out. "I hurt Mah-Lin! Where is she? Is she okay?! Mah-Lin!"

"Mah-Lin is fine!" Naraku called out again. "Mah-Lin is inside and Keiran is with her. He's making sure there won't be any swelling."

"Swelling?" Blade looked at her. "What swelling? What happened? Is she okay? Where is Mah-Lin? Where is my wife?!"

Blade called out her name again and both Matsuru and Naraku tried to calm him down. "He's been like this ever since he hit her." Naraku said to Matsuru. "I can't seem to reach him!"



“He’s in some sort of a shock.” Matsu guessed, having no medical background.

“We have to make sure he doesn’t hurt himself.”

“But he doesn’t listen to me!” Naraku replied.

“Try your telepathy!” Matsu suggested. “Maybe that will calm him down.”

Naraku nodded and tried to reach Blade telepathically. >Blade.< She started. >Blade, it’s me, Naraku. I’m here, with Matsu.< She didn’t get any reply. >Mah-Lin is fine, she is not hurt! Look at me, Blade, look at me!< There was still no response, until Naraku’s next words washed over him like a tsunami: >LOOK AT ME!<

Obedying the order, the panting and frightened Blade turned his head, towards the orange eyes of his Chieftess. He couldn’t hear what she was saying, but somehow... something in her eyes calmed him down. Those eyes, which anyone could drown in... mystical and enchanting, like the girl herself. As if the eyes held a thousand stars, they shone with an embracing light. Warm, soothing... like a glass of warm milk after a rainy day...

“Blade?”

Blade snapped around, to where the voice had come from. He saw a girl, with dark blue hair, that was almost black. Her eyes were equally dark, but this time they betrayed fright. Her arm was resting in a cloth and she looked as if she had hurried back to see him.

“Blade?” Mah-Lin repeated. “Are you alright?”

“Mah-Lin?” Blade carefully whispered.

“I’m alright.” She smiled at him. “Nothing to worry and my wrist already hurts less. So, no need to worry, okay? I’m okay, you’re okay, we’re all... we’re all...”

“Mah-Lin...” Blade sighed and lost all control. His eyes rolled away and his body went limp. Matsu barely managed to hold him and Keiran rushed over to help.

Naraku touched him, but quickly found out what had happened.

“He’s alright.” She tried to smile. “He only fainted...”

Mah-Lin held a hand to her chest. “Thank the High Ones...” She whispered.

“I guess your training days are on a break.” Keiran smiled. “It’s your own fault, you know.” He helped Matsu pull up Blade. “You were the one who taught him that trick.”

Mah-Lin noticed a small wink and smiled. “Yeah...” She only replied.

“Let’s take him to his bed.” Matsu looked at the dreaded stairs. “It’s probably best if he sees you first when he wakes up.”

Naraku did her best to help the two men getting Blade up the stairs. “Are you certain you are okay?” She asked Mah-Lin, who nodded in reply.

“Just shaken.” She admitted. “I hurried back as fast as I could when Sushi told us Blade was losing it.”

“I’m glad you did.” Naraku smiled. “I didn’t know how to get him calm otherwise.”

Mah-Lin opened the door to their room and followed them inside. “I hope he will wake up soon.” She whispered.

“Blade doesn’t want to miss welcoming the others home.” Matsu assured her.

“Give him a few minutes and he’ll be up and running again.”

“I’ll ask Mayonaka to bring some soup.” Naraku smiled. “If there’s anything, even the slightest worry, don’t hesitate to call for me, okay?”

After they put Blade in bed, Matsu took off his shoes and Naraku took a blanket. "Man, what a guy." Matsu grinned. "All high and mighty, and yet he already fainted from shock twice in his life. I always thought fainting was more my style." He walked towards the door, glancing backwards once.

"Call me, okay?" Naraku instructed Mah-Lin once more. "No matter what!" Mah-Lin nodded. "Thank you." She said and then pulled a chair close to the bed. She sat down on it, while the door closed, taking her beloved's hand. "I just don't know it any more..." She whispered. "How can I tell you something I don't even know myself?"

"Will they be all right?" Naraku played with her spoon in the soup Mayonaka had prepared.

"Of course they will." Keiran smiled. "Blade was just scared he had lost Mah-Lin and that he might be the reason."

"It was scary seeing him like that." Naraku admitted. "I never saw anything like that before."

"You did well." Keiran assured her.

At that moment, Matsu walked through the door. Hopeful faces immediately turned to him, but Matsu had to disappoint both. "No news from the others and Blade is still asleep. He did seem to have a nightmare for a moment, but he's peaceful again."

"I wonder if the others will still come today." Keiran wondered.

"It's just past noon." Matsu disagreed. "And for Sushi's sake, I hope they come."

"What if Blade still sleeps when the others arrive?" Naraku pondered.

"Then we'll let him sleep." Matsu told her. "He saw his worst fear coming true today; he's pretty exhausted."

"Is Blade already up?" Mayonaka walked into the room, blushing for a moment when she saw Matsu, recovering quickly.

"No, not yet." Naraku leaned with her chin in the table. "How is Sushi doing?"

"She didn't even look away when I brought her soup." Mayonaka huffed. "She just tried to grab it without looking. I eventually pushed it into her hands, otherwise she would have dropped it."

"At least seven hours of staring now..." Keiran mumbled.

"I just wished she could show the same patience with everything else." Mayonaka folded her arms.

"Oi..." Naraku sighed. "We're having so much trouble on a day that should be joyful. All we need now is a natural disaster and the drama is complete..."

Blade opened his eyes. At first he was calm, staring at the ceiling, but then he shot up. "Mah-Lin!" He called out.

"I'm here!" Mah-Lin immediately replied, taking his hand. "I'm here and alright."

Blade looked aside, seeing her left arm resting in the cloth. Reality pushed through again, but Blade didn't want to lose control again. He stepped out of bed, onto the cold floor and knelt before his wife. He wanted to speak, but she placed her finger onto his lips.

“It was just a one-timer.” Mah-Lin teased him. “Don’t get used to it; I shall get my revenge!”

Relieved, Blade embraced her, placing his head on her lap, where she carefully touched his hair. “I love you...” Blade whispered with tears in his eyes. “I love you.” “I know, I know...” Mah-Lin replied. “You tell me so every day...”

“And I will keep on saying it...” Blade sniffed.

“You’re so silly...” Mah-Lin messed up his hair.

Blade suddenly looked up, with a serious face. He had already faced many fears today, so one more or less wouldn’t matter to him anymore. “Why don’t you say it anymore?” He whispered.

“Say what?” Mah-Lin honestly wondered.

“You never say that you love me anymore...” Blade admitted. “Are you... are you...?”

“Silly boy.” Mah-Lin kissed him on the forehead. “Where do you get such crazy ideas?”

“Then say it.”

“Blade, I married you, that should be enough.”

“Say it.”

“Blade, my heart is yours.” Mah-Lin told him. “If you can’t believe that...”

“Three little words, Mah-Lin.” Blade looked at her. “That’s all I ask from you.”

Mah-Lin sighed, but then smiled. “[Ne.]” She tapped on his nose. “[Kinmaië.]” A peck on his lips. “[Te.]”

Blade took her into his arms. “Thank you...” He whispered grateful.

‘Why?’ Mah-Lin thought. ‘Why do you long to hear those words so much? They are just that... words...’

In the kitchen, Mayonaka was putting away several pots, while preparing herself for dinner. Behn, Rons and Toh had offered to help her once more (well, Toh had, anyway), because they assumed she would want to welcome her friends when they’d arrive. This way, she wouldn’t have to worry about anything.

Mayonaka had decided on a simple meal with potatoes, carrots, beans, mushrooms, and fish, with a sweet sauce. Before she added the carrots, she would add other ingredients and keep a bit of the meal in a separate bowl, so that Rons wouldn’t have to worry about any carrots. She did notice, however, that the three ‘pilgrims’ were getting a bit nervous.

‘Probably because they don’t know how they should act when the others come.’ She convinced herself. ‘After all, they don’t know them; should they greet them?’

Rons was cutting the mushrooms, while Toh was cleaning the fish. Behn scraped the carrots and teased Rons with them, as if they were scary little demons. Suddenly, Mayonaka dropped the potato she was holding, as well as her knife: “They are here!” She exclaimed. Without looking behind, she hurried out of the kitchen, stunning the three ‘pilgrims’.

However, they recovered quickly and gave each other an approving nod. Rons hurried out of the room, while Behn pulled the bubbling cauldron from the fire. Toh put out the fire by placing a steel plate over the fireplace, stealing away the air. Calmly, they followed the dark-toned cook towards the courtyard.

Sushi was running through the valley towards the three riders. She did notice they were pulling a cart, but she couldn't care less. She only had eyes for one person, whom she recognised from a mile away. "Ao!" She called out. "Ao!"

The rider on the fox-coloured horse raised a hand, as if he was saying: 'Hey, you here? I didn't expect that!'; just to tease her. He wasn't hurrying at all; not only because he wanted to give his horse peace after the long journey, but he also enjoyed seeing the red-haired Elf running through the snow. She tripped at least twice before reaching them, but then she reached her brother with one big jump into the air.

Her jump was so sudden, that Ao almost forgot to catch her. Barely they managed to stay on the horse, but they couldn't care less. Laughing sounded between them when the young man uttered his first words: "Hair!" He exclaimed. "Real hair!" With his hand, he ruffled through his sister's hairs, messing it up completely.

"Ack! Ao!" Sushi tried to make him stop. "Stop it! No! Please!"

"Such a welcome..." A young man with ochre-coloured hair smiled.

"Did you bring us some girls too?" An orange-haired man looked around eagerly.

"No way!" Sushi stuck out her tongue. "Such a welcome is only reserved for Elves."

"I'm an Elf!" Ao raised his hand proudly, which promptly caused Sushi to hug him once more.

Suddenly Sushi noticed something behind the carriage. "Oh dear..." She gasped.

"Kai, it was nice knowing you."

"No worries!" Kai, the orange-haired man, smiled. "I am prepared!"

At the gate, the others impatiently waited for their friends. Naraku watched them come and they were just as she remembered them. The same smiles, the same gestures... it was as if they had never left.

The first who entered the castle was Rain, a young man with ochre-coloured hair. His eyes were sea-green, betraying his power over Water. His real name was Rayne, but apparently only this Water User could hear the difference between his true name and his nickname Rain. His hair was a bit shorter than when he had left, but no-one had trouble recognising him.

Behind him was Ao, Sushi's older brother with chestnut-coloured hair and blue eyes. Sushi was still clinging to him, even though he told her six times he couldn't get off with her hanging there. His Earth Powers were immense; there was no secret the earth could hold for him... nor could he hide anything for his sister. He knew her, like she knew him, which would most likely mean they would probably have their first fight within three days.

Last to enter the castle was Kai, the orange-haired Fire User. While his smiles were cheerful and his friends had missed him, there were still many secrets Kai kept from them. His true age, the limit of his knowledge of Magic... He would have been a far better tutor for Naraku than Rain, but somehow this Fire User couldn't stay serious for four minutes. In the beginning he kept on mixing salt and sugar, but eventually Kai grew over that phase and became a top cook. While he held many secrets, they did know that Kai's real name was Kaiyou, given to him by his loving parents, who were both Water Users. The chance of having a Fire User born from two Water Users is almost non-existent, yet it had happened. At first they didn't know it yet,

thus giving him the name that meant 'Ocean'. While Kai loved water (and even adored Rain for having Water Powers), he would never be able to live up to his name. "Welcome home!" Mayonaka sighed, embracing first Rain and then Kai. She stepped towards Ao, but noticed Sushi was still all over him. "Would you like a crowbar?" She asked him instead.

Ao shook his head. "Nah, I'll just jump in the underground spring."

"You wouldn't dare!" Sushi hissed.

"Let's go!" Ao grinned.

"KAI!" It suddenly sounded over the courtyard, as Behn and Toh reached the front gate.

"Or, maybe I will stay a little longer." Ao smiled and did a step back.

Blade stomped towards Kai, who was trying to hide behind Naraku. "What are those?!"

"It was a gift!" Kai tried, while Mah-Lin tried to calm down Blade.

"I told you..." Blade pointed at the two animals behind the carriage. "No more animals!"

"But Woolie and Sheepy were donated by..." Kai peeped.

"Even if the High Ones themselves donated those sheep, I don't want any more animals inside that castle." Blade was furious. "We are not a farm! We are... ooh, what a nice sword..." He took the blade Kai was holding in front of him, as if it would act like a shield... and it did.

Kai handed it to Blade. "This sword was donated by the same person." Kai carefully said. "But he told me I could only give it to someone worthy..."

"The man is forgiven." Blade admired the sword. "Brought any more swords?"

At that moment, Rons reached the group, which caused the three newcomers to notice them as well. "Oh, I believe we haven't met yet." Rain smiled and wanted to stretch out his hand, but suddenly stopped, looking at Naraku.

"Sir Rayne, Sir Kaiyou and Sir Ao, we are most rejoiced you have returned safely."

Naraku smiled at them. "May I introduce you to our three honoured guests: Sir Toh, Sir Rons and Sir Behn. They are pilgrims who have helped us the past few weeks."

Toh bowed at them. "Your arrival was most anticipated." Toh smiled. "Now that you have returned, we feel less guilty about our decision to move on with our guest."

"Will you leave?" Naraku looked shocked.

"Queen of MorningSnow, we thank you for your hospitality, but we should continue our quest for enlightenment." Toh looked at her. "If you do not mind, we would like to leave tomorrow, as the weather looks promising."

"Well, if that is your wish..." Naraku looked sad. "But please, allow us to invite you to the celebration tonight."

"The invitation is welcome." Toh smiled.

"Hey, where's Ao?" Mah-Lin suddenly noticed, but her question was answered after a short scream... and a splash, coming from the underground hot spring.

## Episode 231: Hidden agenda

Mayonaka looked at the mirror. “What do you think; should I have my hair up or down tonight?”

On the side, an Elfin maiden was trying to dry her hair. “Gah, I was so certain he was only kidding!” Sushi complained. “I’m sorry, you said something?”

Mayonaka smiled and repeated her question. “And is this dress okay for tonight?”

“Nobody cares what you will wear.” Sushi took a brush.

“I care.” Mayonaka snarled. “And if you honestly believe that, then you should go like that; with your hair like that.”

“No way!” Sushi started brushing. “And yes, that dress looks good. Of course it looks good. Anything I make for you looks good on you.”

“And then they call me conceited...” Mayonaka rolled with her eyes. She straightened her dress and looked into the mirror. “This is it.” She convinced herself. “Tonight I will tell him... unless he tells me first of course.”

“Thank you so much for helping with dinner.” Naraku smiled at the ‘pilgrims’, as they placed a cauldron with vegetables on a low table in the ballroom. It was another room that was even less used by The IceHunters, but this celebration just asked for a suitable room. Normally, The IceHunters would have also invited the animals, but the horses were tired after their journey and it would make a wrong impression.

Grasshopper, the white wolf, never really liked crowds and was satisfied with a large piece of meat she could devour in the stables. This way, she could also keep an eye on Sheepy and Woolie; the two new inhabitants of MorningSnow. At first they looked uneasy, but then it seemed as if they had been friends with the chickens, rooster and the cow Milky for years. It probably also helped that Sushi had placed a big stack of hay and a bucket of corn inside the stables.

Back to the ballroom, Kai was the first who had changed into a formal attire and helped getting the ballroom ready. With his magical Fire Powers, he lit all the candles on the chandeliers and then went off to inspect the food.

“No way.” Maturu pulled him away from the table. “We haven’t eaten either.”

“But I am hungry!” Kai pouted.

“That’s what I’m afraid of...”

Ao rolled a barrel into the room. “Kai, rejoice, they haven’t touched the ‘Heer!’” He smiled at him.

“Heer!” Kai jumped into the air. “There is Heer here!”

“Heer?” Behn asked curious.

“Honey Beer.” Keiran explained. “Kai likes to get drunk. He used to love wine, but since we ran out of wine, he drinks Heer instead.”

“We tried keeping him sober several times,” Mah-Lin started, “...but he’s annoyingly lively the next morning. He’s more enjoyable if he has a hangover. We do have to find a middle way. Luckily we don’t have much Heer so he isn’t drunk that often.”

By that time, the last attendant entered the room. Short stories were shared and of course Ao, Rain and Kai wanted to know all about Mah-Lin’s ‘injury’. Naraku then called for their attention, giving a small speech, where she got lost halfway; forgetting

what she wanted to say or how to construct the line grammatically correct. During this speech she managed to say a line that sounded very formal... but was missing a verb.

Dinner followed next, where Blade was put in charge of the table with food. With his new sword tied to his belt, he made sure Kai would not get too close. Kai not only had a reputation of getting drunk on parties, but also of eating everything that was edible.

After dinner and sharing more stories, Ao, Rain and Kai called everyone together to a table, where various things were stacked. "Gifts!" Kai exclaimed.

"We tried to find something for everyone." Rain smiled. "That turned out to be trickier than expected."

"Blade already got his gift." Ao said. "But of course, first a gift for the Queen of MorningSnow." Ao handed her something small. "We have many stories to tell you, as well as formal gifts, but this is something from us personally."

Within Naraku's hands, a small necklace glittered in the candle-lit air. On the silver chain, a small pendant dangled, shaped into three moons. Two of the moons were made of a yellow gem and the other was blue... just like the moons outside. "Thank you!" She replied honestly. "It's beautiful!"

Kai handed Mayonaka a large pack, wrapped in a white cloth. Eagerly she unpacked it, only to squeal with delight. "You're kidding!" She exclaimed.

"What is it?" Everyone hurried to her side, seeing a large and thick book.

"What is it about?" Blade asked, curious.

"Where did you find this?" Mayonaka asked Kai first.

"Eh, it was in one of the last towns we visited." Kai admitted surprised. "The shopkeeper said it was just released and that this is the seventh copy of it. He also said it was quite a revolutionary and popular book and since it was new, we figured you didn't have it yet."

"What's the title, Mayonaka?" Naraku liked to know as well.

"*Hearing the silence: A comprehensive guide on how to let the deaf speak successfully.*" Mayonaka read out loud. "My, it even has an illustrated sign-language dictionary!"

"That's cool." Sushi smiled. "But this reminds me of something..."

"Wait, who is the writer?" Matsuru suddenly asked.

"Arken and Moko-o, with the help of Ansane, who made the dictionary." Mayonaka smiled.

"Those names sound familiar..." Mah-Lin mumbled.

"Hold on, *the* Arken, Moko-o and Ansane?!" Blade called out. "They actually did what they said they would do?!"

"It starts to ring a bell..." Ao admitted. "Sushi talked about them. Didn't you guys meet them on your way to the Desert Kingdom?"

Mayonaka nodded. "While we were travelling to my birthplace, we met these three. Ansane was a deaf girl and Arken was her brother. Arken wanted to be an inventor and was sent to Moko-o as a student. Moko-o, however, didn't want a student, but a fellow scientist. His life-long dream was to prove another scientist wrong; a man named Hezor. Hezor claimed deaf people were useless and Moko-o was convinced they were not only useful but could also learn how to speak." Mayonaka looked at the