

Tiara did not intend her plan to go that bad. She had to do something or the humans would kill them both. The druid stood up, alerting the men about to finish off the beast. She hit the ground with her heel and drew some shapes in front of her with her hands. It confused the men long enough for the moss on the stones to crawl and wrap around their legs. In seconds, they were unable to move or fight. The redhead saw fear in their eyes.

Sadora fell on her knees, back in her human body. A moment later she collapsed, unconscious. The druid cursed, knowing that she would have to drag her by herself to get out of this place. It cost her all her strength to pull the boat out of its shed, put Sadora in it and then row to the other side. During the crossing, her eyes stayed fixed on the broken arrows piercing the human's chest. She was losing too much blood.

Back on the southern shore, Tiara commanded grass and plants to carry Sadora inside the forest. Before nightfall, she gathered medicinal plants in the surroundings. Images from the fight flashed inside her mind. She shivered and ran back towards the dying woman. The redhead chewed the leaves, berries and roots and made a paste out of it before applying it to the wounds.

Pulling the arrows required time and precision, she was not in shape to perform such an act now. Thus, she only prevented infection and blood loss. However, her shed was very far away. Sadora would not get there alive. They needed another solution. Unable to think straight anymore, the elf lay down and sank into sleep in seconds.

She woke up in the middle of the night and jump on her feet. Her heart racing, she looked for the moon behind the clouds. Despite its rays shining on the human's skin, nothing happened. Still exhausted, she got back to sleep for a few more hours. Spell casting was draining, enough to kill any unwise mage. The Immaterial had rules, and none was able to escape them. It was as generous as it was demanding. No one understood the invisible realm in its entirety, however the consequences of challenging it were clear enough to every magic user.

Waking up again, Tiara notice Sadora's gaze fixed on her. The warrior tried to speak, only leaving a weak sound out of her dry lips. The elf shook her head.

— Do not move, do not speak.

— Your... fault, articulated the human.

The redhead remained quiet. She had no intention of rekindling the debate. Moreover, she didn't know what to say anymore. At that moment, her intentions towards the human were different.

— We are going to a hidden temple not far, downstream the river.

— Why ?

— Because you are dying.

Sadora grumbled something before falling unconscious again. Tiara kept resting too. A few blue chickadees and some frogs chatted around their makeshift camp. A doe wandered closer, appeased the the magical aura of the elf.

At first light of dawn, the druid dug a circle in the dirt. She placed some stones around it and drew a symbol in the center. Then, she found a tiny mushroom between two rocks and returned to Sadora who was slowly waking up. The improvised ointment had worked wonders, stopping the injuries from getting worse.

— We are departing soon.

— I can't walk.

— I know. Stay calm and he will carry you.

She nodded at the colossal bear called by the summoning circle. He sat just before the warrior.

— No fucking way, Sadora whispered.

— As expected, Tiara laughed.

In a swift movement, she placed the mushroom in the human mouth and held her jaws closed. She fell deep into unconsciousness again.

— Now we can go, concluded Tiara.

The bear stooped down for the druid to settle the wounded woman on its back, then they set off without further delay. The animal displayed a strange smile, or what most resembled one. Tiara knew he was always happy to assist her. Once, when she was just a child, he had defended her against the dangers of the forest. Today, as the bear was getting older, the redhead did not want him to put himself into harm's way. The roles had been reversed.

The elf constantly scanned the surroundings. Her worry masked behind her eternal severity alerted the bear who growled while shaking his head.

— I am not welcome here, Shura, she grumbled. The forest has nothing to do with that, only the elves. If they find me here, they will be ruthless

They reached the Lake of Silhouettes which flowed in long waterfalls into the ravine where the Temple was located. The small group circled along the shores, and before reaching the falls, they moved west to get to a crevasse hidden under giant ferns. They walked down cautiously and followed the path which went between the rocky walls. After a vine covered natural arch, they came out onto a promontory inside the ravine. A path ran along the cliff leading to the woods below. Tiara went first. Shura regularly slipped on the pebbles, heaving sighs of annoyance.

— One last effort, friend. We are almost here.

They ended up in a birches and ash trees grove. The sun chased away the mist, making the water droplets sparkle on the cobwebs. The temple was in sight.

She didn't need to knock for her presence to be noticed. The door was open, but she stood outside, silent. The druid respected the temple and its inhabitants, she did not intend to disrupt their lives if the priestesses did not want her to be here. Kynae, one of the Temple Watchers walked towards her, her saber on her hip. She looked at the odd group with her piercing blue eyes.

– You are far from your home, druid.
– I do not have a home, according to Sylfan rules at least.
The watcher displayed a slight smile. Tiara could not understand its meaning and decided to forget everything about it.
– Why are you here ?
– This is a long story.
– One you have to tell me.
– This woman is wounded. She will die without your help.
– These are not elven arrows.
– No indeed.
– The other shore ?
– Humans will not look for us.
– Why are you with her ?
– She’s under some sort of magical influence. I wanted to learn more about it, she had other plans. Things get worse.

Kynae turned pale. Tiara cursed. The tall elf connected the dots in her mind. However, to the redhead astonishment, she did not slammed the door at her face.

– The matriarch foreseen this moment. This is the beast who injured Yatika.
– So, she lived.
– Yes.
– That is good to hear.

The Watcher could not hide her surprise after hearing this. Tiara was well aware that she had a heartless reputation. She ignored that too.

– Come in, with the human. Stay in the courtyard.

Tiara dragged Sadora to the ground and pulled her to the indicated spot under the stunned looks of the priestesses. She thanked Shura who smiled again and stomped away. Kynae came back soon after with Judith.

– Welcome, Tiara. We have to talk about several things as you guessed, I am sure. This will wait though, as you are exhausted and confused. You need to heal as much as this woman.

– I can take care of myself, thank you, replied the druid. I am staying to keep an eye on her.

– I know you can take care of your own flesh, but can you lie to yourself eternally ? If you change your mind, the infirmary is still in the same place as during your last visit.

– You remember.

– How can I forget ?

Tiara nodded, doing her best to show as little emotions as she could. Kynae helped her carrying Sadora inside. The redhead lay down in another bed not far. They slept soundly until the next day. The elf was awakened by the agitation of the priestesses. Obviously, they had taken care of stripping the injured woman of her ripped clothes and were about to finish healing her minor wounds. Her own bruises and cuts were already cleaned. They used magic too, she could feel it, though the pain was lingering.

A young priestess, visibly intimidated, came forward with a bowl of hot water and a clean cloth. She placed everything on a table and added in a thin voice :

– There is food for you in the great hall. The matriarch awaits. Don't worry about your friend, Lady Kynae will be watching over her.

– She is not... Thank you.

Tiara washed her face and left the infirmary. As she passed through the door, she almost bumped into another woman and recognized Yatika. The human gave her a long disgusted look.

– So, you are truly here...

– I do not intend to stay. I am leaving soon.

– The sooner the better.

Yatika strode away. The druid glanced behind her, catching the priestesses who had been witnessing their exchange. Finally, she reached to the hall where several wooden bowls and a basket of fruit awaited her. Judith was seated in a large armchair, a parchment in her hands.

– You are awake, said the dean, smiling. Give me a minute. Please, eat if you are hungry, it is all for you.

She sat, looking at the meal. The aromas filled her lungs, tempting her. Though, she hesitated.

– There we go, added the matriarch while putting her parchment down. Go on, don't be shy ! The pear compote is still warm. You have carrot cake and hazelnut biscuits, my favorite. And fresh fruits of course.

Seeing that the old woman was waiting for her to eat before speaking, Tiara took a biscuit and bit a so small piece that a mouse would have done better. The druid felt confused and embarrassed.

– The woman... she finally asked.

– She's alright.

– Very well.

The redhead finished her biscuit without the strange feeling leaving her chest. The expression on her face did not go unnoticed.

– You do not to fear anything here. We did not tell the elves.

– Oh no, I know. I am... I guess the fact that everyone here excepting you despite me is affecting me a bit.

– Most of our disciples are glad of your presence, my dear. We can not stop them asking questions about you.

– What did you say to them ?

– I told them to speak to you directly. I am sure none came to do so yet.

The druid felt her heart skipping a beat. Then, hunger took her by surprise. She put a bit of everything in her bowl and started eating, blushing under the dean's joyful gaze. A few minutes later, Judith continued :

– This woman is the beast, isn't it ?

– Yes.

– Do you think she is dangerous in her current state ?

- Even without the beast strength, she is a skill warrior. When the curse takes hold, she became terrifying. She could have killed me several times. I wonder if she has not been created in this purpose : killing again and again.
- Did you know that her bite is poisonous ? Not only that, but it is so maleficent that not one of our spells can dissipate it.
- Yatika is poisoned, understood the elf.
- Her life depends on a sacred relic now. If she was to loose it, she would meet her end.
- I tried to stop her from attacking the wolf but... She is stubborn.
- Both your responsibility and hers are yours to manage. Consequences will be your reward and punishment. I will not judge any of you, the Immaterial will do that just fine.
- The girl disagrees.
- The only thing making events good or bad, is our way of looking at them. Time will come when both of you will understand. She is still young and brave. You, friend, have your own wounds to heal, and I am not talking about these bruises. Anyway, I understood that you plan to leave. I am sure you want the other woman to go with you. No one here will prevent that.
- She will.
- Precisely. I would therefore like you not to give free rein to your powers within this temple.

Tiara glanced outside. She felt tired and let out a long sigh. The dean stood up at the same time and placed her bony hand on the elf's. She then walked away, settling down on the steps where a seat was already waiting for her. Intrigued, the druid grabbed one last biscuit and followed her. She discovered a second chair.

- I always sit here when something is bothering me. Would you like to try ?
- Do I look bothered ? the redhead asked.
- Judith's silence was enough. Tiara sat. They looked at the courtyard, the central tree, the mist dancing in the ravine. A weight left Tiara's chest.
- She can do whatever she wants, she finally added. I want my peace back.
- Is that what you wish ?
- Yes. I think. Is this answer good enough ?
- You tell me, friend. My own troubles are elsewhere.
- What do you mean ?
- An unprecedented change is coming. The flow of events is getting darker. We are on a slope. All of us will have to make a choice. Mirh needs new heroes or we will fall.
- Are you trying to tell me something ?
- I'm sowing the last seeds I have in my hand, the dean whispered.
- Matriarch, this world rejected me with so much hatred that all I get now is disgust and threats.
- Is that so ? Or do you give people the means to harm you ?
- Excuse me ?
- Confirming a hurtful belief is easier than putting effort into forging a new one, even a beneficial one. You remain the only creator of your life.

Tiara stiffened and felt tears forming under her delicate eyelids. She tried to answer but felt that a single sound coming off her mouth would lead her to cry. Her jaw trembled as she sank into her chair. The dean kept looking at the sky.

— Darkness is growing above us and it is feasting on our discord.

She was running at full speed. She ran so fast that the plain appeared like a shapeless mass of moonlit elements. She thought she could leap for leagues. As of her, she saw like in daylight, another advantage of this bestial form. The plain had no end. No forest stood before her, no mountains, no river or village. Thus, she kept moving. The taste of blood still excited her senses and made her hunting for more. A sudden gust howled. It was so powerful that she staggered and stopped.

A woman's heartbreaking scream echoed in the shadows. She eagerly scanned the surroundings, without being able to find her. She was about to resume her charge when she saw the lifeless body resting in her arms. The young pointy eared woman was livid. A red stain spreading on her tunic.

The smell of blood made her shudder. She brought her gaping maw closer, ready to tear the elf's tender flesh. She woke up with a start and rolled to the ground. The next moment, she disappeared on the horizon, prompting the wolf to follow in her footsteps. It wasn't long before she noticed a white bump in the grass, then another. Lifeless bodies all dressed in the same white tunic lay around her. Her prey had disappeared and as she progressed, her movements became heavy and rigid.

Finally, paralysis took hold of her. The white-robed carcasses came to life and floated in her direction, like puppets hanging from strings. The closer they got, the more the pressure on her body became unbearable. She thought all her bones were about to snap. She screamed without achieving any result. Finally, the ghosts overwhelmed her, whispering in one voice :

— The beast is stronger than you. Give up, let her dominate you. You are worthless compared to her power. Die, mortal, it's the best thing you can do.

Sadora jumped awake and slid off the pallet, wrapped in the sweat-soaked linen sheet. While struggling, she moved towards the door but a threatening elf intervened. She pointed her sword at her throat. The threat brought her back to herself. She wore simple short breeches and bandages covered the majority of her body, tensed by pain. She sat down, almost falling a second time.

— Stay put, human, Kynae said.

— Who are you ?

— Does it matter to you ?

— No. I want to know where the fuck I am though.

— In a safe place.

— Safe for who ?
— Everyone, finally said the watcher while sheathing her blade. If you decide to be stupid however, I will take care of you myself.
— I need to leave. There is children here. The beast will slaughter them.
— Young women, not children. Anyway, you are not in condition to...
Sadora dashed forward, pushing the elf aside. The pain threw her off balance, but she hurried on, reaching the hall. Her passage provoked screams of terror and cries for help. The priestesses locked themselves in the neighboring rooms. Sadora saw the door leading outside and rushed down the steps, reopening some deep wounds. Too late she noticed the branches of the central tree snaking towards her and lifted her from the ground without the slightest difficulty.
— You never learn, Tiara sighed.
— Leave me alone, you damn witch ! roared the human.
— That is my intent. I just need your full attention, one last time.
— The beast will break you this time.
— Will you let her do so ? Judith intervened.
— It is bloody tempting.
— I will not apologize for what I did, continued the druid. I am not coming back on what has been done (Yatika, standing nearby, chuckled in despise). However, I give you two choices. Can you listen ?
— The plants let Sadora down. She stood still, fists clasped.
— Speak.
— You can go. I will not hunt you down again. You only have to leave this land. Or, you can stay, as I offered you once. If so, I...
— That's enough, Sadora growled.
— If so, repeated Tiara louder, I will do all I can to help you harness the beast's power, or banish it once and for all. You would only have to let me learn more about it. You have my word, *Var'sha ena*, she concluded with a nod.
— Your word... grumbled Sadora. I'll do just fine without it.
She pat on the ground and left the courtyard. Yatika remained still, quiet witnessing this scene. She had to admit the powerful aura of the mutant and the redhead. Then, she glanced at Judith, waiting for her reaction. The later raised her eyebrows.
— Did she react as you would expect her to do ?
Yatika sneered and shrugged. Maybe the elf wasn't all bad. But thinking of her as benevolent ? No.

The evening was quiet, like it often was in the temple of Yre. Dinner was simple. This time, the druid barely ate. She stood at one end of the table, pensive while a group of priestesses chatted on the other side. A few older women were dozing in front of the fireplace. During the rest of the day, Yatika had only glared at her once or twice, which left her plenty of time to mope about the hybrid's departure.

A source of knowledge had just slipped through her fingers. *Maybe it's for the best*, she thought. *People hate me enough as it is*. She had not yet noticed the

young human in front of her.

- I hope not to disturb you, she stammered. Can I ask you a question ?
- Go ahead.
- I wanted to know if... My friends want me to...
- Well ?
- No, it is so ridiculous. Guys, why do you want me to do this ?
- Come on ! insisted the others, laughing to tears.
- Are you and the woman who left, hum...
- Careful girl.
- Are you lovers ?

Flames ignited the emerald eyes of the druid. The priestess was about to vanish from existence, fear striking her down. Then, Tiara laughed. She was seized by a burst of laughter which affected the assembly.

- Does it matter to you ? the redhead continued with a strict voice.
 - I am... It's not me, well... My friends...
 - You like her, right ? I do not get it, I admit. Well, now she is gone, she is all yours. If you find her back I mean. Beware, she can bite.
- The girl's face was completely red. She fled and hid behind her friends. Suddenly, a freezing silence grew. Yatika appeared, her relic in hand.
- "she can bite" that is so funny. I could not have said it better myself.
 - I did not know you were here.
 - I leave here.
 - That is not what I meant.
 - I know.
 - The offer I presented to Sadora, it stands for you too. I can help you find a cure.
 - As I said, I don't want to have anything to do with you ever again.
- Silence settled again and Yatika left. The redhead sighed and walked toward the young priestess and her friends.
- No, girl, I did not sleep with this woman. She does not interest me in that matter, and I advice you to keep your distance from this kind of people. They are dangerous.
 - By the Goddess no ! That was not my thought ! I mean...
 - What is it now ?
 - Well, you are so beautiful and mesmerizing. I thought she fell under your spell. You know, like in those tales...
- Tiara repressed a gasp. She walked away without adding anything and entered the infirmary. As she lay down on her bunk she gave way to a silent sob.

Judith finished writing her letter and put down her peacock feather with a trembling hand. She read it again, twice, and before adding the seal of the Temple she went to get some fresh air on the balcony. It overlooked the back garden, a young cherry tree and a honeysuckle with an intoxicating scent. Further on

stretched the woods which were lost in the darkness. Fireflies fluttered here and there. She smiles, turning towards the stars. She remained like that for several minutes, thoughtful. Her fears were becoming clearer and clearer in her mind, she needed to ask for help from the elves now because time was against her. The dean did not know how many grains would still flow into the hourglass, and what circumstances would accompany their fall. She returned to her apartments and sealed her letter with red wax pressed by her signet ring.

— Watch over them, O Yre, benevolent Goddess. Bring them your wisdom and insight. O Selene, Holy Protector, grant your strength to my western child, for I cannot do it any longer.

That night, shortly before dawn the temperature dropped significantly. Autumn was slipping by and already heralded a harsh winter. In the morning, heavy clouds rose on the horizon. A storm was brewing. A powerful wind began to blow, making trees groan.

Tiara attended the rites, but did not engaged in them. She prayed to Yre regularly without ceremony, and that was enough for her. At some point, she noticed agitation in the courtyard. The druid walked towards the door which opened violently in front of her, slamming against the stone walls. Sadora appeared like a mad shade. She stood there, paralyzed, her eyes bloodshot. Mud covered her up to her neck and her bandages had been torn off. Finally, she turned to the redhead and opened her mouth :

— I accept your offer, elf.

She was led back, where a basin of hot water awaited her. She washed herself slowly, each movement an ordeal. After that, she put on new breeches and placed a blanket over he shoulders. She joined Tiara who was waiting for her not far from the hearth, ignoring the suspicious and frightened looks that fell on them.

— Why did you change your mind ?

— The Huntress.

— One of your pursuers ?

— No. She is the one who did this to me, she said, pointing at her tattoos.

— Tell me more.

— When the wolf take over, I wake up somewhere else. A dark place. The Huntress is there too, sometimes. I hear her talking to me.

— What place ?

— I don't know. It's cold and dark, like a cave.

— Like a cave, but it is not one.

— I guess no. I'm waking up inside, without my body.

— A plan from the Immaterial.

— 'know shit about that.

— Alright. And this "Huntress" ? What do you know about her ?

— She's no human or elf. Nothing like that, for sure. She turned the Initiates on my clan.

- Is she a wolf too ?
- Worse I reckon.
- Like what ?

Sadora closed her lips, but her eyes betrayed deep anguish. She shook her head.

- So, the beast woke up again after you left, continued Tiara.
- Right. I was in the "cave" but it was different this time. I managed to run out. Next second, I was near a lake, in my wolf shape.
- What is preventing it to resurface ?
- Me.
- How ?
- I resisted. I thought I would kick the bucket on the spot, but that didn't happen. After that, the wolf... went to sleep ? I guess.
- So it is still here.
- You bet ! But it doesn't seem able to take control back.
- Congratulations.
- Are you joking ?
- Not at all. This is unprecedented black magic. Resisting it is a prowess.

They remained quiet for a time, gaze lost in the flames. The wind was still wailing outside. The rain soon fell, pushing the priestesses inside. Tiara shivered.

- You said you want my help now. Why ?
- I won a fight against the wolf and I barely survived. The Huntress wants something from me. I don't know what, but she will not let me be. If my inner wolf is not answering her call anymore, she will send the pack.
- The pack.
- The Initiates. The other wolves.
- How many ?
- Seven.
- That is troublesome.
- Well, they were seven before I leave. Could be dozens now.
- Shit.
- That's some way to put it, yeah.

The matriarch joined them. She was visibly worried. Though, she smiled at the women and said :

- I am asking you to stay with us for a few more days. At least long enough to recover your strengths.
- I will probably need my belongings.
- Do what you can without it as long as possible. I need you to be around. I will do what I can to assist you in the meantime.

Yatika was standing in the hallway, hidden. She grimaced, feeling anger burning her insides. The intruders' presence weighted as a constant reminder of the past. This feeling was fighting with the dean's words. The protector did not know how to handle it. She disappeared for the rest of the day.