



Forever Young
 Eternity 6: The curse of the High Ones

Kim Houtzager



Forever Young Eternity 6: The curse of the High Ones
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THE STORY THUS FAR.....5

CHAPTER 16: [KITSU-UN]6

Episode 376: The shadows of a sunny day7
Episode 377: It's dark beneath the moons.....13
Episode 378: To escape Cabin Fever.....19
Episode 379: Best of three24
Episode 380: The world is mine30
Episode 381: The city of opportunities36
Episode 382: A dangerous challenge42
Episode 383: Sometimes the moment is enough47
Episode 384: The brightest star in MorningSnow53
Episode 385: How pride turned the moons into a star.....58
Episode 386: Before the storm64
Episode 387: Fade out.....70
Episode 388: The new owner of the Lunar Requiem75
Episode 389: Reaching Raindrop Island80
Episode 390: Treacherous winds.....86
Episode 391: Each blessing has its shadow92
Episode 392: A shining reflection97
Episode 393: A thief's honour102
Episode 394: Traders.....108
Episode 395: The disappointment of a father.....113
Episode 396: Deaf man's ears118
Episode 397: Brave.....123
Episode 398: A watery grave.....128
Episode 399: A bridge and a rift.....134
Episode 400: A gentle wind can hide a terrible truth.....139

CHAPTER 17: [RIMA NOGU WIJMAH]145

Episode 401: Sea Serpent's Pass.....146
Episode 402: A run for the money151
Episode 403: The Alchemist.....157
Episode 404: The one in the mirror is not me.....163
Episode 405: Dinnertime.....169
Episode 406: Time is the last gift we have.....176
Episode 407: A harbour of memories182
Episode 408: Mah-Lin's worries.....188
Episode 409: The White Swan.....193
Episode 410: Too close for comfort.....198
Episode 411: Fragile as a dream204
Episode 412: All we have is well-intent.....210
Episode 413: If you remove the petals of a rose, all that remains are the thorns.....216
Episode 414: Picking up a life that was considered gone.....222
Episode 415: The dance of Xing-Zing.....227

Episode 416: A dream fulfilled	233
Episode 417: Close the door, turn away.....	239
Episode 418: A talent discovered	245
Episode 419: Overkill.....	251
Episode 420: A talent to blow things up.....	257
Episode 421: Armony	263
Episode 422: Into the ring.....	269
Episode 423: The song of the wind	276
Episode 424: A flame of sorrow.....	282
Episode 425: Skip	288

CHAPTER 18: [YUTSANI].....294

Episode 426: The Annual Hunt	295
Episode 427: A forest of magic	302
Episode 428: A forest of heart.....	308
Episode 429: A forest of dreams and tears.....	314
Episode 430: A dream fulfilled, a nightmare coming true.....	320
Episode 431: The future is now	326
Episode 432: The moon shines	332
Episode 433: Don't forget the clown	338
Episode 434: A prophecy fulfilled.....	344
Episode 435: The new target	351
Episode 436: The new tribe	357
Episode 437: The forgotten gates	363
Episode 438: Endless Celebration.....	369
Episode 439: Time flies when you're having fun.....	375
Episode 440: The end	380
Episode 441: The secret liar.....	388
Episode 442: As predicted.....	394
Episode 443: What we couldn't tell	400
Episode 444: The false queen	405
Episode 445: Suta's first mission	411
Episode 446: The Yami way.....	419
Episode 447: It isn't over yet	425
Episode 448: Sunset	432
Episode 449: Midnight.....	437
Episode 450: Dawn	442

MORE ART.....448

SEKEN LANGUAGE.....453

CHARACTER GLOSSARY.....468

READ MORE.....473

ENDNOTES.....475

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 wakes up in a forest. She knows nothing of the world around her and people consider her new to this world, despite looking like a young adult. When Matsuuro meets this girl, he decides to take care of her and raise her as if she were his own. He teaches her how to speak, how to behave and even how to fight. This girl, named Naraku, seems to have amazing magical powers, which becomes the source of their many adventures.

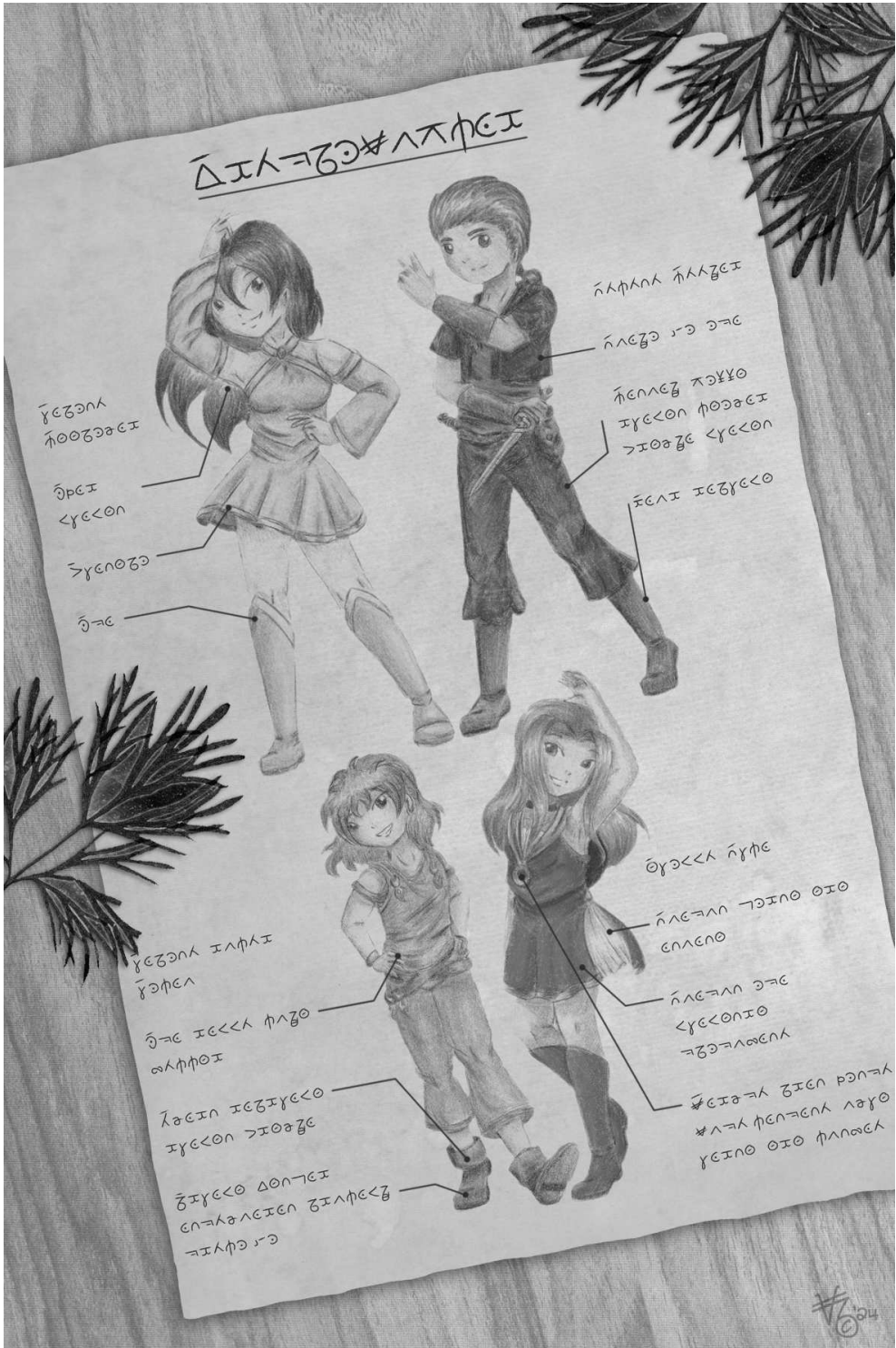
Magic attracts Magic, so Naraku attracts both friends and enemies. During their adventures, they find a home in the mysterious castle MorningSnow. Naraku has become the Chieftess of The IceHunters, a small tribe with both Magic Users and Non-Users.

After a journey to the desert and back, Naraku finds 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 yet have been the Yami, a small but highly skilled tribe. Due to an accident, the Yami kill two of The IceHunters, resulting into a hopeless war between the two tribes. Nothing seems to bring the tribes together, not even when Naraku finds her Sonai within the Yami's ranks. However, when a bloodthirsty monster attacks MorningSnow, the Yami and IceHunters are forced to work together and finally, they end the war.

After many years and adventures, the Yami return to MorningSnow. They now protect the castle and its inhabitants from the terrorist group Bright Stellus. Bright Stellus considers Naraku an evil queen and everyone connected her must die. So even when her country is not at war, there is still no peace.

Not only that, while Castle MorningSnow is big enough to hold four tribes... it will always be too small for both The IceHunters and the Yami...

Chapter 16: [Kitsu-un]¹



Episode 376: The shadows of a sunny day

“Sixty-six, sixty-seven...”

“Are you done yet?”

“Sixty-eight, sixty-nine...”

“Do you really have to brush your hair a hundred times?”

“Sixty-ten...”

“Don’t you mean seventy?”

“Shut up! You’re making me lose count.”

“Oh, wow.” Yume flopped back onto her bed. “Can you imagine the drama if you only brushed your hair ninety-nine times instead of a hundred?”

Suta kept on brushing her long hair. “Be quiet! What do you know about this?”

“The art of brushing...”

Suta slammed the brush onto her vanity table. “Mother!” She called out. “Yume is acting like a cow again!”

“I’m not!” Yume jumped up. “Mom, she’s totally lying!”

However, instead of their mother, their father walked up the stairs. “Father, please.”

Suta pointed. “Yume knows I have to brush my hair one hundred times a day.”

“I want to brush my hair somewhere today too.” Yume defended herself. “She always gets the brush first!”

“That’s because you are such a lazy cow.” Suta snorted.

“Am not!” Yume called out. “Dad, I want my own brush!”

“Girls,” Their father calmly stated. “in your case, a brush is a privilege that needs to be earned.”

“Oh, great.” Suta rolled with her eyes. “That means never.”

Their father was unimpressed. “If you learn how to share...”

“Stop looking at me like that!” Yume suddenly called out.

“Why would I want to look at you?” Suta snarled.

“Girls...”

“It’s pointless to brush your hair one hundred times!”

“A princess *has* to brush her hair one hundred times if she wants to meet her prince.”

“Who made that up?”

“Girls...”

“Aunt Mayonaka does it too!”

“Yeah, but she is a true princess.”

“I am too!”

“Girls!” Their father suddenly stepped in-between. “Do I have to remember you two what your last fight led to?”

Yume and Suta looked at their father, but then at each other. “You can have it.” Suta suddenly smiled and handed the brush over.

“Ah, thank you.” Yume politely replied and gratefully took the brush.

Relieved, Keiran sighed and turned around. He walked down the stairs, where he found his wife leaning against the wall. “Crisis averted.” He assured her.

“I.” Naraku started. “Can’t.” She didn’t look at him. “Handle.” He touched her back.

“Teenagers.”

“Ew, your hair is in this brush!”

“So is yours!”

“This is so disgusting.”

“Hey, it’s clean!”

While the bickering started once more, their mother took a deep sigh and walked towards the stairs. She walked up, stair by stair, with no idea how to solve this drama. Teenagers, why didn’t anyone ever warn her about them? She herself never experienced the wonders of growing up, let alone growing up with a sibling.

The moment Naraku reached the top of the stairs, a huge explosion surprised her! She flew backwards and hit the wall hard. She then flopped down, hitting half of the stairs on her way down.

“Mother!” Suta called out scared and rushed down.

“Mom!” Yume wasn’t far behind.

Keiran had already reached his wife and saw she was coming to again. “Are you okay?” What a foolish question. Of course she was okay, she was a High One. Her injuries were probably already healed the moment he reached her.

“That’s it!” Naraku called out. “This is the sixth time this month I end up against the wall!” She crawled up, looking at her daughters. “Enough is enough! When will you two finally learn that your pointless bickering always ends with *me* getting hit by your clashing magic?”

“But Suta...” Yume started.

“Stop pointing at each other!” Naraku screamed. “I can’t take this anymore! Enough! Get out and find your own room – far away from each other!”

“Mother?” Suta gasped. “Are you really saying...”

“...that we can finally get our own rooms?” Yume started glittering. “[Elja?!]” She cheered. “Thank you so much, mom!” She jumped on top of her mother.

“Oh, mother,” Suta embraced her mother as well. “Thank you!”

“I’m going to get a room next to Graven!” Yume decided and hurried away.

“No way!” Suta quickly turned around as well. “I want a room next to Graven!”

It was soon silent in the tower room. However, the parents did not sigh relieved. “How long will it take before they’ll be back this time?” Naraku wondered.

“Well, they did seem pretty determined.” Keiran pondered. “I give them an hour.”

Outside, a few people watched the cheerful girls rushing over the courtyard. “Seems like Naraku sent them off again.” A man grumbled.

“You’d think they would’ve picked a room by now.” The woman that accompanied him added. “They’ve been sent out to find a room for themselves for a year now.

Graven had no trouble picking his room.”

“Reminds me of, where is that boy?” Blade looked around. “We’re leaving within half an hour and he’s late... again!”

“Oh, hush.” Mah-Lin sighed. “There’s no need for him to go along. The Yami brought in plenty of meat. There’s no need for us to go and hunt.”

“But it’s practise!” Blade disagreed. “We need to keep our skills in perfect shape; we can’t rely on those idiots. Why doesn’t that kid get that?”

“He’s no longer a kid, Blade.” Mah-Lin prepared herself for the journey. “He’s almost eighteen, a Full Grown.”

“He’ll be a Full Grown when I say he’s a Full Grown.” Blade growled. “And it’s time the boy learns some responsibility.” He closed his mouth and started using his

Telepathy. >Graven?< He started. >Why aren’t you here yet?< There was no reply.

>Graven?<

>I'm hearing you!< An irritated voice appeared in Blade's head. >I'm not in the mood, okay?<

>Are you reading books again?< Blade knew his son well. >Stop reading them and get your butt over here. You need to practise.<

>I don't want to.<

>You've got nothing to want.< Blade ended the discussion. >You're here, within five minutes, or I'll come and get you.<

>Whatever.<

>Well?<

>Okay, okay, I'm coming.< Blade could feel the annoyed sigh of his son. His son was not pleased, that was obvious. However, Blade only wanted what was best for his son. His son simply had to understand that there was only one future for him: to be a soldier and a hunter, just like his parents. Graven had no magic, so what else could his future this high North hold? A scholar? A historian? Useless people, in the eyes of Blade.

"Was that really necessary?" Mah-Lin asked Blade.

"You want our boy to be a weakling?" Blade snapped. "The boy never comes out and only reads."

"I know that, but could you give him some space?" Mah-Lin noticed how a door to the courtyard opened. "You know he's smarter than anyone in this castle."

"His books never helped us in a hunt." He saw his son walking towards them. "Well, that was about time."

"Whatever." Graven only mumbled and passed his father without looking. "Let's just go, okay?"

"Hey, show some respect!" Blade grabbed his son's collar. The boy stopped, turned around and looked at his father with his emerald-coloured eyes. Then, he stepped aside and allowed his father to go first.

"This is going to be one fine hunt again." Mah-Lin sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, this one!" Yume pointed. "This room is awesome!"

"No, wait!" Suta pointed three rooms further. "This room is just perfect! It even has a window."

"No way!" Yume hurried to her sister. "That is so cool!" She pointed back. "But that room has a king-size bed."

"Hey, girls." A man greeted them. "Looking for a room again?"

The girls nodded. "Yes, uncle Matsuru." Suta smiled. "Mother suggested we'd both get our own room."

"That's great." Matsuru smiled back. "So, which one will you pick?"

"That one." Yume and Suta both pointed at a different room.

"What?" Suta gasped. "No, we have to take this one. There's a window."

Yume shook her head. "King-size bed, definitely."

"But I need the sun's light."

"King-size bed!"

"Ah, girls?" Matsuru raised his hand. "Weren't you supposed to get your own room?"

Yume and Suta nodded. "Doesn't that mean... away from each other?"

It was silent for a moment, when the girls looked at each other. A realisation slowly sunk in, as tears welled up in their eyes. Matsuru wanted to get closer, when the girls suddenly jumped into each other's arms.

"No!" Yume cried. "I want to stay with Suta!"

“I want to stay with Yume!”

Carefully, Matsu tried to calm them down.

“Mom!” Yume suddenly said.

“Mother!” Suta realised as well. “We have to ask her if we can have our room back.”

“Beg her!” Yume nodded. “MOM!”

“MOTHER!”

Quickly, the two girls rushed away from Matsu, who was left behind, flabbergasted.

“What... why... what?” He could only say.

The drama of her daughters wasn't the only thing Naraku had to face on a daily basis.

“Mayonaka, please!” Naraku sighed, placing her hands on a man's forehead, looking at the wound. “Get a new broom!”

The dark-skinned librarian folded her arms, holding a broken broomstick. “I'm not going to waste a brand-new broom on these idiots.” She huffed.

“So, what did you guys do this time, Shay?” A man asked the injured man, ignoring the upset woman.

“Nothing!” Shay hissed, feeling the sting on his head.

“Nothing?” The man named Cisse narrowed his eyes. “If it would've been nothing, The Princess wouldn't have chased you with a broom.”

“I really wished you stopped addressing me like that.” Mayonaka grumbled.

“And since when are you this slow?” Cisse added, ignoring Mayonaka.

“It was nothing, really.” Shay repeated, while Naraku finished the healing.

“They built a fort in the library!” Mayonaka pointed at Shay.

“Was it big?” Cisse wasn't impressed.

“Totally.” Shay grinned, upsetting Mayonaka even more.

“They used my books!” Mayonaka turned to her Chieftess. “They used my precious books to build a fort!”

“How big was it?” Cisse asked and Shay showed the height.

“Naraku!” Mayonaka tried again.

Naraku sighed deeply. “I'm sorry, Cisse, but I'm with Mayonaka this time.” She passed on her judgement. “If they want to build a fort, they should use snow, like everyone else. You can't use books to build a fort.”

Cisse turned to Shay. “The Chieftess is right.” Cisse called Naraku by her title as well.

“I know things have been dull ever since Bright Stellus decided to lay low, but this is too much.”

“Awe, man.” Shay grumbled. “We were just having some fun.”

“You apologise to The Princess.” Cisse decided. “And you will help her clean the library for a week.”

“No!” Mayonaka disagreed. “I won't let any of the Yami near my library again!”

“Then what do you want?” Naraku was getting tired of this. At that moment, a telepathic message reached her. “Argh!” She called out. “Kai, not again!” Naraku turned around.

“Wait!” Mayonaka tried to stop her. “You can't just leave.”

“Mayonaka, Kai accidentally hurt himself in a fight with Marine and Aidee.” Naraku walked towards the door. “Marine wants me to take a look at it. Apparently, it doesn't look good.”

“But he should be punished!” Mayonaka pointed at Shay.

“Later, okay?” Naraku ended the discussion, opening the door. With a sigh, she closed the door behind her. There, she paused a moment. A deep breath, a hand through her hair. Then, she continued her path to the kitchen.

In Castle MorningSnow, two tribes tried to live together. The shadow tribe, the Yami, usually spend their days hunting and chasing Bright Stellus, a terrorist group living in the forests. The Yami had no leader since their leader Caron had passed away, but Cisse had accepted the position of temporary regent. They patiently waited until they would find out what their destiny would be, or until one of the Yami would accept the position as new Chief. Since no one considered himself fit for the job, they were stuck at MorningSnow.

The IceHunters, Naraku’s tribe, spent their days inside the castle, doing their chores. While they too hunted occasionally, they never hunted together with the Yami. They were content with their lives, looking for beauty and wisdom during this time of peace. Normally, this split was enough to preserve the peace. The Yami outside, The IceHunters inside. However, due to an unknown reason, their common enemy Bright Stellus hadn’t shown itself for a while. Now the Yami had no one to chase around anymore, leaving them restless and bored.

The ultimate goal of Bright Stellus was to kill everyone inside Castle MorningSnow. They hated anyone who sided with Naraku, whom they considered an illegal queen, poison to MorningSnow. Loyal to a feud that started over five thousand years ago, they had spread throughout the entire country.

Many men, women and children had perished because of Bright Stellus. Bright Stellus feared no one but the Yami and Naraku. They had faced the shadow tribe before, which always resulted in their defeat. The Yami’s knives and speed were terrifying, claiming blood in the name of MorningSnow. To defeat Naraku, they had to defeat the Yami first. However, were there warriors stronger and faster than these shadows? Only Magic Users would stand a chance against them.

While they hadn’t faced Naraku that often, they feared her as well because of the rumours that had spread about her. Hadn’t the queen defeated several large armies single handed? Wasn’t she the most powerful Magic User in the nation? She could steal the magic of a powerful wizard just by looking at one. Only a fool would try to confront her alone. No, they first had to defeat her allies and let her end up all alone. If she would be alone, then maybe they would have a chance to beat her as well. If she would be without her Magic User friends, she could not draw powers from them. She would still have magic, but if the army was grand enough, they would have a chance. Only cold steel would stand a chance against her.

However, Bright Stellus hadn’t shown itself for a while. Why? Were they gathering forces? Were they planning something? Surely they hadn’t given up! It was most unlikely Bright Stellus would have suddenly given up, after battling non-stop for a decade. Or perhaps this was a trick; driving Naraku and the Yami insane?

Without an enemy, the Yami were left without a challenge, which resulted in numerous fights within the castle. The IceHunters and Yami had been at odds for months now and Naraku spent most of her days preserving the peace and healing the injured. Last thing she wanted was another war between the Yami and The IceHunters. It left Naraku in conflict. Should she wish for the return of a murderous terrorist group, so the Yami would finally have something to do again? “Why isn’t this castle big enough

for us?” She whispered, reaching the kitchen. “It’s big enough to hold four tribes... so why isn’t it big enough for The IceHunters and the Yami?”

With a sigh, she pushed the handle and opened the door. “Ah, hey, hi, Naraku.” Kai smiled, seeing the eyes of his Chieftess grow.

“Kai!” Naraku rushed inside, looking at the large gash on his arm. “You said it was nothing big!”

“It’s not.” Kai could feel the magic inside his Chieftess focusing on his arm. “Well, not that big.”

“You’re bleeding to death!” Naraku gasped.

“Nah, he didn’t hit an artery.” Marina assured Naraku. “The wound’s too big for bandages, so I let him call for you. It was really amazing how this happened, though.”

“Oh yeah.” Kai sounded as if he just remembered something. “That reminds me of...”

His eyes narrowed. “Get out of my kitchen!”

“It’s mine too!” Marine raised his voice.

“Hey, guys,” A second Yami said from the side. “You guys should really taste what’s in this pot. It’s really tasty.”

“Aidee, put that down.” Marine rolled with his eyes.

“That’s my custard!” Kai wanted to walk away from Naraku’s healing hands, but she barely managed to hold him back. “If I get my hands on you...”

“All right, all right already.” Aidee put the pot down. “Keep your pants on.” The man did a few steps. “Oh, what’s this?”

“Get your fingers out of my...”

“Aidee!” Naraku finally called out. “Would you *please* leave the kitchen?”

“What? Why?” Aidee wondered.

“It wasn’t a request!” Naraku finally snapped. “Get out, now!”

“Come on.” Marine touched Aidee and together they left the kitchen. “Seems like everyone is grumpy today.”

Soon, Kai and Naraku were alone and the Chieftess could focus on the healing. “Well done.” Kai smiled. “It was about time those idiots learned who’s in charge here.”

Naraku thought it was best not to respond to that. “So, what happened?” She tried to figure out what happened this time.

“Nothing.” Kai shrugged, while Naraku was almost finished with the healing. “Marine should just really grow up.”

“What happened?” Naraku narrowed her eyes.

“How was I supposed to know he wanted to save those apples for later on?” Kai defended himself. “They weren’t even tasty.” Suddenly, Naraku violently pulled away her hands from the slightly bleeding arm. “Ow!” Kai flinched. “What did you do that for?” He saw Naraku turning around. “Hey, what are you so upset about? It wasn’t my fault.” However, his Chieftess clearly saw otherwise and left him alone in the kitchen.

“Hey, Nara, I’m still bleeding to death here!” She shut the door with a loud slam. “Nara? Eh... Nara?”

Episode 377: It's dark beneath the moons

"Had a rough day?" Keiran asked when his wife flopped down onto the chair next to him, leaned forward and let her head fall onto the table. "I guess you had." He concluded. Naraku muttered something unclear in return, after which he patted on her head. "It'll be better tomorrow." He assured her.

Slowly, both The IceHunters and Yami entered the dining room, save the watchmen. The men and women always sided with their own tribes, never mixing. Keiran observed his old tribe, who all chattered as if they hadn't seen each other for ages.

"Hey, did you already figure out why the Yami can't access telepathy?" Keiran asked Naraku. "We've been living together for about a decade. Shouldn't they have gained something?" There was no reply. "Non-Magic Users can gain telepathy if they stay near a Magic User long enough, can't they? I know it took me a few months, but..."

"I don't know." Naraku sounded less friendly than she intended to. "They should have, but they don't. Rain can't figure out a reason either." She rubbed her face and eyes.

"His theory is that they are refusing it."

"Refusing it?" Keiran watched his daughters hurrying inside. As usual, they were bickering who would sit next to Graven, but they sadly realised the spot next to Graven was already taken. Well, that would save them from another fight.

Naraku poked a bit in her bread. "The Yami are one because they know each other so well, right?" She didn't look at him. "Their moves are attuned to each other. A single shift means so much." Keiran nodded. "Rain thinks that since they are so used to moving in silence, they no longer need words to communicate."

"Aye, but telepathy is silent as well." He saw his daughters sitting down next to Naraku and himself.

Naraku agreed. "Yes, but they are not used to words during a hunt or a fight. Rain thinks it would distract them or even confuse them. A new form of communication would be dangerous for them."

This sounded logical to Keiran. "But is it possible to resist the influence of magic?"

"Apparently, it is." Naraku gratefully took a plate from the passing Kai. "The Yami are living proof."

It didn't take long before all the people inside the room had a plate. All folded their hands and prayed in silence. They used to say the prayer out loud, but The IceHunters never liked the prayers of the Yami and vice versa. Not wanting to start a war because of a prayer, Naraku had decided all prayers would be done in silence.

When one was done with his or her prayers, they calmly waited until the last person opened his or her eyes again. This time, it was Yume who was last.

"Thank you for the meal." Naraku said, followed by the others.

Keiran took a bite from his potatoes. "You don't usually pray that long, Yume." Keiran mentioned. "Was there anything you needed to pray for?"

Yume shook her head, her mouth full. "Perhaps she prayed for seconds." Suta grinned. "Shuh uh!" Yume snapped with her mouth full.

"Yume!" Naraku corrected her daughter. "Mind your manners."

"Or perhaps she prayed for that king size bed she saw." Suta pondered.

"Shut up!" Yume snapped again, now with her mouth empty.

"Yume!" Naraku disapproved of such language, but knew it was futile.

"Suta, stop teasing your sister." Keiran corrected his other daughter as well.

Suta only smiled and shrugged, before placing the fork into her meat. “Or perhaps...” She started. “Yume prayed for her own hairbrush?”

“That’s it!” Yume jumped up, stomping at Suta. “You’ve gone too far!”

“Girls!” Keiran had already jumped in between. “We’re having dinner.”

“But dad,” Yume turned to her father. “Suta is always picking on me!”

“I am not!” Suta defended herself.

“Oh, you so totally are!” Yume pointed.

Around them, people took their plates and cutlery. They were used to this and when they saw the negative energy gathering around the two teenage girls, they knew it was time to remove all sharp objects.

“Father, honestly.” Suta replied. “Just look at her. She’s a princess, the crown princess and she looks like a boy!”

“I don’t!” Yume replied, upset.

“Suta, I don’t want to hear such language.” Keiran got angry as well. “Your sister has the right to dress how she wants to dress. You have that right, so she has that right as well.”

“But what kind of queen will she be?” Suta was convinced she was right. “Queens don’t wear pants.”

“Mom does!”

“Not when she keeps audience!”

Around them, people carefully moved to the floor, hiding underneath the tables. The negative energy around the girls started sparking and created short flashes of lightning. If they wouldn’t calm down soon, another clash would be inevitable. However, all adults also knew that it was not easy to calm down a teenager, let alone two sisters. The shouting grew worse and Keiran and Naraku did their best to calm them down. Unfortunately, Naraku’s rough day had made her snappy, adding kindle to the fire. It wouldn’t take much longer or the clashing magic would cause another explosion. Usually, the explosion was enough to calm the girls down, but there had been rare moments they kept on bickering. Those were the most dangerous and destructive moments, so Keiran and Naraku had their hands full to prevent that.

The tension grew alarmingly and suddenly Naraku pushed Keiran out of the way. A split second later the expected explosion followed, hitting the three most powerful beings on Seken. Yume and Suta only toppled over, while Naraku was slammed backwards once more. She hit the wall with a grand force, almost leaving an imprint on the brick stones. Barely a second later, she already flopped down again, hitting the cold stone floor below.

Dazed, Yume and Suta crawled back up, knowing quite well what had happened.

Grumbling, they looked at each other, ready to bite at each other again.

“Naraku, are you okay?” They heard the familiar voice of their father. Suddenly realising that they once again had hurt their mother, they could feel their hearts fill with regret. Why? Why was it so hard to keep the peace for a single day? Why... “Naraku?!” The voice of their father changed, and Yume and Suta stared at their mother... who was still on the ground!

Worried, they hurried to their parents, but were stopped by members from the tribes.

“Mom?!” Yume called out worried.

“Father, is mother alright?” Suta wanted to know as well.

“Is mom okay?” Yume repeated the question of her sister.

A blond-haired woman rushed through the people, followed by Marine from the Yami. “Irina,” Keiran worried. “she won’t wake up!”

“Did she hit her head?” Irina asked Keiran.

“I don’t know.” Keiran admitted, truthfully. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Her pulse is higher than usual.” Marine noticed. “Is she healing herself?”

Irina shook her head. “I can’t sense any magic being used.” She admitted, but then noticed something.

Irina carefully glanced at Marine, who understood her subtle hint. When he noticed the red fingers of Keiran, which carefully held Naraku’s head, he got up. “Okay, nothing to worry.” He smiled. “We’ll just take her to the infirmary.” However, even though he smiled, the adults did notice something inside his eyes.

Trying not to alarm the children, the Yami and IceHunters quickly made a path, allowing Keiran to carry Naraku out of the dining room. Marine followed them, but Irina took Matsu aside. “Calm down Suta.” She instructed him. “We’ll need her.” Worried, Matsu nodded. “But Yume’s healing powers are stronger.”

Irina nodded. “I know, but Yume acts on emotions. Suta acts on reason... and we’ll need that.” She turned around. “Hurry.” She urged him.

“Why won’t she wake up?” Keiran held Naraku’s hand. “She hit the walls so often... she even hit one this morning!”

“I don’t know.” Marine admitted. “Nobody knows what goes on inside a head and I’m not talking about thoughts here.” He tried to figure out what was going on, but in these medieval times, the knowledge of healing was still limited. “The longer it takes, the less chance...”

“But I hit my head once!” Keiran called out. “I was out for days!”

“Keiran, please.” Marine tried to calm him down. “The brains are a delicate matter.” He stepped aside, so Irina could inspect Naraku as well. “We’re doing the best we can.” Irina looked at Naraku. “Naraku usually heals her injuries herself.” She recalled. “So why isn’t she?”

“Maybe she used too much healing magic?” Marine guessed. “She did look tired today.” Irina shook her head. “No, Naraku’s magic doesn’t run out that easily.” She carefully took the face of the woman into her hands. She knew the Yami were unaware of Naraku’s heritage, so she had to be careful with her words. “I think something is blocked.”

“My guess is the head.” Marine sighed and saw the door open. “But we’ll find out soon enough.”

Suta carefully shuffled inside, and Keiran could see his daughter had been crying. Had they told her how dire the situation was? And would Yume know? No, Yume was probably kept in the dark. Her emotions were connected to her magic, so a panicking Yume was easily noticed.

Silent and humble, Suta had trouble getting closer. “Is... is mother really...?” She whispered. “I’m so sorry, father, I didn’t...”

Irina smiled and took the hand of the fifteen-year-old girl. “Come.” She invited her. “Let’s find out how you can help her.” Suta swallowed and carefully nodded. “We think the blow to her head blocks her magic.” The Herbal Healer of The IceHunters saw Suta looking up shocked. “Please, use your magic and see if you can sense something odd.”

Marine, the Herbal Healer of the Yami nodded. "If you sense a bleeding, that's probably it."

Suta looked scared at her father, but also realised she had no choice. Trembling, she went with her fingers to the face of her mother. It was warm and she seemed asleep. She looked so peaceful... Was she really injured?

Trying to concentrate, Suta closed her eyes and carefully used her powers. Afraid she'd cause even more damage, she took little steps at a time. Matsu had told her that even though Yume's healing skills were better than hers, Suta had a better chance. All she had to do, was staying calm. All she had to do, was looking for something strange. All she had to...

"Hold on..." Suta suddenly whispered and moved her hand.

Marine noticed the moving fingers. "Eh, the wound is over here." He pointed, thinking she couldn't find the source.

"I know." Suta whispered, moving the fingers some more.

"Suta?" Irina wondered, sensing the girl's magic.

Suta placed another hand on her mother's body. "She's hurt." She mumbled. "But it's not... there." She said, poorly.

Marine looked at Irina. Wasn't the blood on Naraku's head a pretty good sign something was amiss there? "Irina, I think we should call Yume." Marine advised.

"It's here." Suta suddenly said, pointing at an uninjured shoulder.

Silence filled the room. "There's not even a bruise there." Marine concluded.

"Suta, dear," Irina started. "there is nothing wrong with your mother's shoulder."

"It's here." Suta said firmly, not seeing how her father was torn between the conclusion of the healers and his daughter. "If I just..." She carefully used her magic, giving off a soft glow. "It's small... narrow, but... if I just..." Her face betrayed this was not easy for her. "Come on... open... come on... if I just..."

Suddenly a lightning flash went through Naraku's body, letting her shock on the bed. It was short, but enough to make the woman gasp for air, as well as suddenly opening her eyes.

The adults jumped forward, looking at the purple-haired Chieftess. Her eyes slowly closed half. They called out her name in surprise, but nothing seemed to happen.

"Mother!" Suta shouted, shocked. "Oh, mother, I am so sorry! I'm so, so sorry!" She apologised. "I'll never fight with Yume again. I'll brush my hair in the morning and the evening, I'm certain it's okay to split it." She noticed how her father was pushing her away from the bed. "And I'll never tease Yume again! She can even wear my clothes if she wants to!"

"Suta!" Keiran tried to calm his daughter down. "Suta, calm down." He glanced back and the smile and the nod from Irina reassured him. "She's healing herself. You did it, she'll be fine." He wasn't convinced himself just yet, but had to pretend for Suta.

"Oh, father," Suta started crying again. "why do I keep on fighting with Yume? Why is it so hard not to fight? We're trying, honestly, we are, but we just keep on fighting."

"Hey, hey." Keiran smiled. "It's normal for sisters to fight. My brother and I fought all the time and trust me, compared to that, this is just a small spat."

Suta sniffed. "That's not true." She replied. "According to the Yami, you and Uncle Caron rarely fought."

Embarrassed, Keiran nodded. "Ah, yes, but he did some other things that were not so nice." He didn't want to dishonour the memory of his brother, but he had little choice

if he wanted to calm his daughter down. "My brother did his best to turn me into a man and believe me, the fighting between you and Yume is nothing compared to that." Suta sniffed a bit more. "Did he really tie you to a tree using poison ivy?" She carefully asked.

Trying to forget that memory, Keiran sighed. "Just... never tie your sister to anything, okay?" He saw his daughter nod. "Now, go back to uncle Matsuru and tell him we'll give him an update as soon as we can." He guided her out of the infirmary, softly closing the door behind her. Then, Keiran hurried back to the bed, taking the hand of Naraku.

"Yeah, sorry about that." Marine apologised. "Voyce accidentally told them about that."

"Did he tell them about the bees and the honey?" Keiran inquired.

Marine shook his head. "No, he managed to leave that out." He noticed Keiran was still on edge, but that was probably because of his wife. "Suta is pretty good. It seems something blocked Naraku's magic and that something in the shoulder caused it."

"Do you know what happened?" Keiran wanted to know.

Irina shook her head. "I'm sorry, our specialty lies with illnesses and injuries. We haven't found anything in the books about the flow of magic."

"The human body is still a great mystery." Marine agreed. "And Irina knows twice as much as I do."

"We'll look into it again." Irina promised Keiran. "And perhaps I can return to Nyhmar one day, so I can catch up with the latest discoveries. Maybe the answer lies there."

The sun was already slowly rising, when Naraku finally had the strength to talk to Keiran. "[Danoooh] helped." She said with a hoarse voice.

"[Danoooh?]" Keiran wondered. "Your Light Magic?" Because Naraku's magic was so strong, it sometimes felt as if it was a living being.

Naraku nodded. "She guided Suta." She then turned to Keiran once more. "Keiran?" He could see her trembling eyes and lips. "Why... why am I such a bad mother?" She whispered. "I can fight armies, wizards, Blood Demons... Why can't I raise them?" Keiran smiled, going with his hand through her hair. "You're not a bad mother." He reassured her.

"I am." Naraku blamed herself. "Matsuru told me that children grow up as we raise them. So all this fighting must be my fault. I did something wrong."

"You did nothing wrong." Keiran wouldn't hear of it. "They know right from wrong, they know when to behave." He sighed. "They're just... going through a difficult phase. They can't live without each other, and they can't live with each other." He touched his wife carefully. "They are two sisters in puberty, locked in a castle, hardly ever meeting anyone new. They long for the world outside, but know they can't." He kissed her hand. "And they know they can't go outside before they can handle a weapon."

"But Graven..."

"Graven is a boy." Keiran explained. "Plus he's the son of our best warriors. Blade's way is not our way. We'll make it."

"I'm tired, Keiran." Naraku started crying.

"Do you want to sleep?" Keiran misunderstood.

Naraku shook her head. "This fighting... all this fighting." She cried. "I can't go on like this. The girls, the Yami, The IceHunters. All I hear is yelling, screaming, cussing, blaming. They all blame the other and I'm stuck in the middle of it all." She dried her

eyes. “And I don’t want to be stuck in the middle of this anymore. I don’t want this anymore, Keiran, I don’t. MorningSnow is simply not big enough for both our tribes.”

Episode 378: To escape Cabin Fever

“Thank you for coming.” Naraku smiled, welcoming her tribe into the room. She could see they were curious about her invitation.

The past few days things had been quiet in Castle MorningSnow. Because of Naraku’s accident, both the Yami and IceHunters did their best to prevent any irritation. For now, things were peaceful, but Naraku knew it wouldn’t be long before it would start all over again.

Yume and Suta did their best to behave like angels, but they couldn’t keep themselves from fighting. However, whenever they started fighting, they made certain their mother was not near and that their magic wouldn’t clash. It did result into hair pulling and slapping, but thanks to their own magic they could hide things well.

“Oh, the kids are not here yet.” A red-haired Elf noticed.

“I didn’t invite them.” Naraku informed Sushi. “They don’t have to worry about this.”

“We have worries?” A man with ochre-coloured hair asked.

Naraku nodded. “Yes, and I need your advice in this matter.” She turned to the group, who had sat down. She herself sat down on a backwards chair, letting her long hair flow over the wood. “I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“About what?” A tall male Elf asked.

“About everything.” Naraku admitted. “I know you guys all spare me because of what happened days ago, but we all know that’s only temporary.” She sighed. “Soon people will start fighting again.”

“Well, if those idiot Yami would stop being so sensitive...” Kai started.

The ochre-haired man nodded. “Or if they would start using their brains.” He added.

“They used my paint to paint some rocks. They said they needed the rocks for practise, but all I saw was them running around.”

“Rain is right.” The Elfin man sided with him. “And I’m certain they are scheming as we speak!”

“Ao, I know you hate the Yami,” Naraku turned to him. “but would you please listen to yourself? This is plain paranoia.”

“I have good reasons to hate them.” Ao grumbled. “I will never forgive them for killing Clover.”

Naraku sighed, but knew it was pointless to go against him. It was unhealthy to hold a grudge for so long, but who could blame him? Day in, day out he was confronted by the tribe that killed his beloved. At least he didn’t try and get revenge anymore, though Naraku knew all too well one mishap could change that.

“We’re all restless.” Keiran backed up Naraku. Even though he was Yami from birth, he was now considered a full-fledged IceHunter. “And because of this peace we get irritated easily.”

Kai agreed. “Yeah, Marine gets irritated for no reason. Everyday objects frustrate him to no end.”

“We all agree something needs to change.” Mayonaka got up. “And I’m not talking about another war. If you don’t mind, I’d rather avoid that.”

“But what can we do?” Matsuru asked. “I agree with you that war is not an option, but apparently peace is no good either. It drives the Yami insane.”

“Maybe we can send the Yami on a hunt?” Sushi wondered. “A hunt far away from here? They’d probably love that.”

Blade agreed. "Yeah, that gives them something to do. We know they are forest-people, perhaps a good hiking trip will knock some sense into them."

"But for how long will that help?" Irina worried. "Things went well as long as the Yami could chase around Bright Stellus. But now that Bright Stellus has disappeared..."

"Bright Stellus will return." Mah-Lin disagreed. "Those bastards are probably gathering forces. So, we only need a temporary solution. Something to pass a month or two, three."

"How about a journey of self-discovery?" Rain suggested. "The Yami have been here for almost a decade, and they still don't know what to do. Maybe, if they start travelling again, they will find out who their next leader is and what they need to do."

"Ah, yes!" Mayonaka clapped into her hands. "That's exactly what they need to do!" She turned to her friends. "I can browse the journals and highlight important places from their ancestors. Maybe they will find themselves back when they follow the footsteps of the early kings."

The others agreed. "We have plenty of furs, thanks to the hunts." Sushi said. "I can make new, warm clothes for them."

Irina nodded as well. "And I'm certain I can give Marine quite some herbs. With our three High Ones, we don't need much."

"We're heading towards Spring." Matsu added. "It would be the perfect time for a journey."

The IceHunters chattered happily about a possible voyage of the Yami, until Keiran noticed something. "You're silent." He said to Naraku. "That's usually not a good sign."

Naraku looked up, noticing her friends had become silent as well. "Didn't you hear it?" She asked. Keiran looked confused. "The only solution I heard was sending the Yami away."

"Well, they are the cause of this all." Ao grumbled.

"No." Naraku shook her head. "They aren't." She got up. "They are not the only cause." She turned to her friends. "Sushi, didn't you get upset because the fabrics didn't flow the way you wanted to?" She went from the Elf to the main hunter. "And Blade, your strikes are getting less."

"That's because of a lack of practise." Blade shrugged. "I'm working on that."

"No, Blade." Naraku disagreed. "It's because of a lack of concentration."

"Ha, told you it wasn't the sun's fault you missed." Mah-Lin laughed.

"Excuse me?!" Blade snapped.

"This is what I mean!" Naraku jumped up. "It's not just the Yami. We are it too!"

The IceHunters turned to their Chieftess. "It?" Kai wondered. "We are what?"

"High-strung." Naraku started. "Unfocused. Irritable. Restless. Do I need to continue?"

"Are you saying we're going crazy?" Blade snarled.

"Paranoid!" Naraku spread her arms. "Bright Stellus won't be the end of us. We don't even need them to destroy ourselves."

Keiran put his hands on her shoulders, carefully. "Okay, okay, we get it." He tried.

"We're both going crazy."

"I'm not *going* crazy!" Naraku snapped back. "I already am!"

Huffing and puffing, Naraku tried to calm down. "But what can we do?" Mayonaka spoke, softly. "All I can think of, is asking the Yami to give us some space."

"Either that, or we have to find Bright Stellus." Rain didn't like where this was heading. "Give the Yami something to do."

Silence filled the room. No one knew what to do, while there was no doubt something had to happen. “Unless...” Naraku suddenly started, with eyes wide open. “Unless... *we* leave?”

“What are you doing, Graven?” Yume carefully shuffled closer.

Graven didn’t look up. “It seems I’m reading a book.”

“Oh, silly Yume.” Suta released a short, haughty laughter. “You don’t even recognise a book when you see one?”

Turning red from embarrassment, Yume tried to change the subject. “What is it about?”

Suta, being a better reader than her sister, had already seen it. “A historical tale about Yalè?” She knelt next to Graven. “I love stories about Yalè, don’t you?”

Graven tried to ignore her. “Weren’t you supposed to give Grasshopper a bath?”

Yume shrugged. “Mom forgot to mention if we had to help her bathe or give her a bath. With Grasshopper, that’s a bit confusing. Do we have to help her bathe while she’s in her human form, or give her a bath while she’s a wolf? Those are two totally different things.” When she noticed the stares of Suta and Graven, she turned red again.

“What Yume so elaborately meant, is that we have to wait for mother.” Suta sat down next to Graven. “Can I read along?”

Graven shut the book and got up. “No, because I promised dad I’d be ready for training when he gets out of that elder-meeting.” He turned around and gave the book to Suta. “Don’t forget to take it back to the library, okay?”

Without wasting any more words, Graven left the courtyard and headed towards his room to change. “He’s so dreamy.” Suta held the book close, as if he had given her a diamond treasure.

Yume sighed along. “He is so cool.” She agreed. “I’m so totally going to marry him when I grow up.”

Shocked, Suta almost dropped the book. “Yume!” She called out. “Don’t be ridiculous!” She held the book close again. “*I* will marry him.”

“What?!” Yume gasped. “No way! Graven is mine!”

“Why would he ever be interested in a cow like you?” Suta laughed.

“I’m not a cow!” Yume jumped up. “I’m going to tell dad...” She then stopped, spotting something in the distance.

“What?” Suta knew her sister better than anyone.

“I think mom meant the wolf-form.” Disgust filled Yume’s face.

Suta now spotted the dirty wolf as well. “Do I *want* to know what she rolled in this time?”

“If you do know, don’t tell me.” Yume did a step back.

“Pardon me?” Rain raised a finger. “Did you just suggest that we’d leave MorningSnow?” Naraku nodded.

“No way.” Blade gasped. “This is our home, why should *we* leave?”

“Because we’re part of the problem.” Naraku explained. “And High Ones, I haven’t been out for months!”

“So you want a field trip?” Kai grumbled. “This is all about you wanting a vacation?”

“You can’t leave.” Mayonaka sided with Kai. “You are the queen of MorningSnow, you can’t just abandon the country.”

“It would only be temporary.” Naraku smiled. “I’ve never seen the country I’m ruling. I heard stories, but that’s it. The only town I’ve ever visited is Animuk.”

Matsuru nodded, which caused a shock with his friends. “No, no, don’t worry.” He quickly said. “I’m not saying ‘okay’ just yet.”

“She has duties!” Blade made clear. “She needs to stay here.”

Irina turned to Matsuru. “But she doesn’t know anything about the country.” She replied. “How can she pass judgement, if she doesn’t know a thing about the laws and customs of the towns?”

“What if Bright Stellus attacks?” Sushi worried. “We’d need her here.”

“MorningSnow isn’t that big.” Naraku smiled. “We’ll be back before you know it.”

Mah-Lin sighed. “But the woods offer poor defences.” She mumbled. “If Bright Stellus knows Naraku is travelling, they are bound to attack day after day.”

“And we’re not as strong as the Yami.” Sushi nodded.

“Hey, speak for yourself.” Blade grunted.

Keiran had been silent for a while, worrying Naraku. Did he too disagree? “Unless we travel incognito.” He suggested. “What if we don’t tell anyone we’re going on a journey? Let the rumours protect the castle.” He looked around. “There has been peace for almost a decade because of those rumours. I’m certain it will protect the castle another year. Besides, maybe Naraku can do some magical heroism along the way, creating a few new rumours.” He noticed his wife staring at him. “I lost you at ‘incognito’, didn’t I?” He sighed.

Naraku nodded.

“Incognito means travelling in secret.” Mayonaka explained to Naraku. “People may not know your true identity.”

“Yeah, but a group like ours is bound to attract attention.” Blade growled. “Soon the world will know The IceHunters are on the move again.”

“Unless,” Naraku started again. “we pretend to be a different tribe!” Her face completely lit up. “The Moonriders!”

A groan passed throughout the room. “Please, Naraku, please.” Matsuru sighed. “Stop making up names.”

Confused, Naraku looked around. “But, but...” She started, slowly turning sad. “I really like that name.”

Keiran saw her face and a glance around the room let him know she won. Once again her sad, sad face had defeated them. “All right,” He gave in. “we’ll be The Moonriders.”

“Well, I’m not going.” Ao folded his arms. “No way will I leave those backstabbing Yami alone in MorningSnow.” He saw Naraku’s worried face. “I bet this is the opportunity those Yami were waiting for. I won’t let them have MorningSnow.”

“Ao, please...” Naraku tried.

“No.” Was the firm reply. “And you shouldn’t leave as well. *They* should leave.”

“Truth to be told,” Rain got up as well. “I’m not really looking forward to another journey.”

“Me neither.” Kai admitted. “I don’t mind staying here, to help Ao protect the castle.” He paused. “Not from the Yami, by the way. From Bright Stellus and other enemies.”

“So, we split up?” Sushi mumbled. “It has been a while since we split up.”

“Personally, I’d love to visit Nyhmar again.” Irina stepped forward. “My knowledge is most likely outdated.”

“Maybe we should raise hands.” Matsuru suggested. “Who wouldn’t mind visiting the towns of MorningSnow incognito?” Most hands were raised into the air. “And who doesn’t want to leave?” Three hands went up. “Well, I guess we could split up for a few months.” He looked around. “We could visit three or four towns and then return back here.”

Blade was slowly being swayed as well. “It would be good for Graven. Maybe it will help the boy grow a spine.”

Mah-Lin decided to ignore her husband, but couldn’t help rolling her eyes. “It would be great for Yume and Suta as well.” She said instead. “I’m certain they’d love to meet new people.”

“Will we go by horse?” Sushi wondered.

“I advise against.” Mayonaka replied. “Only rich people have horses, so we’d attract a lot of unwanted attention.”

“Well, we *are* rich. At least, we would be rich if we managed to sell those gems in the underground spring.” Sushi mumbled. “And we can’t really be Moonriders without anything to ride on.”

“We don’t hunt ice either.” Mayonaka snapped back.

“Perhaps this journey is what this castle needs to bring back the peace.” Naraku smiled.

“If we’re not here, the Yami will need to do more, leaving them less time to get bored.”

“Are you certain this trip isn’t a way to escape the bickering?” Keiran narrowed his eyes.

“Or to dump our chores upon them?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Naraku answered. After a short silence, she continued.

“Seriously, I don’t.” She admitted. “What do you mean?”

Deciding to ignore it, Matsuru stepped forward. “I guess that leaves talking to the Yami, to see if they object.” He then turned to Ao, Rain and Kai. “And there’s one more thing you’ll have to decide, Naraku.”

“What?” She liked to know.

“Who will replace you?” Matsuru turned back to Naraku. “Working together with the Yami is one thing, but we can’t expect Ao, Kai and Rain to fall under the rule of Cisse. Who will be the voice of The IceHunters? Who will be in charge of MorningSnow?”

Episode 379: Best of three

The IceHunters had expected joy from the Yami, but surprisingly the response was the opposite. “But who will heal us if we get injured?” One of the Yami wondered.

“Well, I guess that shows how important it is you leave.” Cisse scratched his head.

“Nayvee just perfectly demonstrated how dependent we’ve grown on you.”

“You won’t be alone.” Keiran reassured the Yami. “Ao, Kai and Rain will stay behind as well. In case of an emergency, they can defend the castle on their own.”

“Why didn’t Naraku come and tell us herself?” Marine asked.

Keiran looked at Matsuru, who was standing next to him. “Naraku has to decide who will be her replacement.” Matsuru explained. “And considering her choices, that’s not an easy pick.”

“Rain.” One of the Yami raised his hand. “Pick Rain.”

Cisse nodded. “Yes, my vote goes to Rain as well.”

Keiran turned to Matsuru. “Well, Ao does hate them.” Matsuru told his son-in-law.

“He wouldn’t lift a finger if they are in trouble.”

“Nor would he accept our help.” Shay added.

“And Kai’s no good either.” Another Yami mumbled. “The guy is over one-hundred-and-fifty years old, but he still acts as if he’s three.”

“Saffron is right.” Nayvee pointed. “Kai has the responsibility of a cow.”

“So that’s where Yume and Suta picked it up!” Keiran pointed at Nayvee. “Would you please mind your language? We’re trying to raise them into proper ladies, you know?”

“Why haven’t you packed yet?” Blade entered the room of his son, uninvited.

“Do you mind?” Graven got up from his bed, putting the book away. “Could you please respect my privacy?”

“Well?” Blade ignored his son. “Pack your things.”

Graven walked towards his father. “No.” He said. “I’m not going.”

“Ha!” Blade laughed. “You wished! No way I’m letting you stay here. You’re coming along.”

“But I don’t want to!”

Blade’s face showed thunder. “You’ve got nothing to want!” He hissed. “I’m your father and I know what’s best for you. So you pack your things, or I’ll let your mother pack your bag!”

“Pack your own bag!” Graven snapped back.

Blade raised his hand, ready to strike, but managed to restrain himself. “Your mother will be here within the hour.” He hissed. “And if you haven’t packed your bag by then, she will do it for you.”

In silence, Blade turned around and stormed out of his son’s room. The door slammed shut and because of his anger, it took him five seconds before he noticed the eastern woman on the side.

“Was that really necessary?” She asked him.

Blade sighed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with that boy.” He sighed, admitting his frustration.

“He wants to follow his own path.” Mah-Lin understood her son quite well. “And he can’t find it if you tell him where to step.”

Blade grumbled. "I know that." He replied. "But the path he wants only leads to trouble. Books don't bring food to the table."

Mah-Lin nodded. "I know that too." She touched him. "But let him discover that for himself. Let him trip. Let him find out for himself, there is only one destiny for him." "I won't let him waste his youth away." Blade's face softened. "I only want what's best for him."

"He knows that." Mah-Lin reassured him. "But give him space."

Blade muttered something unclear. "Just make sure he doesn't pack books." Blade ordered his wife and walked away from her.

"Found a flaw in your plan?" Naraku looked up, seeing Mayonaka walking towards her. Naraku immediately knew what she meant. "[Do.]" She replied affirmatively in the Seken language. "It's not as easy as it seems."

"I could give you my preference." Mayonaka sat down. "But this is a decision you alone can make."

"But how can I make it?" Naraku sighed. "How can I decide who gets to be the regent of this castle? Who is most capable of dealing with emergencies?"

Mayonaka smiled. "Maybe you should look at this differently. Who would most likely look out for all the people inside this castle?"

"That would be Rain." Naraku pondered.

"And who is the wisest of the three?"

"That would be Rain." Naraku repeated.

"And who knows how to behave when we have important visitors?" Mayonaka asked.

Naraku looked up. "That would be Rain as well."

"Rain won't have to do it on his own." Mayonaka reassured Naraku. "He has Kai and Ao to help him. I know he's uncertain of himself, but I'm sure there's a leader inside him." She stepped up, greeted her Chieftess and walked away again.

However, Naraku was not at rest. She knew who would be the best... but should he indeed be the one? Whenever she thought of a leader, Ao immediately came to mind. He had taken the lead when the Yami had taken Naraku prisoner. He looked out for his tribe and family and could behave perfectly when there were guests.

She then remembered the days when she just met him. Ao was bold, even arrogant and overconfident. And Rain was silent, in the back, not shining one bit.

Naraku paused. Why wouldn't Kai be a good replacement? However, she then remembered his tricks, his foolish behaviour and his irresponsibility. Sure, he was the oldest of them all, but he certainly didn't act like it. No, Kai was not an option. If a king would come for a visit, Kai would probably play a prank on him.

"This didn't help at all." Naraku sighed. "I'm even further away from my decision!"

"Who do you think she'll pick?" Ao asked Kai and Rain. Rain was calmly working on a painting, while Kai munched on some mushroom-buns.

"Rain, definitely." Kai said with his mouth full.

"I'd rather not." Rain admitted. "I'm not really cut out to be a leader." He looked at Ao, who was carving something in a stick. "And Naraku knows that. I'm a teacher, not a regent. She'll probably pick you, Ao."

"Probably." Ao mumbled, but it was unclear if he was happy with it. "After all, I took the lead once before. Can't say we ended up worse."

Kai nodded. “True.” He took another bite. “We’re still alive, thanks to you. But you took the lead *against* the Yami. Can you also take the lead when you have to work together *with* the Yami?”

“I think you’re packing too much.” Yume said to Suta.

“And you’re packing too little.” Suta mumbled. “Would you carry some of mine?”

“Eh, no way.” Yume replied. “I’d break my back.”

“How’s it going, girls?” Keiran walked into the room.

“Terrible!” Suta gasped. “I can’t decide which clothes to take along.”

Keiran looked at Yume. “Don’t you think you’ll need a blanket?” He asked her. Yume jolted and dove into her closet. “Don’t worry, you girls are exactly like your mother.”

“Maybe Yume is.” Suta sighed. “Mother always takes along too little.”

“True.” Keiran smiled, placing two wrapped items on the vanity table. Then, he helped Suta as well. “That’s why I decided to pack her bag for her. She has plenty on her mind anyway.”

“Not the mirror!” Suta worried, seeing her father grab the trinket.

Keiran smiled. “Suta, it can break. You can look at your reflection in water, if you need to. Besides, Mayonaka is coming along, and she’d be most willing to help you.”

Keiran then went to Yume’s closet and took out a pair of pants. “Why pants?” She asked. “I already wear a pair.”

“You plan to travel for months with only one pair?” Keiran raised an eyebrow. “What will you wear if the pants need to be washed?” Yume turned red, but Suta giggled.

“Anyway, I didn’t come up here to pack your bags.” He turned back to the wrapped things.

“Presents?” Suta asked. “But father, we already had our birthday. Graven’s birthday is next.”

“This is not a late birthday present.” Keiran reassured her. “Your mother and I discussed this.” The girls unwrapped the gifts. “There’s a reason why we haven’t let you out alone yet.” He admitted. “But when we’re on the road, we can’t always be near.”

“Whoa, dad!” Yume held the shimmering metal high. “It’s awesome!”

“You haven’t found your weapon yet.” Keiran looked at the knives his daughters held.

“You know how to handle swords and spears, but they are not ‘you’.”

“I’m getting better at the bow and arrows.” Yume smiled.

“But a bow and arrow is not ‘you’.” Keiran tried to make something intangible clear.

“Only the High Ones know when you two will find it, but your mother and I don’t want you to be defenceless.” He grinned slightly, seeing the confused eyes of his daughters. Defenceless? Didn’t they have their magic to protect them? “You can’t always rely on your magic. Your mother learned that the hard way. There are people who can block magic, you know that. The only thing you can always rely on is the way of metal.”

Yume played with the knife in her hands. “Oh, Yume!” Suta sighed. “You’re holding it like a cow.”

“Ah, yes, about that cow-thing...” Keiran narrowed his eyes.

The day was passing and like all days do, it ended with an evening. Naraku was late for dinner, hurrying into the room. She noticed Yume and Suta were not on her and Keiran’s sides, but she didn’t have to look for long. Graven did not seem too pleased about the girls next to him.

“Did you make your choice?” Keiran asked her.

Naraku sat down. “I... think so.” She said doubtful.

“Well, I think you made the right choice.” He saw her surprised face. “Oh, not about the regent-thing. About the journey.” Keiran explained. “The IceHunters are really looking forward to it; they are really alive.” He turned to his former tribe. “And it will be good for the Yami as well. Maybe this will help them to make a choice.”

“I hope so too.” Naraku said and folded her hands. Everyone else followed and this time it was Kai who finished last.

“Thank you for the meal.” Naraku smiled and started her dinner.

Yume and Suta almost had a fight, but Graven managed to calm them down. However, because of the crush both girls had on this boy, it almost led to another fight. “I hope they’ll both meet someone new on the way.” Keiran whispered to Naraku. “It will be heart-breaking when they realise Graven only sees them as little sisters.”

“Oh, I think they know.” Matsu had overheard him. “But Graven is closest to their age. They’ll probably find a ‘true love’ in every town we visit.”

“Which will result in a heartbreak each time we’ll leave.” Naraku sighed, depressed.

“Not looking forward to that.”

This dinner was quite uneventful, even though Kai played a few childish pranks.

Naraku enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere, which distracted her from her troubled mind. If things were like this, shouldn’t she stay then? No, things were like this because she was leaving. She had to go through with this, to preserve the peace. Making up her mind, she knew she had made the right choice.

After dinner, Naraku would reveal her choice. Everyone gathered in the throne room, making guesses who the new regent would be. Some made small bets, but since they didn’t have much to bet with, they bet with chores or invaluable items. It didn’t matter who would win, it was all fun and games.

“Come on! Quit the suspense.” Saffron of the Yami called out. “Just tell us.”

“Yeah,” Sushi agreed. “it’s driving me crazy.”

“You are crazy.” Mayonaka replied. “I mean, the clothes you made for Grasshopper for our journey are just...”

“Plain awesome.” Sushi ended. “She’ll be the talk of the town!”

“And that’s what I’m worried about.” Mayonaka sighed.

“Well, I guess this is it.” Naraku stepped forward. “I won’t beat around the bush. I thought very long about this and I’ve made my choice.” She smiled confidently. “And I choose Kai.”

“What?! No!” The single sudden cry surprised them all. “Pick Rain!”

All stared at Kai, who turned as white as a sheet after he’d shouted his objection. “Eh, Kai?” Matsu asked if he was feeling well.

“I prayed so hard!” Kai hurried to Naraku. “Didn’t you hear me?”

“I’m certain you’ll do fine.” Naraku reassured him.

“But I’m an idiot.” Kai tried. “I can’t grow up. I’m a kid in an adult’s body. I don’t take responsibility, even if it bites me.”

Naraku was surprised by the outburst. “But Kai, you do take responsibility.” She mentioned. “When your old school was in trouble, you helped them, even though you didn’t want to. You put your own feelings aside for what needed to be done.”

“Pick Rain!” Kai pointed to Rain. “Or Ao. Just don’t pick me!”

Naraku sighed. "Kai, you know Ao won't be fair to the Yami." Her response didn't hurt Ao one bit. "And Rain does everything you say, so I might as well choose you." This response offended Rain, but he had to admit she was right.

"But I don't want to." Kai whispered. "I really don't want to."

Naraku put her hand against his face. "You'll do fine." She comforted him. "And you probably don't have to do much anyway. Things have been really quiet around here, remember?" Naraku turned to the others. "Does anyone object to my choice?" One hand got raised into the air. "Anyone besides Kai?" Naraku walked towards Ao and Rain. "Can you live with my choice?" She asked them specifically.

Rain smiled and nodded. "I'm relieved you didn't pick me." He admitted. "You know how well I handle pressure."

Ao nodded as well. "It's probably for the best." He said. "I would've probably kicked out the Yami on day one."

"I'll bring you three back a gift." Naraku promised them.

"Just make certain Su stays happy." Ao requested. "And keep her away from Elf Haters."

Naraku smiled, sealing the promise. "I guess we're ready to go, then." She said. "We shall leave tomorrow." Approving sounds filled the room. "Whisper will stay here to help you hunt. And before I say goodbye to the animals, I will first visit them. Will you take me, Ao?"

The room far below the surface was cold. Even though an oil-drenched flame danced around the stone, it didn't warm them one bit. It even made them colder. It happened over a decade ago, but like all pain, it becomes less, but never vanishes.

"I guess I won't be seeing you for a while." Naraku bowed before the graves. "Clover, Hane, please protect the castle." Silence filled the mausoleum and Naraku turned to Ao. "I can't leave." He whispered. "I just can't leave her behind." The Elfin man turned to his Chieftess. "I know she's gone and I know I should move on... but I can't. I can't let go. Why?"

"You loved her." Naraku softly said. "You still do."

Ao tried to smile. "Maybe I should try and let go." He decided. "She would want that." He looked back to the grave. "Maybe I should get out more."

"You won't betray her by doing that." Naraku reassured him. "She would want you to live." Naraku took his hand. "The past cannot be changed. What happened, has happened. The only thing we can change..."

"Is the future." Ao admitted.

"Oh, Matsuru," Irina giggled. "Your hands are so cold!"

Matsuru kissed his wife. "That's because you aren't." He complimented her. "This change might be exactly what we need."

"What we need?" Irina wondered.

Matsuru nodded, kissing her again. "We've been trying for years now." He went with his hands through her long hair. "Maybe a change of scenery will help."

"You really want it, don't you?" Irina asked.

"Don't you?" Matsuru wondered.

"Of course." Irina smiled back, embracing him tightly. "A child would be wonderful..." Even if he had seen her face, he wouldn't have known the truth. Even after all this time... she could still fool him.

“Yume, make up your mind.” Keiran ordered his pacing daughter, while handling a pair of scissors.

“But why does it have to be now?” Yume panicked.

Keiran cut through the purple hair of his wife. “You either get a haircut now, or when we get back.” He told her the options. “Do I have to remember you how much trouble your grandmother had when your mother’s hair ended up in the wrong hands?”

“It’s just hair!” Yume spread her hands.

“You know our magic is stronger than the average person on Seken.” Naraku sighed, remembering that one haircut she gave herself years ago. Because she didn’t want to be hindered by her long hair, she cut it off, giving it to a random soldier. She then fought Lucan of the Seven United Tribes, but she never paid attention what happened to the cut-off part of her hair. She found out eventually, when her mother, the High One Yunakara, ranted about it. “I didn’t know my hair held some of my magic, but apparently it does.”

“We have to destroy the hairs.” Keiran cut Naraku’s hair till it reached halfway her back.

“Your grandmother had a lot of trouble finding back all the hairs and fighting all those witches and monsters.” He finished the haircut. “Suta doesn’t want a haircut, so that leaves you. What do you want?”

Yume looked at her long hair. She took a deep sigh and hurried towards her father.

“Cut it off.” She said with her eyes closed. “Quickly, before I change my mind. And make it short!”

Episode 380: The world is mine

Yume sighed, looking at her short hair. “This is so not what I had in mind...” She mumbled.

“Seems I have a brother now.” Suta teased her.

“Yume, Suta, move on.” Keiran called for his daughters. “Stay in the middle. Bright Stellus might be here.”

“I don’t look like a boy.” Yume snapped at Suta.

“Yes, you do.” Suta grinned.

“We’re barely on the road and they already bicker.” Naraku rolled her eyes, seeing her daughters hurrying to the middle.

It was still early in the morning and a cold mist embraced the forests around MorningSnow. Naraku could barely see the ones in front: Matsuru and Irina. They would be their guide to their first stop, Nyhmar. Naraku couldn’t wait to see the famous sea, but she also knew it would take her several days to get there.

Behind Irina and Matsuru were Sushi and Mayonaka, who happily chattered about the inspiration this journey would give them. Sushi already dreamed about the fashion in Nyhmar, while Mayonaka couldn’t wait to hear new stories.

Grasshopper, in wolf form, closely followed them, not certain how to feel about this journey. In order to get to Nyhmar, they had to cross a part of the forest that belonged to the wolves of the High One Cecia. This made her uneasy, because she was well aware her heritage lay within that pack. What would happen if they caught a whiff of her scent?

Blade and Mah-Lin followed the wolf, while Blade told tall tales about his youth. Mah-Lin let him rattle on. She had heard the stories a dozen times before. Not only that, she had met Blade when he was barely an adult, so she had been present most of the time. Behind them was their son Graven. He was almost as tall as his father and clearly showed he was not in the mood. His hands were deep in his pockets, far away from the sword on his back. Why was it so wrong to be content with the world back at MorningSnow? Why did he have to ‘become a man’? Wasn’t he already one? Or at least, he would be in four days anyway.

The softly bickering sisters behind him didn’t improve his mood. He kicked against a little pebble, accidentally hitting his mother. He quickly apologised and she accepted it, but it didn’t change how he was feeling.

Stuck.

“We’re supposed to keep ourselves from fighting.” Yume hissed at Suta.

“Well, then be silent.” Suta huffed.

“I’ll be silent when you’ll be silent.” Yume declared.

Suta rolled with her eyes. “Why do I need to be silent?”

Yume grumbled and crouched, scooping up a bit of snow. She quickly made a snowball and tossed it at her sister. However, Suta instinctively created a magical barrier and the snowball bounced off.

“A-hem.” They heard behind them and Yume quickly put a hand before her mouth.

Keiran only had to point and the girls moved to the middle of the group again. Naraku wiped the snow from her hair, removing all the white from the purple.

“I don’t think I’ll survive three months of bickering.” Naraku sighed. “Do they really hate each other that much?”

Keiran grinned and raised his finger, telling her to pay attention. “Yume, go walk with your aunt Sushi.”

“What? Why?!” Yume called back.

Suta nodded. “She’s not doing anything wrong.”

“Yeah, I want to walk with Suta!”

“It’s so boring without Yume.” Suta agreed.

Flabbergasted, Naraku stared at her two daughters. “Can’t live with each other, can’t live without.” Keiran smiled. “Don’t worry, they love each other. They just have to learn how to live together.”

Naraku shook her head. “It was so much easier when they were small...”

Naraku’s group, which she named The Moonriders, took a lunch break near a small lake. The men caught a few fish, while the women looked for vegetables, nuts and fruits. Yume and Suta were left in the care of Graven and Grasshopper. The girls giggled as if they never fought, and Graven just sat on the ground, sulking.

“Keiran!” Naraku held a hare high. “I caught lunch!”

Keiran slammed his hand to his face. “You were supposed to look for vegetables.” He sighed.

Naraku looked at the hare. “He was eating a carrot?” She tried.

“Don’t worry.” Mayonaka joined the group as well. “We found plenty.”

Sushi and Mah-Lin showed their spoils. “But it seems the men had some bad luck.”

Mah-Lin grinned.

“Aw, those tiny fish are so cute!” Sushi looked at the seven small fish.

Grumbling, Blade sat down. “I’m a hunter, not a fisher.” He growled. “Next time, you can go and fish, Lin.”

Mah-Lin pinched his cheek. “Of course I will.” She teased him, while he slapped her hand away.

Irina did her best to quickly prepare the fish and the hare. However, due to her haste, she accidentally cut herself. She released a short cry, putting the finger into her mouth. She then moved towards the lake and carefully cleaned the cut.

Worried, Matsu joined her, followed by Naraku. “It’s okay.” Irina reassured them.

“It’s not that deep.”

“Do I need to heal it?” Naraku asked, reaching out for the hand.

Unexpectedly, Irina pulled her hand back. “No, no, there’s no need to.” She smiled.

“But I guess it’s best if I don’t work with food for now.” She turned around, gratefully taking a cloth from Mayonaka. “Mayonaka, would you be so kind and take over from me?”

“Certainly.” Mayonaka smiled and continued lunch.

“Are you certain you’re okay?” Matsu asked his wife.

Irina smiled at him. “Dear, I’m a Healer. I think I can take care of myself.”

“Of course you do.” Matsu smiled back and gave her a short kiss.

Slowly, Irina got up and carefully walked away from the group. Behind a tree, she removed the cloth and looked at the cut. She hissed a bit from the pain, wrapping the cloth around the finger again.

“Irina?” Naraku’s voice startled her. “Why are you here?”

“Naraku, you surprised me.” Irina said with an angelic smile.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” Naraku carefully came closer. “Irina... why won’t you let me heal you?”

“Dear, there’s no need to.” Irina refused the offer. “It’s true, it hurts, but if I told Matsuuru that, he’d go running in circles.”

“I’m not talking about your finger.” Naraku looked serious. “Irina, you’ve never let me heal you before. Each time you got injured, you pulled away.” She did a step closer. “Why?”

Irina looked away. “Does Matsuuru know?” She wanted to know first. Naraku shook her head. “Good. And I forbid you to tell him as well.”

“Forbid?” Naraku was flabbergasted.

Irina’s voice changed to a tone Naraku hadn’t heard before. “Naraku, I ask you to respect my privacy and never ask me about this again.” Irina replied. Then she turned around and returned to the group, her usual angelic smile on her face.

Confused, Naraku slowly joined them as well, sitting down next to her husband and the children. What just happened?

After lunch, the group moved on, slowly heading towards Nyhmar. It would certainly take another week before they would get there. To people on Seken, that sounded like a short journey. They had so little time to discuss what they would do when they got there. Where would they sleep? How would they get money?

“How’s your finger?” Matsuuru asked his beloved.

Irina turned to him. “It’s throbbing slightly, but don’t you worry.” She reassured him.

“I’ll create an herbal drink before getting to bed and if it gets any worse, I’ll let Naraku heal it.”

Matsuuru put his arm around her. “Well, you know best.” He had faith in her. “I only ask you to be careful.”

“I will, dear.” Irina promised him. However, she then suddenly noticed something.

“Naraku?” She turned to her Chieftess.

“What is it?” Naraku wondered.

Irina looked up, serious. “I sense a change in the wind.” She told Naraku. “I know I’m not that good at Weather Feeling yet, but if I sense something, it must be big.”

Naraku looked at Keiran, who turned to the sky as well. “Our Air User is right.” He told Naraku. “See those clouds?” He pointed up. “Those are the signs of a snowstorm.”

“Are you certain?” Blade asked.

Keiran nodded. “My brother was better at this than I am, but I’ve been right occasionally.”

Mayonaka joined them as well. “It’s better to be safe than sorry.” She advised. “And like Irina said: if she senses something, it must be big.”

“All right.” Naraku decided. “Let’s look for shelter.”

Everyone looked around. “Well, that’s great.” Blade grumbled. “We’re surrounded by trees.”

“Well, trees are a vital part of a forest.” Mah-Lin rolled her eyes. “Let’s move on. It won’t help us if we keep on standing here. Maybe we can find a cave further down the road.”

When the first flakes of snow fell, they still hadn’t found shelter. “We’ve reached the edge of the forest.” Keiran worried. “Do we turn back, or move on?”

Naraku looked at the sky, which was slowly turning darker. “Matsuru, Irina, do you recall any caves on your way to MorningSnow?” Both shook their heads. “Going back into the forest would be pointless; there’s no shelter there.”

“Trees can offer shelter.” Keiran suggested.

Naraku shook her head. “No, Irina said it was something big, so I don’t think it will offer enough protection.”

“How about a farm?” Graven suddenly said.

All turned around. “A farm? Where?” They looked around.

Graven pointed at to something brown and barren far away from them. “That looks like a farmer’s field.” He explained. “And if there’s a field, there must be a farm nearby.”

“Fields can be pretty big.” Matsuru pondered.

“But it’s the only choice we have.” Naraku decided and headed for the fields. “Come on.” She urged her friends.

“Whoa, snowstorm coming.” Saffron noticed, looking at the sky. A few of his friends joined him on the battlement of Castle MorningSnow, all looking at the darkening sky. “Do you think they will be okay?” One of his friends asked. It left no doubt who they worried about.

Saffron shrugged. “Rehn, go tell Cisse.” He ordered. “Young, go tell Kai.”

“Awe, why me?” Young complained.

“Because you’re the *youngest*.” Saffron smiled.

“I’m not the youngest!” Young turned around. “Please, at least *try* to make up better jokes.”

“*Young* people are always so sensitive.” Rehn grinned, before walking away.

“Okay, that one was even worse!” Young stomped away. “That’s it; I’m going to change my name.”

The other Yami watched him leave, grinning from ear to ear. “Care to place a little bet?” One asked.

Saffron shook his head, refusing the offer. “Young will never change his name, you know that.” He turned back to the valley, returning to his watch duty. “It’s the only thing he has left from his parents.”

The wind was howling, blowing the snowflakes over the world below. You couldn’t see a hand, even if you held it right in front of your eyes. For already half an hour, the dreadful weather claimed the lands of MorningSnow. A small group of people was still out in the open, but the little light in the distance gave them hope.

Bravely, they reached the door, but all wondered whether Naraku’s knock could be heard above the howling wind. A voice inside responded, wanting to know who was there.

Naraku introduced them as a small group of travellers, looking for shelter for the storm. The farmer opened the door, hesitating, obviously worried they could be bandits.

However, when he saw the women and children, he quickly opened the door.

Grasshopper growled at the sight of the axe the farmer held, but Mayonaka and Sushi quickly calmed her down. “No, Grasshopper, it’s okay.” Sushi reassured her. “He is just protecting his family.”

Naraku noticed the farmer was still not at ease. He didn't want to leave people outside, where they would surely perish, but what if these strangers...? "Put down your weapons." Naraku ordered her group. "Leave them at the door."

This order reassured the farmer, who put down his axe as well. "Please, forgive me." He apologised.

Naraku smiled kindly. "We understand it." She said back. "But we're eternally grateful you allowed us in."

"We don't have any beds for you to stay in." The farmer informed them. "But you can warm yourself near the fire."

"That is plenty." Matsuru thankfully accepted the offer. He walked towards the fire, introducing himself to the farmer's family. The others followed, but Naraku was last. "You have such a big family." Naraku gasped, amazed, seeing the family gaze at the sight of Sushi, Mayonaka and Mah-Lin. The ears of Sushi, the skin colour of Mayonaka and the eyes and skin colour of Mah-Lin entranced them. This family had never seen such exotic people before, that was obvious. "Are all those children yours?" She counted six small children. There were also five adults; three women and two men. The farmer shook his head. "No, they belong to my sons and their wives." He invited her to join them near the fire. "They live with us, taking care of the farm."

"That's wonderful." Naraku said. "It must be really lively around here." The farmer's face saddened. "Did I say something wrong?" Naraku worried.

"No, no." The farmer immediately said, but he couldn't help glancing at Yume and Suta. They were near the fire and Suta helped Yume getting the snow out of her hair. "It's just... we've recently suffered a loss." He looked at the mantelpiece, where a little rag doll sat next to a candle. "My little girl... had an accident. But no matter in how much pain she was, she smiled till the last moment."

Naraku looked at her daughters. Suddenly the bickering didn't seem that terrible any more. "It wasn't just an accident, was it?" Her lips moved beyond her control.

The farmer smiled. "Am I such a bad liar?" He asked.

"Was it Bright Stellus?" Naraku wanted to know.

"You know," The farmer walked away from the fireplace again. "I wonder why they keep on calling themselves 'Bright Stellus'. There's nothing bright about them." Naraku wondered if she should tell this man what the goal of Bright Stellus was: to kill all who sided with Queen Naraku. "They said that we deserved this, for believing in a false queen."

Naraku knew she had to pick her words carefully. If these people would find out she was that queen... "Do you think the queen is a false one?"

The farmer shook his head. "I refuse to believe a bunch of murderers." He said.

"Besides, she freed us from [Mutetou Hismaehdon] and she's creating that food reserve. If anyone asks for help, she gives it, without asking anything back. Even if it's an unreasonable demand." The farmer sighed. "The queen does the best she can, but the stubborn townsfolk refuse her wisdom." He mumbled. "They keep on insisting they keep their independence and their own laws. She's much too kind to respect such foolish ideas. A country should have one rule and one law."

The way this man spoke freely, reassured Naraku he didn't know who she was. "So you think the queen should tell the towns to give up their laws? And that they should follow her laws?" She turned to the farmer. "Wouldn't that take away their freedom?"

"The queen knows what she's doing." The farmer was convinced. "I'll be honest with you, milady. For all my life I believed it was a man's destiny to rule, whether it is his

home or a country. But the queen... she showed me something.” He looked at the rag doll again. “I was so happy when I saw my daughter for the first time. I dreamed about her future...” A tear formed in his eyes. “The queen showed me something...” He whispered. “...and I lost it so soon again...”

Episode 381: The city of opportunities

“High Ones, look at that!” Naraku yanked Keiran closer to her. “It’s the sea! And look, boats!” She practically shook Keiran dizzy. “Those are boats, aren’t they? They float! Look at it, Keiran, look at it!”

“I’m looking, I’m looking!” Keiran tried to calm her down.

“Mom, would you please stop acting like a co- eh, calm down?” Yume hissed. “You’re totally embarrassing Suta and me.”

However, Suta disagreed. “Oh, I think mother is right.” She clapped her hands. “I think it’s rather exciting.”

Yume stared at the two. “It’s the magic that made you crazy, right?” She asked, which Keiran repaid with a soft slap to her head.

Irina and Matsuru stepped to the front, presenting the nearby city and harbour. “I welcome you all to Nyhmar.” Irina smiled. “The city of opportunities and probably the largest town of MorningSnow.”

“[Fuul], it’s huge!” Sushi gasped. “Look at those hills.”

Mayonaka pointed to a large building on a hill. “Is that a temple?”

Irina shook her head. “No, that’s the city hall.” She remembered. “There are five temples in Nyhmar.” She invited her friends to follow her. “The Temple of the Waves is located near the harbour, as expected.”

“I never managed to find The Temple of the Flames.” Matsuru admitted. “I did find The Temple of the Wind and The Temple of the Forest.”

“What about the fifth temple?” Blade wondered.

“Oh, they were still building it when we left.” Irina turned to Blade. “They called it The Temple of the Soul, but I don’t know if that was the final name.”

“Why are there so many temples?” Graven wondered, having accepted he would be stuck on this journey.

“May I put in my theory?” Mayonaka asked Irina, who nodded. “It seems that Nyhmar is a large city. To stay prosperous, people want to please as many High Ones as possible.” Irina smiled with a nod, confirming the theory. “If the city grows even more, they might build even more temples.”

“The Temple of the Waves is the oldest.” Irina explained.

Naraku carelessly joined the conversation. “So Maki got the first temple?” She mentioned one of her fathers. “Ha, I bet Yunakara really hates that!” She didn’t notice the stares of her friends. “Especially since Xist, Eerah-Nouschka, Ish and Qyrah got one as well.”

“That’s nice, dear.” Keiran pulled his wife closer. “But please keep in mind that our daughters don’t know yet that they are half High Ones.”

Naraku gasped, but was relieved to see Yume and Suta hadn’t paid any attention to them. “Anyway,” Sushi changed topic. “where will we go first?”

Irina took the lead again. “Ah, yes.” She regained herself. “We will first go to the city hall. I will offer my services as Healer and Midwife again. We’ll probably get a small home in one of the suburbs.”

Matsuru nodded. “Healers and Midwives often get a home appointed to, with a very low rent.” He explained. “It will probably be too small for us, but it’s only for a month or so.”

Irina nodded. "We have a bit of money to pay the rent, but not for food or clothes." She mentioned their little reserves. "Sushi, would you and Mayonaka please go to the market and sell the skins of the animals we've got?" The women nodded. "And we should all look for jobs. The men can go to the harbour. They always need people there."

Sushi grinned. "Don't worry. A Master Tanner like me will find a job in no time!" Mayonaka was confident as well. "And my services and wisdom will surely find their place as well."

"This is it?" Yume stared at the small apartment.

"Well, at least it's on the first floor." Mah-Lin stepped in. "And the neighbourhood doesn't seem too shabby either."

Blade looked outside again. "Well, that tavern down the street might cause troubles." He predicted. "Don't you dare going there, Graven."

Graven looked back, disturbed. "Why would I want to go there?" He snapped back.

"There's only one other room." Suta noticed. "And two beds!"

"But it does have its own bathroom." Maturu presented the small separate room with some sort of hole in a crate, to which the girls responded with disgust. "That's so modern, we don't even have that at MorningSnow!"

"So, what shall we do now?" Keiran asked his wife, who stared at the separate bathroom with awe. "Naraku?"

"[Ah, hyena.]" Naraku apologised in the Seken language. "Well, I guess we should go out and look for jobs before nightfall."

"I'll stay here with Naraku." Irina smiled. "We'll clean up this place. We don't need to look for a job anyway. People will come to us." She turned to her husband. "Tomorrow I'll go and visit an old friend with Naraku. He can probably tell me how much I've missed on medical developments."

Everyone dropped their bags and turned away. They walked back towards the door, opening it. They noticed the busy streets outside and Blade quickly grabbed his son's arm. "This way." He ordered him. "You're going to work where I can see you."

"Let's find the market, Mayo-nenha." Sushi invited her best friend.

"Well?" Naraku asked her daughters.

Yume and Suta looked up surprised. "What?" Yume gasped. "Us too?"

Naraku nodded. "But, mother..." Suta started.

"Everyone will look for a job." Naraku ordered her daughters. "Irina said that children are often hired as delivery helps."

"But you won't get a job!" Yume tried.

Naraku placed her hands on her hips. "I'm Irina's assistant." She told them. "If I follow her around, I will learn more about Healing and the people and laws of Nyhmar. That was the goal of this journey."

"Pwah, you just don't want to work." Yume accidentally slipped, disrespectful, which Naraku repaid by pushing her onto the street.

"Nice going." Suta hissed, hearing the door slam shut behind her.

"What? You thought it too!" Yume growled, following her sister.

Naraku sighed, looking at Irina. "And what will we do about Grasshopper?" She asked Irina, seeing the white wolf yawn and lying down.

Irina pondered. "I guess a watchdog is pretty handy when we're out." She mumbled.

"We can't send her out to get a job. I guess she can stay here."

“But what if she transforms into her hu-... never mind.” Naraku remembered the unruly behaviour of the wolf. “Watchdog it is.”

The strong-looking man looked at the four Moonriders before him. “You seem pretty scrawny.” He said to Matsu. “Are you certain port-work is cut out for you?”

“Don’t worry about that.” Matsu smiled.

“How about you?” The man turned to Keiran. “You seem even scrawnier than your friend. The wind will blow you from the mast for sure.”

Keiran hid his true feelings. “I’m indeed light, but that makes me perfect for working with sails. I know every knot there exists.”

“Put your foot where you mouth is and fix the shrouds.” The man pointed at a sailing ship. Keiran didn’t waste a second and hurried towards the ship. “You’re not hired yet!”

The man called after him. “Proof your worth first!” He then turned to Blade. “Well, no doubt about that, you are strong.” He saw Blade grin confidently. “But this kid is useless.”

Blade wanted to jump forward to protect his son, but surprisingly it was Graven who stepped forward. “You gave him a chance, despite being scrawny.” He mentioned Keiran. “Why don’t I get a chance?”

“Because you’re too young.” The man wasn’t impressed by Graven. “You’ll only get hurt.”

“Won’t that be my problem then?” Graven said. “You let me work for you and you only pay me when you are satisfied.” He saw the man pondering. “So if I’m in the way, too slow or too weak, you don’t have to pay a thing.”

The man laughed loudly, his laugh almost alike boulder rolling into a ravine. “You’ve got guts, kid.”

“Of course he has.” Blade huffed.

“All right then, you’ll get a chance.” He agreed. “But I won’t go easy on you. I expect you to work like everyone else and you’ll have to prove yourself on a daily basis.”

“Fair enough.” Graven nodded, heading towards the wharf as well.

The man smiled, seeing the boy looking for something he could do. “Well?” He then turned to Matsu and Blade. “Why are you two still standing here? Get to work!”

“Sorry, boy.” The baker apologised. “But if you arrived today, you don’t know any of the streets yet. Come back when you know the town.”

“Boy?!” Yume called out. “I’m a girl!”

The baker looked up, estranged. “Then why do you look like one?” He snapped back.

“Does your mother know you dress like that?”

Thrown back, Yume’s lips started to tremble, but she didn’t want to cry. “How dare you?” Suta stepped in front of her sister. “How dare you being so rude to my sister?”

“Look, girl.” The baker leaned forward. “Let me give you some advice. Knock some sense into your sister. I don’t know where you’re from and I don’t care one bit, but here in Nyhmar we don’t like it when women pretend to be men.”

“She doesn’t pretend.” Suta huffed. “And she can wear whatever she wants!”

“She’s a girl!” The baker snapped. “So she should act and dress like one. Now, scram! I’ve got more important things to do.”

The baker turned away, but Suta wasn’t ready to go yet. Yume carefully pulled her sister’s hand, worried Suta would use her magic accidentally. Then a few giggles behind them drew their attention.

“Look at them.” A girl with wavy hair giggled. “They look so stupid!”

“Isn’t that something my grandmother wore as a kid?” A girl with a ponytail sneered.

“Isn’t your grandmother, like, a thousand years old?” A third girl added.

“One thousand and one!” The girl with the ponytail replied.

The wavy-haired girl smiled wickedly. “They are such losers. That little one probably thinks she’s a boy!”

Hearing those words, Yume suddenly turned away and rushed into the crowd. “Yume!” Suta called out, worried. She glanced at the laughing girls, resisting the urge to use her magic. She was better than they were, no matter how tempting it was.

Because of their magical link, it didn’t take Suta long before she found her sister. The tears were expected and Suta embraced her sister. “I knew it!” Yume sniffed. “I knew I shouldn’t have gotten that haircut!”

Suta shushed her. “But you look great.” She comforted her. “Those girls don’t know a thing.”

“Why are they so mean to us?” Yume asked. “We’ve never done anything to them. We don’t even know who they are!”

Suta sighed. “I have no idea.” She admitted. “But we can’t let them think they are above us. High Ones, you’ll be queen one day!” She encouraged her sister. “Then you can show them who’s boss!” Suta took Yume’s hand again. “Come, let’s find a job and prove those girls we’re way more awesome than they are.”

“No.” Yume pulled her hand back. “I want to go back. I look like a boy!”

Suta looked at her heartbroken sister. “You don’t look like a boy.” She reassured her, but her sister was not convinced. “Don’t worry, I’ll help you.” She offered and took a clip that was attached to her vest. She then put that clip into Yume’s hair, slightly changing her hairstyle. “There. If they still think you’re a boy now, they’re a bunch of cows.”

The day passed and was heading towards dinnertime. The door to the apartment opened and Mayonaka and Sushi entered the room again. “You’re home early.” Naraku looked up from cleaning. She was terrible when it came to household chores, so there was water everywhere. “Did you already find a job?”

Mayonaka sighed and let herself fall onto the ground, sitting defeated yet elegant. Sushi followed her example, but less dignified. “What happened?” Irina asked them.

“The people in Nyhmar are pig-headed idiots!” Sushi called out.

Mayonaka nodded. “We couldn’t sell a single thing.” She added. “Never before have I met such closed-minded people.”

Irina gasped, but Naraku hurried to her friends. “But what happened?” She asked curiously.

“High Ones, how foolish of me!” Irina knelt before her friends. “I should have remembered this.”

“Remembered what?” Naraku asked Irina.

“The people in Nyhmar have never seen people like Sushi and Mayonaka before.” She revealed. “Elves stay in the forests and Mayonaka’s dark skin stands out like a fly on a white wall.”

“Huh?” Naraku was confused.

“The people of Nyhmar don’t trust us, because of how we look.” Mayonaka explained to Naraku. “They judge us on our looks.”

“One of them even accused us of stealing these furs!” Sushi shouted. “He called us thieves!”

“What?!” Naraku jumped up. “How dare they! I’ll...”

“No, Naraku.” Irina calmed her down, quickly. “You can’t do anything about this.”

“But they should trust Sushi and Mayonaka.” Naraku tried.

Irina nodded. “They should, but they don’t. People don’t trust what they don’t know.”

“But...” Naraku was at a loss.

Mayonaka turned to Naraku. “Even if you throw in a royal decree that people should trust us, they wouldn’t. Sushi and I are the first of our ‘kind’ to come here, so we face all the prejudices and unfairness. We’ll just have to prove we can be trusted by showing them kindness and patience.”

“That’ll take decades, considering these [ruma]³.” Sushi used a Seken swearword. “Look, Nara, we’ll try again tomorrow, but for now I’ve had my share of idiotism, if you don’t mind.”

Mayonaka looked up again. “Oh, dear.” She started. “Have the people of Nyhmar seen Eastern people before?” Irina shook her head, understanding what she meant. “I hope Mah-Lin will have some patience left after today.”

Sushi looked at the furs again. “Perhaps these furs will be worth enough to buy her out of jail.” The Elf showed little confidence.

A soft tingle drew the attention of Yume and Suta. The little piece of yellow danced over the street, ending up before their feet. Yume picked up the coin, looking at it.

“Miss?” She called out. “Miss, you dropped something!” She walked towards the woman with ochre-coloured hair, who slowly walked away from them. “Miss?” Yume pushed herself through the crowd.

The woman didn’t seem to pay attention to Yume, or perhaps she hadn’t heard her. It didn’t take long before Yume lost sight of the woman. “Did you find her?” Suta joined her sister.

Yume shook her head. “No, she’s gone.” She admitted. “Now what are we going to do?”

Suta looked at the golden coin. “It’s not ours.” She decided. “We’ll keep it until we find her again.”

“She looked familiar.” Yume pondered. “For a moment I thought she was grandma Nohaja.”

“Impossible.” Suta said firm. “What would she be doing here?”

“Yeah, why would a fairy like her go to a dump like this?” Yume agreed with her sister.

“Come.” Suta urged her sister. “It’s getting late. We’ll let mother decide what to do with it.”

They passed street after street, trying to find back the apartment. They sometimes took a wrong turn and argued about it, but eventually they managed to find the way back to one of the main roads. However, it didn’t take them long before they took a wrong turn once more.

“Great, this will take ages.” Yume grumbled. “Will you just listen to me for once?”

“I know what I’m doing!” Suta huffed.

“All right, all right already.” Yume did her best to preserve the peace. “Hey, there’s a crowd over there. Want to go and look?”

Suta shrugged. “Why not? We’re late already. Might as well do it good.”

Yume and Suta walked towards the crowd, carefully pushing themselves to the front. They saw a strong-looking man slowly aiming a knife. Looking aside, they saw a large hoop and a few metres behind that, a board with a few painted rings on it.

“Come on!” A man on the side encouraged him. “Hit the outer ring, win one hundred gold pieces. Hit the third ring, win two hundred gold pieces. Hit the second ring, win three hundred gold pieces! Hit the first ring and win four hundred gold pieces. Hit the bullseye and you’ll be walking home with five hundred gold pieces!”

The crowd murmured restlessly, looking at the strong man. He aimed once more and then released the knife. It went through the hoop and the crowd cheered enthusiastically. The contestant was looking confident, but his smile died down easily... when he barely missed the outer ring.

The crowd released a collective sigh of disappointment and the owner of the game cheered up the challenger. “Who else?” He asked and looked around. Soon, another man followed, taking a careful aim.

This knife had a terrible spin, hitting the hoop and never even reaching the goal. The man refused to give up and collected his knife again. He took a second try, but even though it went through the hoop... it hit the wall behind the goal.

“I’m sorry, sir.” The owner patted on the man’s back. “Care to try again?”

“Did you feel that?” Yume gasped.

“He... he used magic!” Suta whispered. “That man used magic!”

“No, not the one who threw the knife.” Yume carefully pointed at the stand owner.

“That man over there. The one who owns this stand.”

“He’s cheating.” Suta mumbled. “He uses his magic so that no one hits the target!”

“Anyone?” The owner looked around. “Who is willing to place a little bet? Who wants to show his skills? All it costs is a single golden coin!”

Episode 382: A dangerous challenge

“I will!” Suta suddenly stepped forward. “I will take the challenge!”

“Suta!” Yume grabbed her sister’s hand. “What are you doing?”

“He’s cheating!” Suta hissed back. “And mother always says it’s our destiny to protect the innocent.”

“Then let mom do it.” Yume tried again. “You don’t know how to toss a knife.”

Suta pulled herself loose. “I’ve seen mother and father tossing knives a hundred times. I don’t even need to hit the board. All I have to do, is reveal his cheating. And *you will* help me.”

“Well, girl?” The man walked closer. “Will you take it or not?”

Suta nodded, brave. “Please, forgive me the intrusion.” She said. “My sister was a bit of a worry-bee, but I told her what she needed to do.”

“Do you even have a gold coin?” Suta presented the coin. “And you think you have what it takes?”

“Perhaps. But I’m most willing to find out.”

The man laughed. “All right then.” He turned around. “People, let’s hear it for this brave contender. Will she walk home with the prize money? The jackpot of five hundred gold coins?”

Suta took her knife, the one she received from her parents over a week ago. It was slim yet strong and the blade was razor sharp. She had only taken it from its cover to admire it, but now would be the first time she would use it.

Suta closed her eyes and imagined her parents. The way her father held his knife, the way her mother held her knife. There were slight variations, but the flick of the wrist was the same. If she could manage that same flick... no, she didn’t have to hit the board. She couldn’t even expect that. All she had to do, was reveal the man’s fraud. Though... how could she do that without cheating herself?

“Well, girl?” The man asked, impatient. “Before night falls, if you don’t mind.”

Suta sighed deeply, losing her confidence. Then, she gathered her courage and did her best to toss the knife. Her heart sunk when she noticed the spin and how the blade hit the hoop. It tipped up and spun even harder. People did a step back, worried about this unguided metal. Where would it hit? Where would end up?

The journey of the knife finally ended and a few people hurried towards the target.

“The outer ring!” A man yelled. “She hit the outer ring!”

The crowd started cheering and Suta hurried towards the board. With her heart throbbing in her throat she saw how her knife was barely stuck in the board. A small tip would be enough to let it fall and it was less than a millimetre away from the edge. But... she had hit the board.

“Magic!” The owner of the stand pointed at Suta. “You used magic!”

The crowd gasped shocked, but another voice startled them even more. “No, I did!”

Yume stepped forward. “And I used my magic to block yours! My sister hit the board fair and square!”

“What are you babbling?” The owner growled.

Suta stepped next to her sister. “She said she blocked your magic.” She spoke. “You know, the magic you used so all the other contestants missed the target? The magic you used to disrupt the path of the knives?” Suta looked at the man’s face as he started sweating. “I know I’m not good at tossing knives. This was my first time! But you

scammed all these people.” She did a step back. “Magic should be used to help people, not hurt them.”

“I... don’t know what you’re talking about.” The man stammered, looking around nervously. “I... I don’t have magic.”

“Yes, you do.” Yume accused the man. “Air Magic, so be exact.”

“You scammed us?” One of the contestants stepped forward. “You scammed all of us?!”

Knowing he was caught, the man stepped back. “I... I can explain!” He tried. “I’ll give you all your money back!”

“We don’t really like frauds...” The crowd slowly closed in.

Yume and Suta noticed the crowd getting closer. They could feel the emotions of the people around them and it started to scare them. “Wait!” Suta tried to stop one of the men. “He already promised you, you would get your money back. Please, don’t hurt him.”

The man turned around with a kind smile on his face. “Girls, you two did us a favour.” He told them. “But thieves need to be punished. Don’t worry, we won’t hurt him. We have laws to deal with lowlifes like him.” He turned to the men behind him. “Get him to the Judge Council.” He ordered them. “Let them decide on his fate!”

“But what will happen to him?” Yume worried, seeing how the crying man was pulled away.

A woman joined them. “Here, girls, you deserved this.” She handed the girls a satchel with coins. “We can’t find back everyone who was scammed by him, so you can have it.” Suta looked at the amount of coins. “We mean it, you can have it as a reward.”

“But... but that man?” Suta worried, hearing the cries far away in the distance.

“Don’t you worry about that.” The woman smiled, kindly. “You just enjoy your reward.”

The crowd quickly disbanded, leaving Yume and Suta behind with the satchel. “But... but this money isn’t ours!” Suta tried. “We don’t want the money!”

However, nobody listened to the two girls. It was as if the sound of their voices couldn’t reach the people. Or perhaps they didn’t care. The crowd left the two small Moonriders alone with the feeling they didn’t deserve any of this money.

“Now what?” Yume asked worried.

Suta looked at the coins again. “We did something right, right?” She asked for confirmation. “And the woman said we deserved this. So... we can keep it, right?”

Yume shrugged. She was just as lost as her sister. “All right, we keep it.” Suta decided. “Mother said we needed money for food and now we have it. Besides, I didn’t cheat and we turned in a thief.”

“But what will we do with it?” Yume wondered. “Give it to mom?”

Suta pondered, until she heard some girls giggling. “Yes, but first we will get something else.” She decided and pulled her sister along.

“I’ll go and look for them.” Keiran decided and turned towards the door. “Blade, Matsuru, will you join me?”

“We’ll let you know when they get home.” Mayonaka reassured them, while Irina and Sushi tried to calm down Naraku.

“I’ll go look for them too.” Graven wanted to join the men.

Blade wouldn’t hear of it. “You stay here.” He ordered him. “You need to rest.”

Just when Keiran wanted to open the door, the door opened. Suta carefully peeked around the corner, having heard the commotion from outside. "Suta!" Naraku hurried to her daughter. "Where is Yume?"

Suta stepped inside, followed by her sister. Naraku stopped dead in her tracks, seeing her child avoiding her eyes. Silence filled the room, but soon the worry of the parents got the better of them. "What kept you so long?" Keiran scolded them. "And Yume, where did you get that dress? Did you steal it?"

"I didn't steal it!" Yume called out, scared. "Suta bought it for me!"

"You didn't have any money." Naraku had joined her husband. "Where did you get the money?" She then sensed something. "You used magic?"

"I... I had to!" Yume started crying. "I'm sorry, mom, I know I shouldn't have used it but I did. I wanted to help Suta, but now he's dead!"

Seeing her daughter burst into tears worried the parents even more. Naraku took her daughter into her arms, letting her cry. "Suta, spill." Keiran ordered his daughter and she hesitantly obeyed. She told her father about how people thought Yume was a boy because of the pants and the short hair. She also told him about the con artist they had met and how they wanted to help the innocent.

"But... but, father." Suta whispered. "We-we heard that people get their hand cut off if they get caught stealing... or worse!" She looked at him with trembling and watery eyes. "Father, they told us that thieves get executed!" She grabbed her father for comfort as well. "What if we were wrong? What if he didn't have any magic?"

Keiran looked at his shocked wife. "You weren't wrong." He reassured his daughters.

"Remember? You're fairies." He smiled at them. "And if you did something wrong, your grandparents would've come and cleared things up."

Yume and Suta weren't reassured. "That's true." Naraku said honestly. "Your grandparents may not interfere with human affairs, unless innocents get hurt because of our mistakes." She hoped to convince herself as well, even if she knew Keiran had to be right. If she or her daughters hurt the innocent, the High Ones would surely make that clear.

At that moment, Mah-Lin finally came home as well. "Hiya, all." She greeted them.

"I'm as hungry as Kai." She smiled. "What's for dinner?" She turned to Blade. "And boy, do I have a story for you! I just heard this story about a thief that was caught today. You won't believe what they did to him!" Only then Mah-Lin noticed the shocked and white faces of Yume and Suta. The begging eyes of Naraku surprised her as well and Mah-Lin thought quickly. "They chased him out of town." She quickly said. "They threw tomatoes at him and then chased him out of town!"

"Well, since we're all present, let's get ready for dinner." Irina tried to get the attention.

"We don't have much, but tomorrow Naraku and I will do groceries."

Naraku and Keiran guided their daughters to the centre of the room, where they all sat down. The parents kept the arms around their daughters for comfort, knowing they were punished more than enough. A feeling of doubt went through them. Should they make clear that their daughters should never do something like this again? However, the sniff of Yume and the silence of Suta let them know they would probably never try this again anyway.

"Did you find a job?" Mayonaka asked Mah-Lin.

Mah-Lin nodded. "But it has terrible pay." She grumbled. "I managed to find a job at the fish market as a fish cleaner. It's the best I could find." She sighed. "These people honestly admitted they don't trust foreigners like me."

“Welcome to the club.” Sushi growled.

“Well, considering the money the girls brought, we don’t have to worry just yet.”

Matsuru looked at the satchel. “Maybe Irina can buy some fabrics tomorrow for you, Sushi.” He suggested. “Perhaps Naraku and Irina can sell one of your dresses.”

Sushi shrugged. “Yeah, they’d probably buy it from Irina.”

“How about you?” Mah-Lin asked Blade.

Blade stretched himself. “We got hired at the wharf.” He told her. “Boring work, but we made a bit of money.” He looked back to his son, who was barely awake. “But he pulled his own weight.”

“Wow, you’re almost sounding proud.” Mah-Lin smiled.

“This was just day one.” Blade mumbled. “Let’s see how things go in week.”

“Father?” Suta carefully asked Keiran. “Do Yume and I have to go into town tomorrow again?”

Keiran looked at Naraku. “Yes.” He decided. “When you fall of a horse, you have to get right back up.”

Yume looked at her mother with begging eyes. “Your father is right.” She smiled at her daughter. “Besides, don’t you want to show those mean girls how beautiful you look?”

Night fell, but Naraku and her friends soon found out, it was never silent in Nyhmar. Unable to sleep, Naraku left the apartment, going down the stairs and ending up at the street. “Ah, Irina.” Naraku noticed. “You couldn’t sleep either?”

Irina smiled back. “I guess I’m just excited.” She said. “Though I should apologise. I should have prepared you better for Nyhmar.” She sighed. “The laws of Nyhmar are strict and some trials are just a farce. And the discrimination; I never realised how much trouble we would face here.”

“Maybe it’s best you didn’t tell us.” Naraku admitted. “Maybe we would have had prejudices, unable to give this city a fair chance.” She leaned back. “But I admit that Nyhmar is nothing like I imagined. The people are cold, distant and rough. It’s so noisy and you can barely see the stars here.”

“Spoken like a true country girl.” Irina giggled. “When I first came to MorningSnow, I thought it was awfully silent and I missed the light of the night. Nothing was no longer private. What was mine, was suddenly of all and what was yours was suddenly mine.”

“Don’t you like it at MorningSnow?” Naraku worried.

“Don’t worry, dear.” She reassured her. “I love MorningSnow and I love my tribe. I admit it asked some getting used to, but I wouldn’t want to miss it for the world.”

A short silence fell. “You seem sad.” Naraku whispered. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

Irina turned to her Chieftess. “Please, Naraku.” She said with a smile. “Please, let me keep this one secret.”

Early in the morning, the men rose with the sun. Blade woke his son, who rubbed his eyes all the way to work. They took orders without speaking back, biting it through because of the promised money.

Irina and Naraku left early as well, heading towards the market. Mah-Lin left for the fish market, while Mayonaka and Sushi remained with Grasshopper and the girls. Sushi and Mayonaka promised they’d send the girls out as soon as they woke up.

When Irina and Naraku returned, the girls were already gone, having taken Grasshopper along. “As long as she’s in wolf form, people won’t assume a thing.” Mayonaka reassured Naraku.

“I hope these fabrics are good enough.” Irina handed the fabrics over.

Sushi nodded. “I’ll do my best.” She promised. “Mayo-nenha will help me.”

“Then Naraku and I will be heading to an old friend of mine.” Irina bowed, politely.

“We’ll do our best to be back before dinner.”

“Good luck.” Mayonaka wished them.

Irina and Naraku turned around, leaving the apartment once more. Naraku waved when they were on the street and Mayonaka and Sushi waved back shortly.

Each did their own task, playing their own part. They knew they had to give Nyhmar a chance, but one thought was within the hearts of all: ‘IceHunters don’t belong in Nyhmar. IceHunters belong in MorningSnow.’

Naraku was lost in thoughts and didn’t notice that Irina had already knocked on a door.

“Ah, Irina!” A man welcomed her, rejoiced. “You’re back, welcome! Please, come in, come in.” He did a step aside. “The Medical Council already informed me of your visit. How can I help you?”

Irina wanted to step inside, but then looked back. “Naraku?” She called for her Chieftess, who jolted up from her thoughts. “Are you coming?”

“[Ah, dol]” Naraku hurried inside, following her tribe’s Herbal Healer. She politely greeted the acquaintance of Irina with a bow, introducing herself as Irina’s assistant. The man smiled back, allowing the women to go first.

Naraku looked back at the closed door. She couldn’t help... but feel locked in.

Somehow Nyhmar felt like a prison to her, from which she desperately wanted to escape.

“Look, it’s those girls again.” A girl with wavy hair pointed. “Ha, would you just look at that ridiculous dress that boy-girl wears?”

“Didn’t you have a dress like that?” The third girl asked the girl with the ponytail.

“Yah, like, four years ago.” The girl with the ponytail laughed.

“Oh, wow!” The wavy-haired girl suddenly called out. “Would you look at that hunk over there?”

“No way!” The other two girls gasped. “He’s drop-dead awesome!”

Then, they saw how Yume jumped at the boy with black hair and emerald-coloured eyes. Suta joined them as well and both girls started throwing snappy remarks at each other.

“What are they doing?” The third girl asked, playing with her long curls. “Do they think they know him or so?”

“I think they do.” The girl with the ponytail replied to her friend. “But I don’t think he is happy with it.”

“What do you have in mind?” The wavy-haired girl asked with a wicked smile.

The ponytailed girl grinned. “Let’s do him a favour.” She decided. “Let’s teach those girls a lesson and if we play things right... I’ve found my date for the ball.”

Episode 383: Sometimes the moment is enough

“Thank you so much for your help, Irina.” The Healer smiled at the blonde-haired woman. “I wasn’t looking forward to this delivery.”

Irina washed her hands, kindly accepting the thanks. “It was nothing.” She said. “I’m glad both survived.”

The Healer nodded. “Yes, she barely survived her first child. I don’t know if either of them had survived if it wasn’t for you.”

“Don’t think less of yourself.” Irina dried her hands. “You’re a most capable Healer. And if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have known about the latest discoveries.”

The Healer was slightly embarrassed, turning away from Irina. “So, you said you’d be here only temporarily, right?” Irina nodded. “You’ve been here for more than a week now. Do you already know when you will leave again?”

The blonde-haired woman shook her head. “We’ll go where the wind guides us.” She admitted. At that moment, Naraku entered the room. “Ah, Naraku, thank you for staying with her.”

Naraku bowed. “It was my pleasure.” She said. “They are both asleep now, completely healthy.”

The Healer grinned. “You have a fine assistant.” He complimented Naraku. “When I first met her, I thought she had zero medical knowledge, but she proved me wrong.”

Irina sweated, uneasy. “Yes, Naraku is full of surprises.” She tried to evade the subject. “Well, we seem to be done early. Shall we head home?”

“Sure, I’ll get our bags.” Naraku offered and left the room.

Irina cleaned things up, until she noticed the stares of her friend. “Is there something wrong?” She asked him.

“Irina,” He started. “are you happy?”

“Of course I am.” Irina laughed. “Why do you ask?”

“I haven’t seen your husband since you’ve come here.” He revealed, carefully coming closer. “And you are still childless. Is he not like you expected him to be?” He touched her face softly.

Irina did a step backwards. “My husband is my life.” She replied. “And the High Ones will decide when I’ll have a child.”

The door opened again and Naraku stepped inside. “I’m ready.” She mentioned and Irina gratefully accepted the bag. “Will we come back tomorrow?”

“Perhaps.” Irina replied, coldly. “We have plenty of other things to do.”

Naraku followed Irina towards the door, wondering why Irina was suddenly so upset.

“Irina.” Her friend stopped her. “Know that I can offer more than knowledge.”

Irina hesitated. “We’ll be seeing you.” She finally said and left the door.

Naraku hurried after Irina, but had trouble catching up with her through the crowd.

“Irina, wait!” Naraku called after her. “Did something happen?”

“Dear, I’ve asked it once before and I’m asking it again; please, respect my privacy.”

Irina kept on walking.

“But maybe I can help.” Naraku finally caught up with her.

“You can’t help!” Irina snapped, startling her. “Not even you can help with this!”

“Are we heading the right way?” Yume looked around.

“Of course we are.” Suta was confident. “According to Grasshopper, the scent of the sea is that way, so the wharf must be that way as well.”

Yume scratched her head. “Maybe we should look for a job on the wharf as well.” She pondered. “We’re almost out of our reward money and we barely make any profit on the dresses aunt Sushi makes.”

“They’d never hire us.” Suta replied. “Graven barely manages to hold a job there.”

“I hope the wharf-manager or whatever he’s called won’t mind us bringing lunch.”

Yume looked at the basket she was holding. “The four of them were in such a rush this morning.”

“Maybe I should hold the basket.” Suta offered and gratefully, Yume handed it over.

“Graven will be really grateful when I bring him lunch.”

Realising she was tricked, Yume did her best to get the basket back. “That’s not fair!”

She called out. “Aunt Mayonaka gave it to me!”

“And you gave it to me.” Suta grinned.

On the wharf, sea gulls flew off and on, hoping to find a few leftover fish. The squeals filled the air, barely louder than the sounds below. Men worked hard, allowing themselves no rest. The harder they worked, the more pay they would get. However, they also made jokes and told stories while working, making the work bearable.

On a higher part next to the harbour, a busy street buzzed with people. Three girls leaned on the wall that separated them from the wharf below. They sighed dreamily, looking at the handsome men below. The girl with the ponytail had claimed one of them, so the other two tried to find their Prince Charming amidst the hard-working men.

“He is so perfect.” The ponytailed girl sighed, looking at Graven, who carried around various nets.

“I think I heard this name.” The girl with curly hair mentioned. “I think his name is Raven.”

The girl with wavy hair pointed at the black-haired man that came to check up on Graven. “Do you think that’s his older brother?” She wondered.

“He has to be.” The curly-haired one said. “The way he yells at Raven...”

“Definitely big bro.” The wavy-haired one nodded. “I claim him.”

“No way!” The curly-haired girl snapped up. “I wanted him!”

“Hey, girls,” The girl with the ponytail stopped them. “look who decides to ruin the day?”

“Ugh, what are those girls doing on the wharf?” The curly-haired girl grumbled. “No girl ever goes there.”

“Well, one of them thinks she’s a boy.” The girl with the ponytail smiled. “Maybe she wants a job there.”

The girls suddenly gasped, seeing how their dream-hunks spotted the girls and how they moved towards them. “No!” The girl with wavy hair noticed the basket. “They brought lunch! Why didn’t we think of that?”

The girl with the ponytail wasn’t worried. “Don’t worry.” She said, spotting a barrel on the side. “Best day ever!”

“Give me the basket!” Yume tried to pull the basket from Suta’s hands. Meanwhile Grasshopper had already run ahead, greeting Blade.

“No, it’s mine!” Suta held the basket close. “And smile, Graven is heading our way.”