



Forever Young
Eternity 3: Sonäi

Kim Houtzager

*I am looking for you,
looking for you.
While the melody drifts on,
I hope you are looking for me too.*

*Ne memou te,
memou te.
Wbyl luchia anako,
ne pannië te memou-asta ne saniram*



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The story thus far...

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

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

One day, a girl wakes up in a forest. She knows nothing of the world around her and people consider her new to this world, despite her looking like a young adult. When Maturu 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. Maturu finds out how dangerous his planet can be when he discovers that Naraku, as he named the girl, has amazing magical powers. There seems to be no limit to them; a fact that is most appealing to one Lord Zashjan, a sorcerer who wants to enhance his own powers and considers Naraku's powers a nice addition. He sends out more than one warrior to capture this mysterious maiden. However, Naraku makes sure she has her own band of protectors.

After the battle with Lord Zashjan, the new tribe finds a home in the mysterious castle MorningSnow. Naraku has become the Chieftess of The IceHunters, while still learning from the wise Mayonaka. One day, Mayonaka has no choice but to return to the Desert Kingdom. Her father, the king of the desert, is dying and her younger brother is too young to rule. She is the only suitable heir, in a world where women are considered worth nothing and owning slaves is normal.

During the journey, Naraku is being pestered by a strange enchantress, who is set on killing the girl. Naraku realises only one group of people will have the answers to everything: The High Ones. She sets out to find them... and finds the strange enchantress, who reveals to not only be her mother... but also one of the twelve High Ones!

Now, Naraku is heading back home, to her family she left behind in MorningSnow, not knowing what happened there while she was absent...

Chapter 7: Clover



Episode 151: Fresh snow and morning dew

The sun rose, announcing the upcoming winter. Even though winter was still one day away, the snow already covered this part of the planet Seken with a thick, white blanket. The three beautiful moons got lost in the morning dew, making way for the cold sun.

Around a smouldering campfire, a small group prepared themselves. Seven horses stretched their legs, warming up for another day of travelling, while the last of the travellers woke up, smelling the ashes.

“Mm?” Sushi the Elf scratched herself. She rubbed her long pointy ears, hoping they would warm up. Since that didn’t work, she quickly put on the cap she lost during her sleep.

The cap was made of beautiful fabrics; fabrics they received from the Desert King, as well as warm skins from life around them. Yes, this was a group of hunters, that had spent the night in the cold snow. They were used to it. Not only that... this was proof they were almost home.

Matsuru, a young human man, looked at the Elfin girl. A few red strands peeked out from underneath her cap. “Is anything the matter?” He asked her.

Sushi looked around. “Where’s Blade?” She asked, referring to one of their companions.

“I saw him leaving with Mah-Lin.” A girl with purple hair pointed out.

The purple-haired girl looked human as well; on Seken, all possible hair and eye colours exist, as well as mythical beings like Elves. And yet, this girl, Naraku, knew she was more unique than anything else. She was not human, nor an Elf. What she was... was beyond words.

“They’ll return.” A soft voice informed them. On the side was Mayonaka, a dark-skinned girl, having both wisdom and beauty. She was a princess from birth, but she had decided to be the loyal advisor and teacher of Naraku. “So, Naraku,” She started. “do you think it will be much longer before we reach home?”

Before the young Chieftess could reply, Matsuru snarled the answer. “That depends on when Blade and Mah-Lin return!” He hissed. “I don’t get it. He could always find his way with his eyes closed and now he keeps on getting lost.”

Sushi nodded. “Yeah, and it is getting worse. First Mah-Lin could help him out, but now she lost her touch as well.”

Naraku wanted to say something, but Mayonaka stopped her. “Don’t.” She ordered. “It’s of no use.”

“I bet they are lost again.” Matsuru sighed. “I’ll go to look for them.”

“We’ll be right here.” Sushi smiled, waving him goodbye when he left. “High Ones, my stomach is so empty. Do we have anything left?”

Mayonaka looked into a bag. “We still have some left. But don’t worry, soon we will be home again and then we’ll probably have plenty of food.”

Naraku sat down, poking in the ashes. “I can’t believe we’ve been gone for almost eighteen months... I wonder how the others are doing.”

Silence filled the group. They thought about those who they had left behind. They never expected the journey to the desert and back to be this long... and that it

would change them this much! Where would they start, telling the others all they had been through?

How they missed their tribe members: Ao, the big brother of Sushi. Rain, the young man who controlled the water. Kai, the storyteller and Fire User, and Hane, the peaceful Air User. Still, they were not all they had left behind. Clover would now almost be an adult young lady and Apple the mare would have a grown daughter named Snowdance. Grasshopper, Mayonaka's snow wolf, should now be as big and strong as the wolf Shadowhunter, who had accompanied them to the desert and back.

The black wolf laid down next to Naraku. "I hope they haven't forgotten us..." Naraku sighed, solemnly. "We've been gone for so long..." She scratched the black wolf behind her ears.

Mayonaka knelt behind Naraku and put her hands onto the Chieftess' shoulders. "Don't worry," She winked. "you are kind of hard to forget."

Naraku smiled back and wanted reply, but Sushi interrupted them. "I wonder what's taking Matsuru so long. Did he get lost as well?"

Mayonaka smiled teasingly at Naraku, closing an eye and with a finger on her cheek. "I'm actually more curious to what he might find!"

Naraku giggled, but Sushi missed the hint. "What?" She asked. "What did I miss?"

The morning was colder than Matsuru had estimated. He rubbed his arms, but he knew that it wouldn't help much. He just had to get used to this northern climate once more. The desert was too hot, this place was too cold... He chuckled when he realised how spoiled he could be. He wasn't used to the comfortable life, but still... he felt blessed. He had wonderful friends, belonged to an amazing tribe... It could have been a lot worse.

Suppressing the memories of days that didn't seem to end, Matsuru took a left turn. Tracks were visible in the snow, clearly showing the path of the two strongest warriors of this group.

"If they are lost, why don't they just follow their tracks back?" He mumbled, not understanding how his best friend could get lost.

The best hunter of their tribe, the second-best warrior after Mah-Lin... How could he get lost? Or Mah-Lin, for that matter. He expected her to leave them after they left the desert, but for some reason she came along to their home up north. Why? Why didn't she want to go home?

The sound of a soft giggle caught Matsuru's attention and curious as he could be, Matsuru followed it. More 'hush'-es and suppressed giggles followed, making Matsuru even more curious than he already was. Careless yet intrigued, he pushed a bush aside, letting the fresh snow fall on the ground and...

"By the High Ones!!" Matsuru exclaimed, invoking the eternal gods of this planet. Silence filled the small open place, as Matsuru stared at Blade and Mah-Lin, who looked back equally surprised. "Oh, hi!" Blade waved and dusted some snow from his jacket, a big grin on his face.

"What are you doing?!" Matsuru blurted out.

Mah-Lin looked at Matsuru and then back at Blade. "Good question. What are we doing?" She asked him, while his hand went over the fabrics of her vest. In response, she giggled and gave Blade a small kiss on his lips.

Matsuru gasped when he saw this. “Are you guys in love?!”

Blade looked at Mah-Lin. “Are we in love?”

Mah-Lin glanced at the sky. “I think we are.”

“I think I need some convincing.” Blade smiled and kissed Mah-Lin long and tender.

“Does that convince you?” Mah-Lin asked, while Matsuru’s jaw practically dropped.

Blade playfully doubted. “I think I need some more convincing.”

When Mah-Lin giggled and kissed him once more, Matsuru did not know what to think or do. He was ready to puke, but also confused beyond words. What he had seen... wait... What had he seen?

“Ow! Mah-Lin, you’re biting my nose!”

“I am indeed.”

“You’re back soon.” Mayonaka noticed Matsuru. “Did you find them?”

Matsuru looked confused and then spread his arms, almost hitting Naraku in the face. “Did you know Blade and Mah-Lin are in love?” He called out.

Sushi jumped up. “No way!” She gasped.

“I just found them kissing!” Matsuru was just as shocked as Sushi was.

While Sushi and Matsuru continued their shocking discovery, Mayonaka and Naraku were not impressed. “It took them this long to find that out?” Mayonaka sighed.

Naraku was even less impressed. “Even I knew this for months.” She mumbled.

“And I’m only three years, three months, one week and six days old.”

“You really do keep track of that, don’t you?” Mayonaka responded.

“Call it a hobby.” Naraku shrugged it off.

It was quite amazing. Not the fact that Chieftess Naraku was barely more than three years old, though she looked like an adult, but the fact she shared her secret with Mayonaka and Sushi. In the beginning, when she had just found out who she was, she was hesitant to share it with Blade and Matsuru, despite them meaning the world to her. But during the eight-month-journey back from the desert, Naraku eventually told Mayonaka and Sushi as well. It was hard for them accept the truth, but they accepted the change and learned to deal with it, like IceHunters do.

This all started three years ago. Three years, three months, one week and six days, to be exact. Naraku woke up in a forest, knowing nothing at all. When Matsuru found her, he decided to raise her, which caused the demise of his birth village. Blade was the only one left and at that moment, his best friend had become his worst enemy. Not to mention his greatest rival, since both Matsuru and Blade fell in love with Naraku.

However, time passed, and even though various enemies tried to take Naraku to their ruler, the evil Magic User Lord Zashjan, their band of friends grew into a tribe which now call themselves The IceHunters, with Naraku as a Chieftess. This was quite remarkable, because Naraku knew nothing about the world around her. Though, she quickly learned and adapted to new situations and explored her magical skills. But that her magic knew no limits, was something Naraku

discovered during her journey to the desert. While Mayonaka faced her past, Naraku found her own.

In fact, Naraku discovered her lack of a past! Not only that, it turned out she was not human in all! No, Naraku was something completely different... Abundant magic, left behind to die. Yet, Naraku never died and created herself a conscience and a somewhat of a soul, learning to live like a human being.

Her main creator didn't like that though. She promised that if Naraku would stay human, she would be tested repeatedly, to proof she was worthy of her powers. And her creators... were none other than the High Ones, the deities of this planet!

Because Mayonaka and Naraku knew it would take a while before Blade and Mah-Lin would return, they saddled the horses, ready for the last part of their journey. Two of the horses already had a name: Pear and Dusk, while the others were still nameless. One mare belonged to Mayonaka, but she didn't want to name it before she returned to castle MorningSnow, their home.

"Ah, look who finally decided to join us..." Mayonaka noticed while taking the bridles of her mare.

Immediately Sushi and Matsuru jumped to Mah-Lin and Blade. "When did this happen?!" Both yelled, angrily.

"I am your best friend!" Matsuru complained. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"How can you two be in love and not share it with us?" Sushi overreacted.

"Wasn't it quite obvious then?" Blade wondered.

Mah-Lin giggled. "Apparently not."

"When?" Matsuru and Sushi demanded.

The two young lovers thought carefully. "Mmm..." They started. "When did it start...?"

"I think I stopped hating you when you told me..." Mah-Lin began, but then stopped. "No wait, I think... Does our relation have a beginning?"

"Does it matter?" Blade turned around and embraced her, giving her a kiss on the lips.

"Yes!" Both Sushi and Matsuru blurted out.

Mayonaka and Naraku sighed. "I suspect that when they find about the other part, Sushi and Matsuru will fall apart."

Naraku nodded. "Uh-huh." She agreed. "I don't think they can handle the fact that Mah-Lin and Blade are Sonai."

"It must be nice to have someone who is meant to be." Mayonaka sighed. "I envy them."

Sushi and Matsuru kept on demanding a starting date of Blade and Mah-Lin's relation. However, now that everyone was aware of their relation, they seemed to enjoy the fact they could kiss in public... and annoy the heck out of Sushi and Matsuru!

"Are you guys done?" Naraku asked, impatiently, while mounting one of the unnamed horses. "If we hurry, we can reach MorningSnow before nightfall."

"But..." Sushi and Matsuru pouted, while Blade helped Mah-Lin onto a horse.

"Just accept that they are Sonai!" Naraku was fed up with them.

“They are *what*?!” Sushi and Matsuru yelled, while Naraku slammed herself in the face. Why? Why did she blurt that out? Now it would take a while before they could leave...

Finally, the crew of friends finally left for home. Home... It sounded so peaceful. On Seken, peace was rare. All living things could live forever, but because of the everlasting lack of peace, no one seemed to die of old age.

This entire planet with three moons was drenched in magic: both good and evil. And yet, at the same time, it seemed to be stuck in medieval times.

“Why won’t you sit with me?” Blade pouted.

Mah-Lin put a finger on his lips, which Blade playfully tried to bite. “Because we have to move today.” She smiled. “I want to see your home.”

Carefully Blade motioned Dusk to ride closer to Mah-Lin’s nameless horse. He put his arms around her. “Maybe if I kidnap you...” He smiled, but got pushed away by Mah-Lin.

“You can’t kidnap your Sonāi.” She teased.

“You’re not yet my wife.” Blade kept her arm tight. “I just...”

“Will you two finally stop acting so damn in love?” Matsuru grunted, annoyed.

“Your best friend is jealous.” Mah-Lin smiled.

Then Blade simply, yet carefully, pulled Mah-Lin from her horse and put her in front of him. “I like being in love. Let’s do this again tomorrow!”

“But if you give me a pet-name, I will kick your butt so hard...” Mah-Lin warned the man who was cuddling her. “And you know I will win!”

“They make me *sick*!” Sushi complained, knowing she was jealous. Sonāi...

pairings made by the High Ones... and Blade was the first to find his Sonāi! It wasn’t fair! Blade didn’t even want to get a girlfriend, let alone a future wife! It was not fair!

Time moved on, and luckily Mah-Lin and Blade’s ‘love-mood’ died down, restoring peace within the group. Having two friends who are deeply in love is one thing, to see them kissing all day long, is another.

Naraku and Mayonaka wondered why they were so sappy today. They never were this mushy before. It was probably because Matsuru and Sushi only now realised what had been in front of them for the past eight months.

“Look!” Naraku pointed. “It’s the edge of the forest! We are home! We are home!”

Happy and rejoiced, all motioned their horses to run up the hill. Soon they would see their castle again. Soon they would see the valley around MorningSnow, the beautiful, serene surroundings they called home.

The sun slowly turned red in the sky, as the horses reached the hill. Smiles were on their faces and...

The smiles vanished immediately. “What... what...” Mayonaka tried to put into words. Did they really see what they were seeing?

The sound of metal hitting metal filled the valley and blood painted the fresh snow red. What Naraku and her friends saw, was not a serene valley.

“Why... why are they fighting?!” Naraku exclaimed, seeing her friends fighting against a group of strangers.

Episode 152: Welcome home

“Why... Why are they fighting?” Naraku exclaimed. Even though the castle was still a few hundred meters away, she recognised a battle when she saw one. Most of her life had been about fighting and this... this was one heck of a fight! Not waiting any longer, everyone ordered their horses to run down the hill and into the valley. Shadowhunter, the black wolf, had no trouble keeping up with the horses, having run with them quite often.

“Oh no!” Mayonaka gasped. “It’s four against...fifteen!” She tried to count, unsure because everyone kept on moving.

“How dare they!” Sushi called out and saw how a ray of fire burst through the battling men, barely missing them. “You show them, Kai!”

A sudden rage washed over Naraku. She grabbed her sword, raising it into the air. How dare they? How dare they! She had travelled for eighteen months and when she returned, she found her beloved tribe in battle? They fought an unfair battle! Four against fifteen or even more... no wonder Kai had to use his magical Fire Powers. With swords alone, they could never win this!

Howling like a wolf, both Shadowhunter and Naraku released a cry for battle. The men on the battlefield turned around surprised, seeing the travellers plunging themselves into battle. Naraku leaped off her horse and immediately faced the first man she saw. Naraku and her companions were with six warriors, The IceHunters were with four. It was now ten against about fifteen. Then Shadowhunter joined the battle as well, biting warriors in their legs or arms.

Mayonaka knew she was a better archer, but she realised she had no choice. Her friends needed help and she would give it. Sushi used her spear, managing to drive a few of them backwards.

Both Mah-Lin and Blade fought as if they were one. Mah-Lin preferred her deadly legs and hands over a sword and Blade made sure his future wife would not get stabbed in the back, using his large sword.

Surprised by these sudden helpers, the enemy didn’t know how to react or fight and instead of attacking, they suddenly had to defend.

“Caron!” One yelled. “We must retreat!”

The man named Caron nodded. “Let’s go!” He ordered, helped a man up, turned around, and vanished with his group into the forests.

Angry, yet relieved they were gone, Naraku watched them go. She exhaled deeply, trying to regain her calm. For a being like Naraku, losing self-control was very dangerous.

“AO OH MY GOSH YOU ARE HURT THERE IS BLOOD ARE YOU OKAY OH MY GOSH!” A waterfall of words poured out of Sushi’s mouth, directed at her older Elfin brother. She almost dove on top of him, seeing his cuts and bruises. “High Ones, how dare they!” She turned around, angrily. “I’ll...” Her older brother simply placed a hand over her mouth. “Welcome home.” He stopped her with a sigh.

“Kai, your hand!” Mayonaka rushed at the young man and looked at his bleeding hand. “We must take care of this.” She turned around. “Naraku!”

Naraku snapped up from her thoughts. “[Do]!” She replied affirmatively in the Seken language and put her sword back into its sheath. She took Kai’s hand and touched it. A soft glow emerged from it, but it soon faded away again. “This will take a while. We’d better get inside.”

Agreeing, everyone turned to the castle gates. “I see you brought me some gifts!” Ao joked, supported by his sister and pointing at the horses. “One would be enough, though.”

“Oh, hush.” Sushi sighed. “Who said one was for you?”

Suddenly a young girl raised her sword, pointing it at Mah-Lin. “Who is she?” She grunted.

Mah-Lin looked up surprised. “This must be Clover.” She mumbled to Blade.

“She was all you described her to be.”

“What do you mean by that?!” Clover snapped back.

A young man with teal-coloured eyes separated them. “Let’s discuss that inside, okay?” He tried to calm them down. “I assume she is a new member of our tribe?”

“I am?” Mah-Lin asked Blade.

“Yes, you are.” Blade smiled, taking her hand. “Though I think I need a bigger room...”

“No!” Maturu forbade them. “You are not married yet! I forbid you!”

The young man with teal-coloured eyes looked up surprised. “Okay...” He started.

“I also assume Blade has gotten himself a girlfriend?”

“See?” Mayonaka pointed out. “It was that obvious!” She told Sushi. “Even Rain sees it! And he just met Mah-Lin!”

“I’m getting a headache...” Naraku mumbled. “Let’s just get inside...”

Everyone agreed and walked back in. Ao picked up a deceased rabbit; it had probably fallen to the ground during the skirmish. While walking inside, Naraku noticed the damage on the large heavy doors. “How...?” She started, pointing at them. “Weren’t they more dark of colour?”

Kai nodded, holding his hand to stop some blood from flowing. “Yeah, this is our third pair.” He said, casually. “But creating all those doors is quite tiring for Ao. Good thing you are back now.”

“Third... pair?” Sushi turned around and saw Rain and Clover closing the door.

The doors were still opening ‘the wrong way’. Instead of opening towards the inside, they opened to the outside. The doors were made of massive and heavy wood... how could this be their third pair?

Sushi looked around. Not much had changed since they had left. Yes, it was a lot cleaner and the wet dark spot amidst the snow betrayed the underground hot spring. From the side, Apple and the grown Snowdance greeted them. Pear took a good look of his offspring, observing her from hoof to head, nodding approvingly. From the battlement, Grasshopper, now a grown snow wolf, practically dove onto Mayonaka, greeting her unexpectedly. “You still know who I am.” She exclaimed surprised. “And my... Look at how white you are.”

“As long as we keep her inside, she stays white.” Clover growled, letting Mayonaka know that Grasshopper liked getting dirty.

Naraku knelt next to Kai, taking his wounded hand in her warm hands. Though blood appeared on her own hands, she was not worried. This blood was not hers and with her powers, she magically closed the wounds.

Kai looked at his Chieftess, the young purple-haired maiden. He didn't know her past yet, but he had always found her fascinating. How she healed the cuts in his hands... Kai noticed it came with ease, unlike eighteen months ago. Naraku had set off on a journey to gather experience and obviously, it had been a successful one.

"It has been healed." Naraku got up. "Ao, let me take a look at you."

"You're not tired?" Ao asked, amazed.

Naraku shook her head. "If you travel with Blade, there is never a dull moment... nor a moment where I can't practise my skills!" Her glare towards the warrior was filled with reproach. When Blade noticed this, he laughed, embarrassed, which was followed by a punch from Mah-Lin.

"Stop that!" She ordered him. "I hate it when you do that."

Naraku touched Ao's back and healed his cuts and bruises as well. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Clover. 'Strange,' Naraku thought, 'why is she still holding on to her sword? Is it because of Mah-Lin?'

What Naraku didn't know about Clover, was something the men who had stayed behind did know. Clover, this young adult... she had no childhood. She lost her parents during an attack on her village; forced to see them die and then left behind to die as well. The orphanage she ended up in wasn't much better. Her friends didn't know the details just yet, but they did know it resulted in distrust of men. The only man she did trust, was one that had managed to crawl into her heart... Ao.

However, Naraku noticed something off. After she healed Ao, Matsu forced her to take a break. No matter how strong she was and no matter how often she had practised, she should still limit the use of her powers.

Naraku looked around. All her friends were here. Matsu, Blade, Sushi, Mayonaka, Shadowhunter, Mah-Lin, Kai, Rain, Ao, Clover, Grasshopper and the horses... but where was Hane? Where was the man that controlled the air?

Then Naraku remembered something: Hane was a pacifist. He disliked fighting. Yes, he had joined them in the war against Lord Zashjan, but if he could avoid it, he would. Still, he would never abandon his friends. So, where was he?

Maybe he was out gathering some roots or mushrooms. After all, he was a vegetarian and during winter food was scarce.

"Rain?" Mayonaka suddenly filled the air with her voice. "What happened? Why were you attacked?"

Curious, Naraku turned around, wanting to know as well. "Who were those men?" She added.

Rain looked to the ground. "We... we don't really know." He admitted. "We know they call themselves the Yami. They arrived about eight or nine months ago."

"And?" Matsu asked for more. "Why do they attack us?" To him, it felt more appropriate to say 'us' instead of 'you'.

Kai sat down next to Rain. "We didn't really ask or listen. We were... occupied." Kai mumbled.

The way Kai avoided the answer filled the travellers with an uneasy feeling. Kai... Kaiyou, the always-hyperactive-with sugar-in-his-veins-storyteller... he was so... silent and calm!

"So, this could all be some misunderstanding?" Blade wondered.

"What is there to misunderstand?!" Ao jumped up. "They come here and demand our castle! If we would leave, they would let us go peacefully. Well, I'm not buying that!"

"Ao, calm down!" Sushi tried.

"You weren't here for the past eight months." Clover accused her. "Would *you* leave your home if some strangers demanded it?"

"Of course not," Sushi said. "but this castle is so huge... and their group doesn't seem that big... Couldn't we just share this place?"

"Share?" Rain hissed. "With them?! Never! They try to starve us; a coward's act!"

"There's no food?" Mah-Lin was more confused than upset. She didn't know these people and couldn't follow what was going on.

"Not much anyway." Kai replied. "Ao went out hunting today. The rabbit is all he could get before he was attacked."

Naraku stood up. "But why?" She wondered. "We are The IceHunters! We faced a huge army and still won! This is just a small tribe."

"Small, but deadly!" Ao warned her. "They are not like that army. They are worse! They are strong, use traps, make plans... Tribes like them can be more dangerous than an army, Naraku."

"They are like us, but the opposite side of us..." Kai whispered.

>Okay, this is scaring me.< Sushi said telepathically to Mayonaka. >Kai is so... silent and down! What's with him?<

Mayonaka knelt next to Kai. "Kai, what is wrong? What happened to you? You used to be so... cheerful."

"Well, not anymore!" Kai snapped.

"Well, isn't this a nice welcome home..." Blade sneered sarcastically.

"Excuse me?!" Kai jumped up. "Well, excuse me we don't have a party arranged! We were a bit occupied!"

"Calm down!" Mayonaka tried to reason. "Blade didn't mean it like that."

"Don't stick your nose in things you don't know anything about!" Clover yelled at Mayonaka. "You played Prissy Princess for a couple of months, while we had to fight for our lives!"

"Prissy Princess?!" Insulted, Mayonaka looked up. "How dare you say that! Being a queen is not easy! I lost friends, got betrayed, almost got killed; don't you dare compare what I've been through!"

"It can't be the hell it has been here!" Clover screamed back. "Have you ever tried to defend a castle with only four people?"

"I lost a good friend!" Mayonaka threw back. "Ancule gave his life for me!"

"We too lost a friend!" Clover said with a loud voice.

"Stop it!" Mah-Lin jumped in-between. "Look, I know I'm new and all, but this isn't helping! We are tired from travelling and shocked to find you in a war, while you are tired of the fight." Her wisdom cooled the people down. "Both our paths were filled with blood, and apparently, it will stay filled with blood, as long as those

Yami-dudes stay. Obviously, you don't want to leave, and they don't want to give up."

"I think we are indeed tired..." Matsuuro looked down. "Maybe a good night's rest... They say it can do miracles."

Mah-Lin looked firmly at Mayonaka and Clover. Mayonaka nodded. "I apologise." She said to Clover. "I guess I am tired and I've been longing for a real bed for days. I can't understand your situation; I've been gone for months."

"...Neither can I." Clover mumbled. Mayonaka looked up surprised; was this an apology? It had to be! Clover apologized... She thought it would never happen. "We slacked off with the cleaning." Ao admitted. "So, your rooms may be a bit dusty."

"It's okay." Blade smiled. "Mah-Lin, will you...?"

"Get a room far away from mine?" Matsuuro filled in for him.

"You are just jealous." Blade teased him.

"Yes, and?" Matsuuro admitted. "You didn't even want a girlfriend! Let alone a future wife!"

Mah-Lin placed her fingers to her head as if she had a headache. "Let's just pretend I didn't hear that..." She calmed herself down, preventing another fight.

"I'll just take an other room, and we'll talk about it in the morning."

Rain agreed. "You hurt the Yami pretty well." He complimented his friends. "They usually don't attack two days in a row, and with new players in the field... I think we should be pretty safe tomorrow. Oh and Blade, I think there is a nice room for your girlfriend about three rooms away from yours."

"Awe, that far?" Blade pouted.

Mah-Lin simply pushed him away. "At least I'll be safe from your constant drooling. By the way, I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is Mah-Lin."

The others introduced themselves as well and Rain joined Mah-Lin to guide her to her room. Suddenly a voice filled the room, asking a small and simple question.

"Rain?" Naraku started. "Where is Hane?"

Episode 153: The price of war

“Where is Hane?”

Silence filled the room. One side of the room was curious. The other side...

“Something wrong?” Matsu asked Rain.

Rain turned around. “You’d better put on something warm; it’s quite cold down there.”

The others followed Rain. “Cold? Where?” Naraku wondered.

Sushi put her cap back on her head. “That won’t be enough.” Ao told her and handed her a blanket.

“What about you?” Sushi wondered.

Ao paused. “We’ve been down there as often as possible. We’re used to it now... I guess.”

“Ao,” Sushi started. “Is everything all right?” She asked worried, but she got no reply.

Kai was in the front, with a torch to lighten the path. The small tribe followed him downstairs. The stairs were cold and old, but on certain spots you could see someone tried to fix them. On the wall, someone had attached a rope; carefully braided and decorated each time it was attached to the wall. Stains and dust revealed that it was hung quite a while ago.

Kai opened a door and surprised the others followed. “Wow...” Blade mumbled. “So this is what was behind that door...”

“It’s the storage room.” Kai mumbled.

Mah-Lin peeked around the corner. “Not much food left...” She noticed.

Rain nodded. “Because we haven’t been able to get out much, we had to drain our reserves.”

Kai put his hands on another handle. Trembling, he tried to push it, but he suddenly stopped. Clover came closer. “It’s okay.” She said with a voice mixed with tenderness and her usual snappy nature.

“I... I just can’t...” Kai whispered.

Clover took the handle from him and pushed the door open. “We know.” She whispered and took the torch. “Do you want to stay here?”

“No.” Kai said resolutely. “I want to see him.”

Now Clover took the lead, as they walked down. “I didn’t know...” Mayonaka started, looking at the rough walls and unfinished stairs. “I don’t think this is finished.”

“It’s not.” Ao admitted. “But it doesn’t have to.”

Clover lowered the torch and put a small fuse on fire. Immediately, a string of fire danced through the room, bringing light to the darkness. The fuse drenched in oil formed a rectangle on the floor, bringing a soft light to the room.

Mayonaka gasped. An unexpected emotion pierced through her chest and right into her heart. A sudden urge to breathe took over as air was stolen away from her. Rain managed to catch her before she would pass out from shock.

“I... I don’t think he realised what hit him...” Ao whispered as he took his crying sister into his arms.

Naraku knelt on the ground. Carefully, barely missing the flames, she bent over and touched the stone. Her fingers followed the carvings that were made on it. With trembling fingers, she read his name, followed by the date he was born and the date.... eight months ago... the day she left the desert-castle.

“But... but...” Naraku started. “he... he said he would teach me about the wind... when I would return...” Tears filled her eyes. Her hand softly glowed and in spirit she went down into the cold soil. She could feel it. Feel how his body would never decay and would be eternally preserved in this freezing cold. His young face... it would stay forever young.

Naraku buried her face behind her arms and hands, as she let her tears flow on the tombstone. With short, quick shocks she cried, letting the emotions flow. Matsuuro knelt next to her and put a warm hand on her back. He tried to comfort her, but he had trouble sorting out his own pain. Hane...

“I was only kidding...” Blade whispered. “I was only kidding...” Mah-Lin took his hand, when she noticed his face. “I never meant it...”

“What?” Mah-Lin asked.

“I didn’t mean it...” Blade continued. “I... I... when I left, I told him vegetarians die young...”

“Don’t blame yourself.” Kai stopped him. “It was not your arrow...”

“It was over before we could even reach him...” Clover said softly. “Even Naraku wouldn’t have been able to save him.”

“A clean cut.” Ao added.

“Does Kyliya know it?” A sad voice suddenly asked.

“What?” Ao asked Naraku, who looked up and tried to dry her tears.

“Does Kyliya already know?” Naraku repeated herself.

“We haven’t been able to get out yet.” Kai admitted.

“But...” Mayonaka tried to speak. “Kyliya loves him. She has to know!”

“It’s too dangerous to leave the castle and cross the forest.” Kai tried again. “The Yami are sly, we...”

“Curse those Yami!” Naraku suddenly screamed. “I’ll...”

“Whoa!” Matsuuro jumped before her. “Don’t let it take over!”

“But...” Naraku cried. “they killed Hane! He’s dead!” She shook her head in disbelief. “Is this my punishment? My first test?” She cried. “How dare the High Ones let this happen!”

Matsuuro embraced her. “It’s all right.” He hushed her. “It’s okay to be sad. I don’t know the meaning of this, but you can’t let anger or grief control you. Don’t give them what they want.”

“But Hane is dead...” Naraku cried. “He’s dead...”

As fresh tears flowed down, the others didn’t know what to do or say. Kai, Rain, Ao and Clover had been through this eight months ago and the pain their friends went through, was still fresh in their memories.

Mah-Lin didn’t know what to say or do either. On Seken, death was a part of life, and she knew that. She felt sad because her friends and beloved felt bad, not because of the man that lay underneath the heavy stone. She didn’t know him personally, only from the stories she was told.

Some humans live till the age of one thousand. Some never reach adulthood. It sounded terrible... but that was Seken in a nutshell.

Warming up near the fire upstairs, Clover stirred in a large kettle of soup above the fire in the throne room. Mayonaka noticed a large white carpet on the floor. It was nice and soft. "It's a Snow Cat." Ao informed her. "Just... don't ask."

Mayonaka nodded and understood that it had something to do with Hane. The throne room was a lot nicer than before. The large room was decorated with thin fabrics and homemade carpets on the floor. The cold windows were covered by long drapes; where did they find those? Maybe from somewhere else in the castle, or maybe they made them themselves. On the wall were blunt yet beautifully polished swords on shields, decorated with paint and gems. Some were restored, some were still as they had been found.

It showed something of the past; the days before the humans abandoned this castle. However, the throne room was now more a living room than an actual throne room. The collapsed thrones had been removed and replaced by benches. Mayonaka looked up from her observation when Rain handed her a bowl of soup. Gratefully, she took it and tried to blow the heat away. With a sip, she noticed it was more hot water with some thin vegetables than a real soup.

"Tomorrow we'll hunt." Naraku decided. "Shadowhunter and Grasshopper will go along. They can outrun the Yami and bring you food while the others hide."

"What about the horses?" Ao wondered. "We don't have much hay left either. And with those new horses..."

"We'll find a way." Naraku decided. "I won't let anyone starve."

Matsuru nodded. "I agree. If those Yami are indeed as sly as you say, they probably want to observe us first, before doing anything."

Blade agreed as well. "That means they don't know about your powers yet, Naraku. Let's keep it like that."

Naraku put her bowl down. "Blade, Mah-Lin, Sushi, you will come along with me." Nodding was the only necessary answer. "We shall gather as much as we can. We don't know when the next time will be."

"I suggest small preys." Rain suggested. "In case of an emergency, it's easier to run with a light prey."

"Good thinking." Naraku pondered. "Not only that, but we also shouldn't show what we are capable of. We managed to surprise them once. I don't know if we can surprise them a second time."

The next morning, a cold mist covered the valley. Naraku had put on her old winter clothes: white and covering her from head to toe. "It seems I grew again..."

Naraku mumbled when she noticed how tight some parts were. Blade, Matsuru and Sushi had followed her example, while Mah-Lin put on Mayonaka's old clothes. They were a different size, but it would have to do.

"Telepathy?" Sushi asked if they would use mental communication or not.

Mah-Lin sighed. "Please, I'm not that great yet..." She mumbled depressed.

"We haven't noticed any magical powers within the Yami." Kai filled them in. "We use it all the time."

"Then we shall use it as well." Naraku decided and she put on her cap, to hide her purple hair.

The hunt was short but challenging. Letting preys go was harder than catching them. Still, they had no choice. What if the Yami were observing them? If they saw how easy it was for Naraku to shoot or capture any prey, they might realise what she was capable of.

Their hunt led them towards a small lake with a waterfall. "Too bad we don't have time to fish..." Sushi sighed.

Naraku saw that some parts of the lake had frozen, but some of it was still open. The water was slowly moving, as the waterfall raged down. Fish were swimming near the surface, as if they were teasing the hunters. They knew were safe for now. "There's high grass on the shore; we should take that along for the horses."

Naraku decided and turned to Shadowhunter. "Shadowhunter, you take these rabbits and birds and run back to MorningSnow." She tied the preys to her back. "We'll at least have something for dinner." Grasshopper turned around as well, but Naraku stopped her. "Wait, Grasshopper, you will take some of this grass along." While Shadowhunter gave Naraku a small lick on the cheek as a good luck wish, the others quickly cut some grass from the lakeside. "This will never be enough." Mah-Lin complained. "We can never gather enough for days."

"It will have to do!" Naraku cut her off and made a few bundles of the grass. "Go, Grasshopper!" The snow wolf obeyed and then followed the tracks of the black wolf. "It will have to do..."

The journey back was safe and uneventful. It was unclear if anyone observed them or not. At certain times, Naraku felt as if someone followed them, but she never managed to get that feeling clearly into focus. Was she losing her touch?

No, it was not that. The Yami were clever, that was for sure. Her friends had been right. The Yami were more dangerous than Lord Zashjan's army. They were skilled hunters and warriors, just like The IceHunters. After all, The IceHunters managed to beat a great army. It was as if they were now fighting against themselves.

Still, The IceHunters had one advantage. Clearly the Yami knew about Kai's Fire Powers, Rain's Water Powers, and Ao's Earth Powers. But they didn't know about Naraku's High One Powers or Sushi's witchcraft. They would probably assume Sushi would share Earth Powers, like her big brother because she was an Elf, but she would surprise them.

"Sushi, I want you to create as many potions as possible." Naraku ordered Sushi. "The exploding kind, the illusion kind; whatever you can create without using our food reserves?"

"Got it." Sushi agreed. "Mayonaka, will you help me with the spell book?" Mayonaka nodded.

"Mah-Lin, you can read as well." Naraku focused on the Eastern looking woman. "I want you to look in the library for anything we can use. Schematics for weapons, maps of this castle, spell books; whatever you can find." Mah-Lin nodded.

"I will help her." Kai said. "I'm the best reader among the four of us."

Naraku agreed. "Blade, Matsuru, Rain, I need your help to find a peaceful way out. Maybe we should talk to them."

"And what about us?" Clover pointed at herself and Ao.

Naraku looked to the ground. “I need you two,” She started. “to devise a plan to defend this castle. If negotiations fail, we need a strategy to win this war. Because we are *not* leaving.”

“You can count on us.” Ao nodded.

“Tomorrow we shall hunt again.” Naraku ended her decision. “We shall return to the waterfall and get more grass for the horses.”

“And what if we get attacked?” Blade wondered.

“Then we’ll fight!”

Dinner was once again a soup. Because of their friend’s return, Rain had prepared a small loaf of bread from the few grains they had left. Offering everyone a small piece, the loaf was quickly divided.

“Even if we are divided, we shall always be one.” Rain told them. “We are all pieces of one big group: The IceHunters.”

“And IceHunters never give up.” Matsu added. “We have come this far; we won’t let anyone take our home from us!”

“MorningSnow is ours!” Clover yelled, followed by the others.

Suddenly, a glass window burst into shards, as an arrow flew into the throne room, barely missing Sushi! Scared, Sushi jumped up, just like Ao, who demanded to know if she was all right.

“Where did that come from?” Blade demanded to know.

“Outside!” Matsu jumped up, the rest hot on his trail.

Running, everyone reached the courtyard, where another arrow barely missed Mayonaka. They hurried towards the battlement, skipping a few stairs to reach the top even faster. Naraku looked over the battlement, seeing a group of men with bows and arrows.

“Finally!” A young man smiled. “That really took you all a long while. I hope you enjoyed dinner. Is there enough for everybody? I hope so, it must be hard to let half of your preys slip through on purpose.”

Episode 154: Like looking into a mirror

“Well?” The voice was filled with impatience and taunting.

Naraku looked at the young man. She couldn't really guess his age. He looked older than Blade and Matsu, but on Seken, looks can be very deceiving. The body of people on Seken grows and changes until around the age of twenty-five, then stops, but around a thousand years, it starts aging again. For some people it starts earlier, or they get a second pause in aging. Still, hardly anyone ever reaches that milestone.

“Or can I hear your stomach growl?”

“Who are you?” Naraku asked, firmly. A sudden hate filled her heart, but she knew she wasn't allowed to give in. If she would, Black Magic could take over. Even though Naraku hardly feared anything, not even death, she did fear that. In her dreams, she had seen herself killing her loved ones, if Black Magic got a chance. “Ah, a response.” The man bowed. “How kind of the fair lady to honour us with her voice.”

Naraku balled her fists, seeing right through his polite façade. It was clear he tried to get under her skin. “What do you want?”

The man playfully pondered. “Let's see... what did we find out today. You are a small tribe, and apparently, half of it was away. You own two wolves, not dogs but wolves, and you can communicate with them. This either means you are crazy or that they have a conscience, something only a Magic User can cause. Assuming the fact you haven't showed Magical Skills yet, our guesses are that one of those who had stayed behind caused it.”

>Good, they don't know about your magic yet.< Matsu said telepathically to Naraku. >Keep it that way. Whatever happens, keep it a secret.<

>He is only trying to make you lose your patience.< Blade added.

>I know that!< Naraku snapped. Everyone could feel how much she had to conceal what she wanted to say, wanted to scream. These men... these men were responsible for Hane's death! *They* were the ones who pierced his heart with an arrow, while he was minding his own business! He didn't do anything wrong! “Also, observing from your fake hunt today,” The man continued. “men and women are equal in your tribe. Considering how small your tribe is, that could only be expected.”

“And it seems like your tribe has no women at all.” Naraku replied, coldly.

>Good one!< Matsu cheered.

The man nodded. “I must admit that, as well as my regret. But let's not get off track. It seems that you, young purple-haired one, are the leader of this tribe.”

Naraku carefully bit her lip. “What you lack in experience, you make up with courage and determination.”

“Just stop your lecture, your praise and, by the High Ones, state your name or I will...” Naraku bashed with her fist on the battlement. Quickly, Matsu put a hand on her shoulder and telepathically tried to calm her down again.

The man chuckled. “My, and a temper as well. But as you wish. My name is Caron, leader of the Yami.” He made a simple bow. “Will you enlighten me with your name?”

"I'm Naraku of The IceHunters." Naraku proudly stated.

Caron thought for a moment. "Naraku... doesn't that mean 'Eternity'? Interesting name for such a hot-tempered huntress."

"Hey, mind your own business!" Blade defended Naraku. "Just say what you want."

Caron smiled. "Well, isn't that obvious? We want MorningSnow."

"You know the castle's name?" Matsuru asked confused. "How? And why do you want it?"

"Because MorningSnow belongs to the Yami." Caron explained. "It's our birth-right. Now, even though you confronted us with so much violence, I will once again promise, that when you leave in peace, we shall let you go unharmed."

"Your birth-right?!" Naraku snapped. "And was it also your birth-right to simply slaughter Hane?"

Caron looked up. "That was... an unfortunate accident."

"Accident?!" Naraku yelled. "Have you ever considered *knocking on a door* instead of shooting arrows randomly?!"

"A poor choice, I agree, but still..."

"Get the hell out of my sight!" Naraku screamed. "Get out of my sight, or High Ones as my witness, I swear I'll..."

"Naraku!" Matsuru stopped her.

Naraku clenched her fists. She breathed in and out. Everyone could see Naraku was now on the border of her patience. Just one more slip from Caron and...

"Caron..." A younger man nudged him, whispering.

"What?" Caron asked back.

"I... I think we should leave." The younger man said.

"What?!"

"Look, I just really think..." The younger man whispered, seeing Naraku. "I think..."

"I'm not going to..." Caron started, but Naraku interrupted him.

"You killed Hane..." She said with a low and cold voice. It was as if a chill went through the entire valley. "And I shall *never* forgive you for that." When she looked up, Caron could see, even from that distance, the hatred within her eyes. "You shall never set foot into MorningSnow. Now *leave*, before I change my mind!"

"Caron..." The younger man urged once again.

Caron pushed him back. "I'm no idiot." He hissed at him. "We've overstayed our welcome. Come, my friends. We shall let our Chieftess calm down, before she hurts herself."

The Yami turned around and walked away. It seemed as if they didn't watch their backs, but subtle hints told them they were. When they vanished into the forest, a sigh of relief went through the castle.

How true Caron had been. If he had pushed his luck, Naraku would probably have lost control. It was uncertain what would happen. She could have cried, which was a sign of weakness. She could have plunged herself into battle, not thinking of the consequences. And in the worst case... Black Magic.

Mayonaka was shaken, almost ready to cry. "No tears!" Naraku ordered. "They are still at the edge of the forest. They are observing us."

"How do you know?" Ao asked.

“Because I am observing them.” Naraku hissed.

“You can see them?!” Kai gasped.

Naraku slightly shook her head. “No... but I can feel them. Like they can feel us.”

Quickly everyone but Rain and Kai left the battlement. They would take the night shift and first watch. Down the stairs, Mayonaka finally let the tears stream.

“It seems they don’t want to talk.” Mah-Lin mumbled. “They have the stupid idea this place is theirs and they will do anything to get it.”

“They won’t get it!” Naraku said, firmly. Matsuuro wanted to calm her down, but Naraku slapped his hands away. “Not now!” She warned him. “No matter how well-meant, I don’t want any lectures or advise. I don’t want anyone near me!”

Quickly, she turned away. Naraku pushed a door violently open and closed it with a loud slam.

“...Am I the only one who was scared back there?” Ao whispered.

Clover looked up. “You were scared?!” She scolded him.

“She scared the heck out of me...” Sushi admitted. “Naraku... I’ve never felt this much hate coming from her.” While Ao, Rain, Kai and Clover didn’t know yet what she meant, the others did.

“She can’t lose control.” Blade feared. “If that happens, we’ll either get hell on Seken, or ‘they’ get what they want.”

“They?” Clover wondered.

“Naraku will tell you herself.” Matsuuro ended it. “That is not our place to do.”

With big strides, Naraku skipped a few stairs while hurrying down. Two pairs of doors were slammed open, as Naraku stepped once again into the Mausoleum. She created a small fireball and lit the fuse drenched in oil once more. It was an ingenious creation, if she’d have eyes for it. The fuse was what carried the flame and without the oil, the flame would die quickly, without burning the fuse. It was created out of a kind of fabric that wouldn’t let fire touch it, but still acted as a conduct for the oil.

“How dare they?” Naraku yelled at the tombstone. “They come barging in here and demand us to leave! How dare they?”

Silence was all Naraku got. After all, the dead cannot speak. How she wished she could talk to him. Tears streamed over her face. Not just tears of sadness, but also tears of despair, anger, hate... It was all flowing from her eyes.

“How can I leave,” Naraku continued. “after what they did? I won’t give our home to some backstabbers, who didn’t even bother to *talk* first! That Caron... if I get my hands on him...”

Then, Naraku calmed down slightly, as if someone was comforting her. Even though she wanted that with all her heart, she was all alone. It was the realisation. The realisation, that if she would ever let hate control her, the High One Yunakara would get what she wanted: a reason to kill Naraku.

This meant... Naraku could never avenge Hane. Revenge floats on hate and anger, the most lethal emotions for Naraku. Not just for her, but especially for the world around her.

She had to remember that she was going to fight to protect her home. To protect her friends. “Can you forgive me?” Naraku softly cried. “I can’t avenge you... not if I want to protect the others...”

And somehow... deep inside... it felt like something Hane would have wanted.

The night passed slowly, and it took a while before Naraku could leave Hane’s grave. It was the first time someone very dear and close to her had passed away. Yes, she had seen her share of death. She even witnessed the death of Ancule, Mayonaka’s servant. However, somehow... that had felt different than this. Hane was supposed to be waiting for her. That was how it was supposed to happen. She wasn’t supposed to end up in another war. This just wasn’t how it was supposed to go!

“You called for me?” A young man stepped into an improvised wooden house. It wasn’t that sturdy, but the people inside never expected to stay for long. When Caron turned around, he saw the young man that had urged him earlier this day.

“Ah, Keiran, I did.” He smiled. “Please, sit down.”

Keiran sat down on the table, looking at Caron. “I think your blood is starting to shine through.” Not knowing what he meant, Keiran looked confused. “You made a good call today.”

“Oh!” Keiran jumped up. “Look, I didn’t mean to disrespect you. I didn’t want to disobey, but I...”

“Keiran, Keiran, Keiran...,” Caron sighed. “You are supposed to disagree with me. It’s in your blood! What makes me wonder is... how did you know?”

Keiran was confused. “Know what?”

“That we had to leave.” Caron leaned against the table. “I didn’t notice until she told me she would never forgive me for that guy’s death.”

“I can’t blame her.” Keiran admitted.

“I can’t either.” Caron smiled and nudged him. “But, these are the cards we’ve been dealt with and we won’t stop playing. So, how did you know it?”

“I don’t know.” Keiran whispered.

“Excuse me?”

“I honestly don’t know...”

During the night, new guards took their shifts. As Blade and Matsu took the battlement, Kai and Rain swapped the cold night for their warm beds. “Has been a while since we had to do this.” Blade admitted.

“Yeah.” Matsu started. Nothing seemed to happen down in the valley. “So, when did it start?”

“Huh?” Blade looked up surprised.

“You and Mah-Lin.” Matsu pushed over his lips, poorly.

Blade sighed. “It really bothers you, doesn’t it?”

Matsu nodded. “Why didn’t you tell me? I thought I was your best friend.”

Blade blushed a bit. “Well, eh... we kind of started on the wrong foot. We are actually quite surprised we haven’t killed each other yet.”

“When did you realise?” Matsu asked. “How did you know you were Sonai?”

Blade looked at the battlement. He knew that when they left home, he intended to stay single for a long time, while Matsu always wanted a girlfriend. Naraku was someone who was beyond their reach, and to be honest, both didn't want her as a loved one anymore. They just wanted to be a part of her life.

"I don't know..." He admitted. "Maybe the moment I saw her on the slave market. I just had this incredible urge to get her out of there. But, High Ones, she was so incredibly proud!"

"Proud?" Matsu was curious.

Blade nodded. "She said I wasn't worthy of her; that I had to beat her in combat."

"Ah!" Matsu connected some dots. "So that's what all that fighting was about!"

Blade agreed. "Yup. But... oh, this is hard to admit... I don't think I can ever win from her."

"That must hurt." Matsu grinned.

"Absolutely!" Blade replied. "Well, she pushed me too far, we got in a fight, I hit her, she practically offered herself to me..."

"Whoa!" Matsu jolted. "She did *what?*!"

Realising what he had said, Blade did a nice impression of a tomato. "That was not meant for your ears!" He warned him. "That's for couples only!"

"No, wait!" Matsu tried. "I didn't hear it right."

"Let's keep it that way." Blade grumbled. "*Nothing* happened, understood?"

Silence filled the battlement once more. "Will you two marry?" Matsu asked.

Blade looked towards the forest. "I don't want to marry her during a war." He admitted. "She deserves better than that."

"Ah, that means I have all the time of the world to think of a gift." Matsu smiled.

"Just be at my wedding." Blade whispered. "That would be the only gift I want to have."

In her room, Naraku couldn't fall asleep. All she could do, was mulling. What did her tribe need? Which problem had the highest priority? There was little food for them, for the wolves, for the horses... She wished she could simply go outside and hunt tomorrow.

Suddenly, she realised she still had to tell Ao, Kai, Rain and Clover what she really was. A product of the High Ones... Could they accept it? Would they fear her?

No, she shouldn't think like that. This was a time of war; she had to have faith in her friends.

Without faith, this war would already be lost....

Episode 155: Failure

The wind was cold this morning. Winter had only just begun, but this far north, winter meant harsh and cold weather. Naraku realised that the cold right now was nothing. It would get colder... a lot colder!

Naraku also knew the advantage of this. Because of the cold, the Yami would probably hide, staying out of the valley. The weather was unpredictable at this moment; mist could appear within seconds, as well as heavy snowstorms.

However, in the forest... In the forest the Yami clearly had an advantage. Naraku and the others had noticed the Yami were cunning hunters, skilled in hiding. Half of the time Naraku doubted her senses; was she being observed or not?

"Naraku, we are ready to go!" Naraku jolted and walked down from the battlement.

Rain, Blade and Sushi were ready to go. Shadowhunter and Grasshopper frolicked, until a grumbling stomach disturbed their playtime. "I'm hungry, okay?!" Kai spread his arms.

"We all are." Naraku replied. "But we will bring food this time. I swear, tonight we will eat again!"

How she doubted her own words. In the past few days, they had tried to get out to hunt several times. Yet, it was like the Yami were playing with them. Sometimes they thought they were completely alone, and then, when they least expected it, the Yami attacked. The only thing that seemed to reach the castle for sure, was the grass for the horses.

"Damn those Yami." Sushi cursed them while the gate closed. "I hope they choke on our food."

"A coward's act." Rain agreed.

"All is fair in love and war." Blade mumbled. "If they mess with us, please, let me end this today."

"We won't kill meaninglessly." Naraku warned him. "All we will do, is feeding our friends."

"I know, I know..." Blade sighed. "But... they get on my nerves. I want to marry Mah-Lin, but I can't because of this stupid war. And I just want to sink my teeth into a soft, sweet, tender piece of meat..."

"Oh yes... with mushrooms on the side..." Sushi dreamed along. "Meat so tender, it will cleanly slip from the bone..."

"Ah," Rain agreed. "roasted deer, mushrooms... and a good glass of wine..."

"Stop dreaming!" Naraku hissed suddenly. "And make your dream reality!"

The others looked up and saw a small deer. It was a young male, probably just reached adulthood, but the skinny body betrayed that the animals weren't that lucky as well this winter. Quite a few animals would die this winter, and not only because of the hunters.

"Okay," Blade lowered himself. "I will sneak..."

At that moment, a pillar of ice rushed out of the ground, impaling the deer before he even knew what hit him! Warm blood dripped over the ice stake, as The IceHunters gasped at the sight.

Rain lowered his hand. "Beggars can't be choosers." He simply said.

Shocked, the others didn't know how to reply. Rain... he used his magical powers to hunt. Since when? Still, he was right. Beggars can't be picky, and at this moment, The IceHunters were begging the High Ones for food.

Blade looked at the deer while he pulled it with Naraku's help from the stake. "Just feel its legs..." He sighed. "Barely any meat. This is only enough for the wolves."

"Then let the wolves have it." A new voice suddenly said.

Naraku jolted around. From the shade, a man appeared and smiled. "What do you want?" Naraku growled softly.

"How is it going?" Caron simply mingled, not showing any fear. "Any luck with the hunt?"

"Have you come to steal our food again?" Sushi put her hands firmly around her spear.

Caron looked up surprised when he saw Sushi's hands. "High Ones!" He gasped.

"Would you attack an innocent, unarmed man?"

"Innocent?!" Blade blurted. "You know, I wonder, what will stop me from killing you right here, right now?"

"The other Yami that are hidden around us." Naraku stopped him.

"Ah, the lady is right once more." Caron bowed. "I must compliment you; you learn fast."

"You just wait..." Naraku hissed.

"So, did you already hold that memorial service you planned?" Caron smiled. He knew The IceHunters wouldn't attack him. Even though they were nowhere to be seen, Naraku knew that the other Yami were hidden, ready to attack when needed.

"How do you...?" Rain gasped.

"Yami know all." Caron smiled. "Swift as the shadow, moving in darkness. How about that wedding? She's quite a catch, if I may be so bold."

"Why you..." Blade got filled with rage and leaped forward. He would have definitely hurt this smirking tribe leader, if it wasn't for Naraku jumping between them.

"My oh my, you certainly know when to pick your fights." Caron complimented again. "Do know, that when we decide to fight, we won't show mercy."

"Neither will we." Naraku bit back. "But what's keeping you from ending this right now?"

Caron turned around, leaving his back open to anyone who would want to hurt him. "Not all cards have been played." He simply stated. "You are hiding a secret, and I learned not to attack before I know who I am fighting. Go home... now that you still have the chance."

"We will not..." Sushi yelled, but suddenly stopped.

>Yes, you will.< Naraku ordered telepathically. >There is no room for discussion. Trust me; I will show Caron we are not as easy as he thinks we are!<

"But..." Blade tried. This simple word attracted Caron's attention. Why did that young man say that? The past few days Caron had learned quite a lot about the new IceHunters. Nothing they did surprised them... except this word, that seemed to come out of nothing.

>Just go.< Naraku ordered once more.

Doubting, the others took the small deer and turned away. Except... for Naraku. Curious, Caron stared at Naraku. Why didn't she move? Wait, why should he

worry? He knew everything about Naraku. She probably had to calm herself down first. Boy, that girl certainly had a temper. Why did she struggle so much to keep her anger inside? She should vent it; it's better to show your emotions than to bottle them up anyway.

All of a sudden, Naraku turned around and ran into the forest! When the others noticed it, they jolted. "Naraku!" Blade called out, but a mental order was all he got in return.

"Let's go!" Rain urged and before Caron realised what had happened, Blade, Rain and Sushi hurried home with their prey. Grasshopper and Shadowhunter disobeyed Naraku's mental order and dashed after her.

"Go back!" Naraku ordered the wolves, but they disobeyed again.

Startled for a moment, Caron regained his confidence. "Go get her!" He ordered to no one in sight. "If we get her, this war is over!"

Running, Naraku avoided trees and bushes. 'Hane, we can't have a memorial service right now...' She thought, with pain in her heart. 'But you will always stay in our hearts. This dance is for you, my sweet Hane...'

Out of nowhere, the Yami jumped down from the trees, going into pursuit. They dashed through the snow, which got mixed with dirt and half-decayed leaves.

Caron too joined this hunt; no way he would let her escape!

"It seems you still have some hidden cards..." He smiled, passing Keiran. "Hurry up!" He yelled at him. "I want to have a guest tonight!"

Silently, Keiran nodded and increased his speed. It surprised Caron when Keiran passed him and joined the front of the hunt. "Wait!" Keiran yelled at Naraku, as if he expected her to wait for him.

In the back, Caron had heard it as well. "Boy, you still have so much to learn..." He scolded him softly.

Keiran was amazed by his own speed and that he gained upon this little purple-haired girl. Finally, he would be regarded as a man. "Now I've go-..." He smiled. At that moment, Naraku stopped running and put her elbows backwards. Hitting Keiran's chest hard with her elbow, it was enough to make him fall to the ground. The second Yami was attacked by Shadowhunter and Grasshopper jumped from the side to create even more chaos.

Caron walked to Keiran, who lay on the ground, coughing. He checked on him and then looked up. His men seemed to have lost their control, as they looked around in panic... while Naraku and the two wolves escaped.

Sighing, Caron got up. "So, you do manage to surprise me... Okay, that is fair. You can have this battle. Won't do you any good without food..."

Keiran rolled to his side, trying to catch his breath. When he noticed Caron next to him, he tried to talk between coughing. "I... I'm sorry..." He wheezed.

"Well, you tried." Caron shrugged. "You'll get your chance. But it looks you'll be out of the game for a while." The leader helped him up. "Your ribs could be broken. That was one hell of a blow, boy."

"I'm not a boy." Keiran hissed, trying to regain his breath.

"Sure you are." Caron ignored him. "You still have a lot to learn."

"I'm a Full Grown!"

"Sure you are..."

Taking a left turn, Naraku kept on running. Not looking back, she decided that as long as she didn't hear anything, she would be safe. Suddenly, she tripped, and Naraku bashed to the ground. This was nothing; she had fallen more often... but somehow... somehow, she couldn't get up anymore!

All Naraku had, was a strong urge to stay on the ground. She breathed hard, as her heart tried to pound itself out of her chest. Both Shadowhunter and Grasshopper came to check up on her, nudging her with their noses.

"I... I can't..." Naraku gasped for air.

>You must.< Shadowhunter ordered.

>Hunters come.< Grasshopper added.

"My legs..." Naraku whimpered. "They are too heavy."

>Naraku hungry?< Grasshopper tried.

>Shadowhunter will get food!< Shadowhunter said.

"No, no..." Naraku tried to get up. "We have to stay together." With heavy legs, she leaned against the tree. "Let's try and get some food... on our way home."

However, Naraku had little luck. Each prey she missed, but with the help of the wolves she managed to get a few rabbits. A few forgotten nuts and a mushroom growing in the wrong season... It was all she could find.

Evening fell when Naraku finally reached her home. Maturu embraced her with all his might. "Don't you *ever* do that again!" He begged her. "We were so worried..."

"I hope I won't have to do it again, either." Naraku admitted. She showed her small catch. "This was a failed hunt."

"But you sure managed to surprise the Yami!" Rain grinned. "They were running around like headless chickens."

"I don't care that the hunt failed." Mayonaka admitted. "If the price was losing another of my tribe members..."

"Without food, we will lose this war." Naraku walked towards her room. "I just want to sleep tonight."

"But... what about food?" Kai tried. "Food good!"

"You can have my share." Naraku offered. "I had some nuts on the way."

"That can't be enough." Ao tried to reason.

"I also found a few apples." Naraku ended the discussion and walked up the stairs to her room.

"Well, glad to see at least *someone* has a full stomach..." Clover hissed while stepping inside the castle again.

"Are you sure?" Mah-Lin wondered.

"Why wouldn't I be sure?" Clover snapped.

"I can believe that nuts-story... but apples don't grow in the winter..." Mah-Lin explained.

Naraku lay herself down in her bed. Ever since she had visited the desert, she decided to give her bed another try. Okay, it was still too soft, but it was warmer than the floor. Even Shadowhunter agreed, when she joined her.

>You think?< Shadowhunter asked worried.

“Humans always think.” Naraku smiled and sighed at the same time.

>You not human.< Shadowhunter tried.

“But close to one.” Naraku continued. “And they all depend on me.”

>What you do?< Shadowhunter asked after a short silence.

Naraku didn't reply. She looked outside, where three moons slowly rose in the air. Clouds packed together. Tonight would be a rough and cold night; probably even a blizzard.

“I don't know...” Naraku finally admitted. “But... it seems I have no choice.”

Suddenly, tears appeared in her eyes, as she buried her face in Shadowhunter's fur. Trembling, Naraku cried, trying to make no sound at all. Whatever scenario had entered her mind, the Yami would always counter it. Starvation was a low, but very effective tactic. It was clear that size doesn't always matter.

She had no choice. She honestly had no choice left...

“You will stay in for the next few days.” Caron ordered.

“What?!” Keiran gasped and jumped from his bed. “I know I messed up, but that's no reason to...”

“Heck, it's not about that!” Caron sighed. “Look at the sky, what is it telling you?”

“Eh... clouds? Warm night?” Keiran tried.

Caron shook his head. “When will you ever learn, Keiran? These clouds predict a blizzard. Not a heavy one, but it will give you time to heal. It will be a while before The IceHunters can leave MorningSnow again. And then my boy, we will get them!”

“... I'm not a boy.”

“Yes, you are.”

Episode 156: Farewell MorningSnow

It took the weather five days to calm down. Silence filled MorningSnow, the valley and the forest. Damage was caused by nature. Some animals had succumbed and some trees had snapped in two. Still, this had only been a small blizzard. It could have been a lot worse...

"Does your chest still hurt?" Caron wondered, when Keiran stepped outside.

Keiran nodded. "Yes, but it's fading. Maybe they were bruised. Just as long as I won't laugh..."

"Don't worry." Caron looked at a broken tree. "There is nothing to laugh."

"Did something happen?" Keiran wondered.

Caron shook his head. "But something will happen soon. She has no choice left..."

Naraku stretched herself. She scratched herself and then Shadowhunter. However, she said no words. Not a single sound was made, as Naraku dressed herself. She placed her hand on the cold, frozen glass. Trying to look through the ice crystals, Naraku barely saw the valley. It was empty.

"Naraku! Naraku!" Ao's voice alarmed her, and she hurried outside. "I saw them!"

Naraku looked around. "What? What did you see?"

Downstairs on the courtyard, the others gathered as well. "Are we being attacked?" Mayonaka gasped.

Ao shook his head. "Come on, Naraku, we must hurry! This is our only chance!"

"What did you see?" Naraku wondered.

Ao pointed south. "Migrating boars!" He said, enthusiastically.

"That means it will be a lot colder soon..." Rain mumbled.

"Awe, come on, Naraku!" Ao smiled. "If we hurry, we can catch some of them! You know we need the meat!"

Naraku doubted. "It sounds great, Ao." She pondered. "But how can we carry them back?"

"The horses." Blade quickly thought. "They can get us there a lot faster and carry them back."

This wasn't an easy decision for Naraku. Horses or not, the Yami were still out there. "Naraku!" Kai urged her. "This is a blessing of the High Ones!"

"I sincerely doubt that..." Naraku mumbled. "But I do agree that this might be our only chance."

"Woohoo!" Ao cheered. "What are we waiting for?"

"You will stay, Ao." Naraku ordered.

"What? But I saw..." Ao tried.

"If the Yami attack, we need someone to defend this castle." Naraku reasoned.

"And I need you to stay here with me."

"Then who will go?" Sushi wondered.

Naraku quickly looked around. "Kai." She pointed at him. "His powers are best for short range defence. And Rain's water powers can be used with all the snow."

"All right!" Kai cheered. "Kai and the Rain-Master! Out on a journey!"

"And who will protect me from him?" Rain pointed at Kai.

“Blade, Mah-Lin...” Naraku turned to them. “We need the best hunters. Are you willing to go?”

“Always.” Blade smiled.

Mah-Lin nodded as well. “But what about you?” Mah-Lin wondered. “You are just as good as Blade is.”

Naraku nodded. “Yes, but the Yami will expect me to go along with you. And if needed, MorningSnow needs to be defended by long range magic. Water and Fire are short ranged.”

“All right then.” Rain smiled. “Let’s get the horses.”

While the others walked to the horses, Matsuru stopped Naraku. “Nara,” He started. “it’s about the horses.”

Naraku nodded. “I know.”

“We won’t have any more grass after tonight.” Matsuru still told her. “We have nothing left to feed the horses.”

“Don’t worry.” Naraku walked away. “I’ll do what I have to do.”

“Caron!” A young man ran into the camp. “Caron!”

Caron quickly came out of his shaggy home, followed by Keiran. “What?” He asked. “Is it about MorningSnow?”

The man nodded. “All right!” Keiran rejoiced. “MorningSnow, here we come!”

Caron tempered him. “What happened?”

The man showed it with his fingers. “Four of them left and took the seven horses along.”

“And the others?” Caron wondered.

“They stayed behind.”

“Who left?” Keiran asked curiously.

The man thought for a second. “The Water User, the Fire User, and that warrior couple. The ones who want to get married.”

“And Keiran, what does that say?” Caron asked him.

Keiran looked up. “That they are cowards?”

Caron sighed. “Oh please, you’ve got to be kidding!”

“What?” Keiran snapped back.

Caron turned around and walked back inside. “Just let me know when they return. It sounds like a hunt to me.”

The man nodded and turned around, but Keiran followed Caron inside. “How do you know that?” Keiran asked.

Caron sat down on a chair that was covered by a furry pelt, most likely a bear or a Snow Cat. “Two Magic Users and two hunters.” Caron explained. “They’ll use the horses to leave and return quickly. We could only harm the horses if we set a trap. Since we don’t know where they are heading, it’s most likely they’ll have a chance to restock today. You should be able to come to that conclusion by now.”

Keiran walked to Caron and leaned on the chair, staring him in the face. “Why do you always put me down?” He growled.

Caron looked straight at him. “I’m not putting you down.”

“Then why do you keep on treating me like a child?”

Caron stood up, tall as he was. “You studied for over thirty years, and you still haven’t learned basic observation.”

"I know a lot more than you think." Keiran mumbled, avoiding his eyes. "And it took you over thirty years as well!"

"But I had the luxury that I didn't have to study during war time." Caron replied. "I even slacked off! You don't have that luxury. I need you in battle and I need you now."

"But you don't trust me." Keiran replied harshly.

Caron smiled. "I saw you being born." He said. "And I won't let you pick your battles before you're ready for it."

"I am ready!" Keiran declared.

Caron shook his head. "No, you are not. But soon you will be." Keiran looked up surprised. "Call it basic observation, but something will happen. I can just feel that. Soon you'll be ready. And then you'll be the one I have to watch out for."

"Do you think I will betray you?" Keiran gasped. "I would never..."

Caron raised his hand. "You won't betray me." He smiled. "That is not in your nature. But soon you will have learned more than I have. And then I will have to consider who is more fit for leading this tribe."

"But you..." Keiran tried.

"I'll always do what is best for the tribe." Caron ended their discussion. "Even if it means handing over leadership to you."

Unaware of what was happening in the camp of the Yami, The IceHunters had trouble of their own. To save wood, the only room that was allowed a fire, was the throne room. "But my room will be so cold!" Sushi whimpered.

"Then you'll either sleep here or use an extra blanket." Naraku simply stated. "I don't know how else to save wood."

"Wait!" Ao suddenly jumped up. "The underground hot spring!"

"You wish to sleep there?" Mayonaka pondered. "Mm, it would be moist."

"No, no, no!" Ao waved his hands. "But right now, most of the warmth escapes from the stairway towards it. What if I made some sort of tunnel towards the throne room?"

Sushi jumped up and clapped in her hands. "Yes," She agreed. "That way the spring will warm the throne room. If that doesn't save wood, nothing will."

Naraku agreed. "Good thinking. Still, we can't use our limited supply for each and every room."

"Blade and Mah-Lin can share a room." Matsuru pointed out. It was as if a bomb exploded in the throne room. *Matsuru* was suggesting Blade and Mah-Lin would stay in the same room? Oh, if only Mah-Lin and Blade would have been here...

"...That could work..." Mayonaka finally spoke. "And Sushi and I could get a room as well."

Matsuru nodded. "So can Ao and I. That is, if you agree, Ao." Ao nodded. "That leaves Kai and Rain as roommates."

"Kai will love it; Rain will hate it." Sushi mumbled. "Is Kai in love with him?"

"Only his water powers." Ao explained. "Kaiyou was born out of two Water Users; it was expected he would get water powers as well. It was to everyone's surprise he ended up with fire. Rain has what Kai wants. And, of course, Kai is an idiot."

"That is true." Sushi nodded.

"I won't share a room." Clover immediately declared. "No way."

Sighing, the others agreed. "Naraku can share her room with the wolves." Mayonaka smiled. "That way we will use less rooms, and less wood." Now that all was talked through, Ao started on the airshaft from the underground spring to the throne room. Naraku remained in the throne room, worry carved into her face.

Ao's airshaft was finished during the evening. Exhausted, he put himself down on the Snow Cat-carpet near the fireplace. Warm air slowly streamed into the room and filled it. At this moment, the fire was still needed.

"Well, why are you so tired?" Clover sat down next to him. "Creating a tunnel isn't that hard, is it?" Gently, she pushed a strand of hair out of his face.

Ao smiled. He liked being with Clover. Though Clover was the one who took all the steps in their relation, he was happy. One day Clover would be ready for it and then Ao would ask her to be his girlfriend. He could wait. He was a patient man.

"Normal tunnels are easy." He said, touching her chin. "But I had to avoid the storage rooms, and still find the shortest way. It won't be the warmest air that comes here, but it will be above freezing point at least."

"I wonder how Naraku will feed the horses." Clover mumbled. "I'd hate to see them starve."

"Oh, you think about others nowadays?" Ao smiled.

Clover glared at him. "I am not selfish!" She hissed. "And no animal deserves a slow death, don't you think?" Ao could see in Clover's eyes she expected a quick answer, as well as an apology for his insult.

>They're back!<

Saved by the telepathic message, both Ao and Clover jumped up and ran to the courtyard. Both helped opening one of the heavy doors, and one by one the horses hurried onto the castle-grounds. When the last one entered, Ao and Clover closed the gate.

"People, we have *food!*" Kai cheered, proudly showing the seven boars tied to the horses.

Mayonaka clapped her hands together. "Praise the High Ones!" She exclaimed.

"This is enough for two weeks."

"Yeah, for us, but not the horses." Clover burst. With a glare, she turned to Naraku. "So, what is your plan, oh, mighty Chieftess? Let the horses starve?"

"Clover, calm down." Ao tried.

"No, I will not!" Clover hissed. "She didn't even *try* to get grass for them!"

Naraku walked to Clover, calmly. "Is that what you think?" She asked, her face filled with sadness.

Clover nodded. "That is what I think, yeah!"

"I see..." Naraku looked to the ground. "I waited till the last moment to tell you this." She whispered. "I already discussed this with the horses. And they agreed."

Naraku looked into the eyes of the others. "Tonight will be their last meal in MorningSnow."

"You want to kill them?!" Kai gasped.

"No!" Naraku immediately replied. "Of course not! But this is not their war. They shouldn't suffer for the insanity of humanity."

Blade turned white. "You... you mean... you are sending the horses away? You will send Dusk away?" Naraku nodded. "But... how could you? Dusk means everything to me!"

"We can't feed them anymore, Blade." Naraku tried to reason with him. "They'll starve if they stay here."

"But sending them away..." Blade shook his head in disbelief.

Naraku touched his face. "Don't think this decision was made lightly. Ever since I heard about the little supply for the horses, I tried to find a way. I even considered growing our own grass... but it just won't work, Blade. And it's unfair to let them starve for our stubbornness." She turned to the others. "I can only think of two ways to feed the horses. Surrendering MorningSnow so they can get out of here, or letting them go."

"But... but..." Matsu tried to think of something else. "We can let the horses go outside; they can find food there. And we can let them back in."

Naraku shook her head. "The Yami will find a way to use that to their advantage."

"But sending them away..." Mayonaka joined as well. "Isn't there...?"

"If they leave, we will have nine mouths less to worry about." Naraku said. "They are not the ones the Yami are after. If they go far away enough, they'll be safer than here and they can take care of themselves."

Even though no one wanted to admit it, Naraku made sense. Suddenly, Mayonaka looked up, curious. "Wait," she started. "Aren't there seven horses?"

Naraku swallowed and barely nodded. "The wolves will leave as well."

There. The word was out. Somehow, this was almost just as shocking as finding out Hane had died. Mouths dropped open and everyone wondered if they had heard this right. "I... I did not hear that." Mah-Lin gasped.

"How... how could you?" Matsu yelled, astounded. "You... you want to send Shadowhunter away?"

Naraku nodded and felt a nudge of Shadowhunter's nose. >Naraku not like Shadowhunter?< She barely got it out of her mind.

Naraku knelt before Shadowhunter. "Oh, Shadowhunter... don't think this is easy for me." Her voice trembled. "But... you two are not who the Yami want."

>I help!< Shadowhunter tried.

"And you'd be a great help as well!" Naraku agreed. "But... but..." Speaking became too hard for her, so she continued using telepathy. >If one of the humans leaves, the Yami will capture them. They will be used as hostages. But wolves and horses... I don't think they know their value.<

>We not leave.< Grasshopper put her paw down. >Stay in forest, and hunt for friends!<

Naraku shook her head. >You need to leave.< A small tear rolled over her cheek, while she pushed the others away. >You can outrun the Yami. Help the horses find a safe place. And protect them... for me.<

Naraku embraced the black wolf, trying not to cry. The others didn't know what to say or do. Naraku had really considered all options. But sending Shadowhunter away... was to send away half of her soul. They were more than best friends, they were soulmates. Shadowhunter meant the world to Naraku, no matter what the past of the wolf or the girl was.

There was no other option left...

After filling their stomachs with the last grass and hay, the horses and wolves gathered at the gate. Nobody was afraid to show their tears. This was more than just a goodbye; they were sending away half of the tribe. Half of who they were. Naraku was right: the Yami didn't care about the horses, nor the wolves. They only attacked humans. Only Shadowhunter and Grasshopper managed to reach the castle unharmed.

"Find a safe place." Sushi cried and embraced the horses.

"One with lots of grass." Blade ordered Dusk.

The only one who didn't cry, was Clover. "And don't you dare getting hurt." For Clover, this was the closest to an emotional goodbye you could get. "I want to see you all in a couple of months again."

Mayonaka agreed. "Because we *will* win this war and then you *will* return!" The princess ordered. "Stay close to MorningSnow, but as far away from the forest as possible."

"We will keep on gathering grass." Ao dried his eyes. "So, when you return, you can eat for days straight."

With pain in their hearts, the horses were waved goodbye as they walked to the gates. "This is what is best for them." Matsu tried to convince himself, repeating himself over and over again. "This is what is best."

"Wait!" Naraku suddenly yelled and the horses and wolves stopped. Naraku dropped to the floor and grabbed Shadowhunter with all her might. Whatever she wanted to say, she couldn't say it. >Stay safe, Shadowhunter. Protect them... protect them all!<

>I will.< Shadowhunter replied.

Now, it was time to go. Naraku opened her arms, but she couldn't stand up. All she could see, was her soulmate leaving through the gates, into the snow-white night.

With heavy hearts, Rain and Mah-Lin closed the gates. Immediately Naraku jumped up, found back some strength and ran to the battlement. Reaching it, she saw the horses gaining speed and running southwards from MorningSnow. Their hooves sounded like soft thunder, as they vanished in the night. And Naraku... Naraku threw her head into the air, howling like a wolf. Her voice pierced through the night, cutting it in half.

Mere seconds later, the howl was already answered, by a voice already further away than Naraku wished. And then... gone. The voice died out in the night and Naraku knew the animals were beyond the reach of her voice. The only comfort she had, was that they would be safe now...

Suddenly, Naraku turned around and ran towards her room. The slamming of the door betrayed her true feelings. While it was already hard for the others, it was eventually Naraku who had to make this decision.

In the forest, Caron listened to the report. "Wait, the horses and wolves left? That's odd..."

"Why would they do that, Caron?" The reporter wondered.

"They're not giving up..." Keiran mumbled.

"What?" Caron asked.

Keiran looked up. “You already told me that they hardly had food left for the horses. So, they send away the horses. Now they don’t have to worry about them anymore.”

“And the wolves?” The reporter liked to know.

Keiran thought for a moment. “Horses and wolves can take care of themselves, and they know we’re not interested in them. Either the wolves were just sent away, or... actually... I actually think they were sent along as protectors.”

“And less mouths to worry about.” Caron nodded. “It seems The IceHunters won’t give up without a fight, and they don’t want to pull along innocent beings.” Silence filled the room, and not knowing what else to do, the reporter left. Since Caron seemed to be lost in thoughts, Keiran decided to leave him alone. Silently, he walked towards the door.

“What are they fighting for?” Keiran mumbled. “It’s not even theirs...”

Caron observed the young man leaving the room. “You sure surprised me once again, young Chieftess...” He mumbled. “But you are not the only one... It seems this boy is finally turning into a man...”

In her room, Naraku cried her heart out. She buried her face into Matsu’s lap, who had come to comfort her. On her other side, Blade touched her hair, as he tried to find a way to calm her down, to find the right words. But how can you find the right words in a situation like this?

“My heart...” Naraku cried. “It hurts so much! It feels like someone ripped it out...” She sobbed. “I know it was the best thing to do...” Her voice trembled and stammered. “But I just want her back! I want Shadowhunter back!”

Episode 157: So now you know...

The castle felt empty. Uncomfortable, all tried to do their chores. Rain sharpened some arrows, while Kai made a new bow. They didn't have to speak to share their feelings. Everyone felt the same.

Two days ago, they sent away the horses and the wolves. Ever since, Naraku had locked herself in her room.

They knew why. Naraku was separated from Shadowhunter; she couldn't imagine a worse fate. She didn't seem to care anymore. Shadowhunter was everything to her. The one who hunted with her and always knew what she felt. Childhood friends... literally. While the humans and Elves in her life had educated her, Shadowhunter was the first who had showed her friendship. And she loved her... loved her more than she could even imagine. Nobody could ever fill that hole.

Naraku kept on convincing herself that this was only temporary. All they had to do, was simply win the war, so the horses and wolves could return. She could see Shadowhunter again, just like when she went to the Mountain of the High Ones. No... It was different, because right now... Naraku didn't know where Shadowhunter was.

"Did you feel that?" Kai looked up.

Rain looked up surprised. "Huh, what?"

"I thought..." Kai started. "Could Ao be using magic?"

Rain pondered. "You felt magic being used?" Kai nodded. "Mm, maybe Ao is using magic. Could be. Could be Naraku as well."

"Actually..." Kai admitted. "I'm not sure. It felt so faint..."

'Awe... poor child...'

"Oh, great, not you again." Naraku growled, laying on her bed. "I can just *taste* your sarcasm."

'It seems they still haven't taught you to respect your mother.'

"Matsuru and Blade raised me." Naraku raised a finger, speaking into thin air. "You just tried to kill me." Naraku rolled over, but the voice kept lingering. Naraku knew she couldn't be sent away either. This voice... it belonged to her 'mother'. "Besides, I thought you hated to be called my mother."

'Yes, you are a disgrace, I admit.'

"And I love you too." Naraku sighed. "High Ones, why do you keep on pestering me?"

'Funny that you still swear by those who created you.'

Naraku raised herself. "Yunakara, what the hell do you want?" She sighed deeply.

'My, my, what a sigh.' Yunakara said telepathically. *'We haven't spoken for over eight months.'*

"And I so enjoyed the peace." Naraku stepped out of her bed. "Don't talk as if you care about me. What are you doing in my mind anyway?"

Yunakara hesitated. *'The others were worried. Not me of course. They wanted me to cheer you up.'*

Naraku was surprised. "Then they are probably not seeing this."

'Of course not.' Yunakara bluntly admitted. *'No way I will ever cheer you up.'*

Naraku sighed, got up and got dressed. Yunakara was her mother, kind of anyway. To prevent that their ever-growing magic would drive them crazy, the High Ones had put their abundance of magic in a human soulless vessel. Everyone expected it to die, but this vessel accidentally stumbled on Matsuru... and he named her Naraku. While eleven High Ones were curious to see how Naraku would develop, Yunakara was the only one who was convinced Naraku would turn to Black Magic and destroy Seken.

Yunakara had tried everything to stop Naraku. She sent her best killer after Naraku, but Naraku answered that by naming this wolf Shadowhunter. Then Yunakara noticed that Lord Zashjan wanted Naraku, no matter what. She placed her hopes on this wizard and secretly aided him in his search, hoping he would kill Naraku. She would take care of Lord Zashjan herself afterwards. The other High Ones would never object to that.

But when Naraku won the battle and destroyed Lord Zashjan, the other High Ones were rejoiced! Their little Naraku... she grew so much! Angry, Yunakara tried to warn the others. Naraku was dangerous! Why couldn't they see that? Why was she the only one seeing that?

Still, as long as she would stay in MorningSnow, Naraku couldn't be harmed. Using the Desert King as an excuse, she helped Ancule reach MorningSnow. Yunakara knew Naraku could never resist a new adventure. And yes, she bit the bait!

Lord Juras was a perfect pawn, as well as Ancule's stiff mind. She had planned it carefully... but once again she was defeated by the one she had helped creating. The desert, the Sand Dragon, Lord Akar of the Council... she really tried everything! But the more she threw at Naraku, the prouder the other High Ones became of her. Each time Naraku proved she wanted to resist Black Magic. But she couldn't! Naraku couldn't resist Black Magic! Yunakara was certain of that!

"Why are you so silent?" Naraku asked curious. "Did you leave?"

'Sorry to disappoint you. Still here. I was just thinking... the others... they don't know what you are, do they?'

"Only Clover, Ao, Rain and Kai don't know yet." Naraku admitted. "Apple and Snowdance do know. But they don't care."

'True.' Yunakara sounded like she was plotting something. How Naraku wished she could see her face, to see the one who tried to make her life miserable. *'I wonder how they will react.'*

"They will understand it." Naraku was determined.

'Oh, will they?' Yunakara teased. *'All Magic Users know the rule of life: magic wants to grow. And if it gets the chance, one will absorb the other.'*

"I am not like that!" Naraku yelled.

'Oh, I know that.' Naraku did not believe her. At all. *'But think about dear Rayne. His parents were killed by Lord Zashjan.'*

"He doesn't know that." Naraku warned Yunakara. "And you won't tell him either!" *'Now why would I want to do that?'* Yunakara tried to sound innocent.

"Because you hate me." Naraku was done with this woman. What she had ever done wrong to that woman was unclear to her. Oh wait, she did know what she did wrong: she didn't die.

Yunakara was silent. *'Thank you for the idea!'* She then said.

“No!” Naraku forbade her. “You won’t tell him! And you won’t tell the others I’m a High One as well!”

‘A whaaaaat?’ Yunakara gasped, flabbergasted. *‘You are not a High One!’*

“I am created out of High One Magic!” Naraku threw back. “You even gave me the title ‘Secret Child of the High Ones!’”

‘I did not!’ Yunakara immediately replied. *‘That was Cecia!’*

“Whatever.” Naraku walked to the door. “You won’t tell them!”

‘Give me one good reason...’

“Because I will tell them, right now!” Naraku stormed out of the door and slammed it shut. There was no response to what Naraku had said and the girl tried to keep herself from getting angry. Yunakara... She always tried to drive her crazy. Naraku had to stay rational, she just had to.

A small moment of weakness and Naraku could lose control, which could result in Black Magic taking over. Naraku knew that was something Yunakara wanted, so she would have the perfect excuse to kill Naraku.

However, Naraku would prove Yunakara her friends *would* understand it and that she could be trusted.

‘Yunakara one point, Naraku zero points and about to lose everything.’

“Hey, Naraku!” Rain got up. “Are you okay? You look upset.”

“I *am* upset!” Naraku blurted out. “Everyone must gather in the throne room, but first I need a few minutes to cool down.”

“Eh... okay...” Kai put down the finished bow. He followed Rain inside, while in the corner of their eyes, they saw Naraku trying to calm down. “Why do I have such a typical cliché ominous feeling?”

“Because you’re an idiot.” Rain sighed. “Let’s get the others.”

When everyone had gathered in the throne room, they talked about Naraku, who had yet to come. “She looked angry.” Kai told the others.

“She *was* angry.” Rain corrected him, unimpressed. “I don’t know why, though.”

“Maybe a magical experiment got messed up?” Kai pondered.

“What do you mean?” Matsuru wondered.

Rain shrugged. “Kai said he noticed something weird, as if magic was faintly used.”

All eyes went to Ao. “I didn’t do anything. I was with Clover.”

Sushi’s eyes narrowed. “And what were you doing with her?”

Clover bumped in-between. “Kicking his butt in training!”

Ao was stunned... Was Clover defending him? Ah, another moment lost in bliss...

Sushi backed off when she saw Clover’s eyes. Not because she was afraid, but because she was curious.

>If Ao and Clover would have trained,< She said telepathically to Mayonaka.

>wouldn’t they look as if they would have trained?<

Mayonaka agreed. >True... but why would Clover lie?<

>I know you are using telepathy!< Clover snapped telepathically. >I can feel it!<

At that moment, the doors of the throne room slammed open. All eyes turned, looking at Naraku stomping inside. Everyone could see she hadn’t calmed down. Magically, the heavy doors closed behind her.

"Nope, it didn't feel like that." Kai concluded. "It was someone else who used magic."

"High Ones prevent me from doing anything stupid..." Naraku hissed. "Hell, what am I talking about, as if they care!"

"Eh... Nara-nenha?" Sushi tried, hoping the use of the Seken word for 'friend' would calm her down.

Blade stepped back. "I have a feeling that..."

Matsuru joined him. "I'm feeling the same..." He admitted.

"She'd better not bring it up while she is like this..." Mah-Lin had the same feeling.

"Naraku, please think before you act." Mayonaka joined her.

Naraku balled her fists. She breathed heavily; in and out, as she tried to calm down. While the others had a feeling they knew what she was about to share, Ao, Clover, Rain and Kai, were still unaware.

Naraku inhaled once more. "I am fine, I am fine..." She repeated to herself. "I won't let my emotions get the best of me."

"Good girl..." Blade carefully stepped to her. "Breathe in, breathe out..."

"I think hitting you might calm me down even faster!" Naraku snapped. Blade immediately did a step back.

Matsuru gambled and stepped towards Naraku. "Just a guess but... she's back?"

Naraku looked him into the eyes. Suddenly tears filled her own and she broke down. "Why?" She screamed. "Why can't she just leave me alone? I just can't take it anymore!"

Mah-Lin gasped. "Don't say that out loud!" She warned her. "What if she hears you?"

"Let that woman hear me!" Naraku looked to the ceiling. "I want her and the others to know, that *she* will be responsible for my downfall. Cheering me up, like hell she did!" Naraku banged her fists onto the ground.

Silence filled the throne room. Slowly, Naraku managed to calm down. It took her a moment, a long moment, but eventually, Naraku got back up... more or less calm.

"Well," Blade put his arm around her shoulder. "I guess there's no time as the present, right?"

Naraku nodded. "No matter what she has said, she was right about one thing... they have the right to know. Especially one of them."

These words surprised even those who had travelled along to the desert. One person in particular? What did she mean by that? All sat down, while Naraku remained standing. It was easy to notice this was not going to be easy for her to say. "It's okay." Mayonaka smiled, trying to encourage her.

Naraku nodded. "What I shall tell you, is not something I expect you to understand easily." She whispered.

Kai smirked. "There is nothing I won't understand." He joked and poked Rain.

"Trust me." Sushi said back. "This will even manage to shut you up."

"That heavy?" Ao gasped.

"Even heavier." Naraku interrupted. "You see... well... eh... Rain, remember that day you looked for my past?"

The young man nodded. "But... I found nothing." He recalled.

Naraku scratched the back of her head. "You couldn't be more right... You see... I don't have a past. In the literal sense of the meaning."

It was the first big shock that went through the room. Kai got up, ready to say something, but sat down again.

Naraku continued. "Actually, you all guessed my age was around sixteen years old, right?"

"Yes, because you still grow." Rain managed to push out.

Naraku nodded. "I'm not sixteen. I'm eh... three years, five months, two weeks and three days old."

Kai jumped up, with his finger raised high, but he sank down once more. All the others could do, was simply gasp. Even the others were once again impressed. Still, not everything had been told. The 'worst' had yet to come. "You see... I was... kind of born the day I met Maturu."

Kai jumped up again, with his finger raised high once more. All expected silence, but this time he managed to push out some words. "How can you be three years old and still be this... this... blessed?!" He pushed his hands forward, looking at Naraku's body. "This is crazy!"

Naraku stepped back, embarrassed. "Ha, ha..." She laughed, but it sounded fake. "You want to know who my parents are?"

"You know who your parents are?" Ao jumped up as well. "How cool! Do they live in the desert?"

"She says she's three years old!" Kai pointed once more at Naraku. "Three-year-old girls do *not* have... they don't have *that* yet!"

"Please, calm down!" Naraku tried. "Please, sit down again." A part of her was afraid to continue. The others had not responded like this the first time when they heard it. Ao and Kai... they reacted so differently!

Kai protested, but Ao simply pushed him down. "Please, continue." Rain replied like he hadn't noticed Kai's outburst.

Naraku looked to the ground. "This is not easy for me." She admitted. "But you see... eh... you know that if you don't use your magic, it will turn against you?" The others nodded. "And that magic always grows?"

"But what has that to do with you?" Clover said softly. She too must have been amazed. "Is your magic growing so fast you can't control it anymore?"

Naraku shook her head. "No... but there is a group of people who do have that problem. And once in a while, they combine their abundance of magic into a vessel, leaving it behind to die." Naraku's voice turned to whispers. "I just didn't die..."

Moments passed while the people around her tried to grasp what was being said. But again, this was just shock two! Number three and four had yet to come.

Clover suddenly folded her arms. "So, you are a big chunk of magic..." She carelessly said.

Naraku nodded. A part of her was surprised Clover seemed to take it this lightly.

Then again, Clover was someone she had trouble understanding.

"Created by a group of wizards?" Rain asked for confirmation.

"A bit higher classified than that." Naraku played with her fingers.

"What's higher than a wizard?" Ao liked to know.

"The High Ones."

Ah, shock number three. Kai jumped up, pointed at Naraku, but no matter how hard he tried, no sound came out. Ao simply lay down onto the floor. He said he did that so he wouldn't hurt himself. Rain's mouth fell open and Clover seemed indifferent. It

probably hadn't reached her yet. After all, you don't hear every day your Chieftess is a creation of the High Ones... Living proof the High Ones existed and can create life! Naraku wondered if she should mention Yunakara as well. No, not today. That would be too much for them. Then they would know that Naraku was part of a battle between gods. Also, it would make Yunakara seem like she was an evil goddess. In the eyes of those before her, the High Ones were pure beings. Whatever they did, they never made mistakes.

It was already hard for the others to accept this, but they were also convinced that Naraku's life had a higher meaning. Maybe Yunakara pretended to be mean, so Naraku would become stronger and would keep on resisting Black Magic. The High Ones don't make mistakes. Everything they do, has a meaning. Even Maturu and Blade firmly believed that, no matter what Yunakara would throw at Naraku. Naraku was the only one who didn't believe it. After all... she was technically a goddess as well.

Rain stood up and turned around. "I have a headache..." He simply excused himself, walking to the door.

"Rain, wait!" Naraku stopped him.

Rain turned around, looking at this fragile girl. "What?" He asked. "What more do you want to tell? That the High Ones are not who they claim to be?"

Naraku shook her head. "Believe in the High Ones." She urged him. "Even though I am a mistake in someone's eyes, they allow me to keep on living on Seken, as long as I won't use my magic for evil." That wasn't a lie.

"I need to lay down." Rain turned around.

"This isn't easy for me, Rain!" Naraku went after him, but Rain didn't listen. "I know what happened to your parents!"

Shock number four. Rain jolted around, as the others gasped. Even Blade and Maturu didn't know about this! "What did you just say?" Rain hissed.

"For all I care you can think the High Ones sent me here to tell you this." Naraku stood there, with hands clasped together. "And to free them from their deadly hell. I don't know why I am still here. Only one High One doesn't like seeing me alive, but the others do want to see what I can become."

"Don't mess with me!" Rain yelled. "A Hunter took my parents! He stole them away from me, leaving me behind! If I had discovered my powers back then, he would have taken me along, and then I would have at least rested in peace with my parents!" Rain remembered the days when he was a young child, losing his parents. He didn't understand what happened. All he knew, was that there was a Hunter after them, and one day... his parents had suddenly vanished.

"If you would have been taken along..." Naraku still stood there, with eyes filled with pain and hands as if she was praying. "...then your powers would have been used against me. Then you would have been trapped in the same hell as your parents."

Naraku saw Rain couldn't believe this. He started trembling. His whole life he had convinced his parents were resting in peace and now... "The Hunter took them to Lord Zashjan, Rain..." Naraku finally told him. "When I broke his necklace, the spirits he had taken to enrich his magic, were finally freed."

"When magic is stolen, the souls get rest!" Rain screamed. What she was saying couldn't be true!

Naraku shook her head. “Not in the case of Lord Zashjan. The spirits were captured in his necklace, the Eye of the Demons, trapped forever, to feed his powers. But they are free now! And I just know they are watching over you.”

Rain tried to grab the handle of the door, still looking at Naraku. Sweat poured over his body; he had to get out of here! This wasn't true! This wasn't true! This was an evil nightmare! His faith in the High Ones, the only peace he had about his parents... It was all crushed in a single moment! Just a single freaking moment!

“Rain...” Naraku tried, but Rain finally managed to grab the handle and pushed against the door.

“Rain...” Kai tried as well, but he could understand Rain. He too was shaken by all of this. His Chieftess was a product of the eternal gods of this planet... But Rain was his best friend; he had to do something!

However, no matter how hard Rain tried, he couldn't get the door open. The fact he was trying to push against a door that should have been pulled, was something his brains could not comprehend anymore. Rain could have used his magic to let the door burst open, draining all water from the wood, but all Rain could think about, was getting away from Naraku.

Finally, the panic took its toll and the handle slipped from his hands. Slowly, the young man slid down on the ground, until the others realised it was not Rain's choice to collapse!

“Rain!” Kai gasped and ran to the man. He touched his body, turning him around, finding a face wet from tears and sweat. “High Ones, he has a fever!” Kai concluded, looking at his fainted best friend.

While the others rushed to him, Naraku didn't move. She knew this wasn't a normal fever. It was a fever she had caused. This was the way his body reacted to the immense panic she had caused.

She couldn't blame him if he hated her now.

And at this moment... Naraku hated herself more than anything.

Episode 158: No matter what...

Kai didn't want to leave Rain's side, no matter what. A day and a night had passed. The fever hadn't gone down, and to add to that, the young Water User was being haunted by nightmares. Naraku hadn't visited his room. Kai would have never let her in anyway.

What she had done to his best friend... Kaiyou didn't care Rain didn't see him like he saw Rain. Maybe Kai was overreacting. Maybe he was overdoing it. In Kai's eyes, his antics were done in good fun.

While Kai was indeed jealous of Rain, he admired him as well. Kai's parents were magnificent Water Users, so everyone had expected Kai would wield water as well. They named him after the ocean, Kaiyou, but instead of putting out fires, Kai started them! Oh, his parents were supportive of him. They helped him control his powers and did the best they could, but Kai kept on feeling out of place.

When he went out into the world, Kai discovered his gift of remembering every story he had ever heard, which managed to cheer him up. And when he found a forest with a plant that could kill humans, Kai thought he had found his place.

However, that wasn't his place. His place was here, in MorningSnow, at Rain's side. Not thinking about his own shaken faith in the High Ones, all he could think about was what Naraku had done to Rain.

In the courtyard, Naraku wandered around. She tried avoiding Ao, Clover and Rain and Kai. It was easy to avoid Rain and Kai. Besides, was there anything she could do to help? The fever that Rain had was caused by her, a physical response to his crushed faith. This was something she couldn't heal.

'Well done, sweetie.'

Naraku let Yunakara's comment wash over her. Yunakara had been right: she had gambled, and she had lost. Ao and Clover might forgive her one day, but Kai and Rain... No, they would never forgive her.

>Give it time.< Naraku suddenly heard and looked around. On the battlement she spotted Blade and Mah-Lin, hand in hand. The smile on their faces encouraged her, but Naraku couldn't help but feel miserable.

"Hey, Naraku!" Naraku turned around, and surprised she saw Ao walking to her. Naraku looked to the ground. "Yes?" She asked, uncertain.

Ao looked to the ground as well. "Is there something on the ground?" He joined Naraku. Surprised, Naraku looked up. "Well, you suddenly looked at the floor; did you lose anything?" A smile on his face betrayed Ao was joking.

Naraku released a soft chuckle. "No, not that..." She admitted.

"I won't deny it will take some time getting used to." Ao suddenly said. "But thus far you never tried to harm us, and I trust you that you won't start doing that. Sushi trusts you, which means I trust you."

"Clover, Kai and Rain don't." Naraku murmured sadly.

Ao grinned. "Clover trusts me, so don't worry about that. She doesn't want to admit it, but she's quite... surprised as well."

"Clover trusts you?" Naraku looked up, seeing Ao nod. "When did that happen?"

Ao sweated, uneasy. "Eh... eh... you see, we eh... it's very complicated."

Naraku smiled. "I see." She didn't press on. Ao would share it with her when he would be ready. "Can I help you?" She then asked, referring to why he called her. Ao blushed. "I eh... I hope you don't mind but eh... I have some questions." Naraku had already expected this. She had hoped all shared the same sentiment, but apparently Ao was alone in this. "Sure, ask away." She smiled. Ao nodded. "So... your parents are the High Ones?" Naraku nodded. "Only two of them, or all of them?" Naraku looked up, thinking for a moment. "I think all of them. Six mothers and six fathers." "Ah, so there are twelve High Ones." Ao pondered. "But... how did you... how were you created? Did they... you know?" Naraku blushed. "I don't know!" She admitted. "As far as I know, they simply gathered their magic and created a human vessel." "But why a human?" Ao asked. "Why not an Elf, or a rabbit?" Naraku shrugged. "I think humans are considered the weakest species. They need others to survive." "But why a grown girl, instead of a baby?" Ao continued. Naraku hadn't thought about that yet. "Well, maybe it appeals more to take care of a baby than of a grown girl. Maybe they expected that if other humans would find me, they wouldn't try and raise me and just consider me crazy." "Mm, you might have a point." Ao added. "So, what can you do?" "The question is more, what can't I do?" Naraku fidgeted with her hair. This shocked Ao. "I'm sorry." He apologised. "I just need some time getting used to this. After all, you don't hear every day your Chieftess is a goddess." "If it makes you feel better, I'd rather be a human." Naraku admitted. What followed, was an awkward silence. Naraku could feel Ao had more questions burning on his lips, but that he didn't want to overflow her with his curiosity. "YOU!" Naraku and Ao suddenly jolted. Naraku looked up, and saw Kai pointing at her. "Come!" He ordered. "Hey!" Ao defended her. "Show some respect to..." Naraku stopped him. "It's okay." She said. "I'll come, Kai." "Good!" Kai huffed and stomped back. "But still..." Ao started. "you are his Chieftess." "You can't force someone to respect you." Naraku stated. "That is something you have to earn."

Inside Rain's room, Kai's mood turned from angry to meek. "He's still having nightmares." Kai whispered. "I know..." Naraku replied. "Can't you do anything for him?" Kai asked. "You are a goddess, right? You can do anything." Naraku nodded. "I am indeed a goddess... but it wouldn't be right to force my help upon him. I already caused this." "Still... can't you chase the nightmares away?" Kai's eyes were filled with emotion. Naraku shook her head. "He has to do this himself, no matter how much I want to help him. I can only do so little. You, on the other hand, can do so much more." "Me?" Kai was surprised. "What can I do?"

“You can stay with him... and talk to him when he wakes up.” Naraku suggested. “Because he will need a friend when he wakes up.”

Kai paused, but then nodded. “I’m not sure about my own feelings just yet.” Kai admitted. “A part of me is so proud, because I know a High One... but the other part...”

“I understand.” Naraku said and left the room. She softly closed the door behind her. *‘Oh, how wisely solved...’*

“Yunakara, leave me alone or I will use my magic to silence you.”

‘You can’t do that!’

“It worked with Lord Juras so it’ll probably also work with you.” Naraku threatened. *‘Fine, have it your way.’* Yunakara ended. *‘But I am curious: what will happen first? Will Rain die of fever, or he will die from hunger?’*

“Hunger?” Naraku looked up. “What do you mean?”

‘Bye, Naraku.’

“Wait!” But silence was all she got. “Fine, be that way!” She hissed.

Mayonaka rubbed her arms, while small clouds escaped from her mouth. “Why did you ask me to come with you?” She wondered, trying to warm herself.

Naraku looked at the storage. “How many days do you think we have left before we’ve run out of meat?”

Mayonaka looked around. “A week or so?” She guessed.

“Okay, thanks for clearing that up.” Naraku thanked her and left the storage room.

Mayonaka followed her. “What?” She gasped. “That was all you wanted to know?”

Naraku turned around during her climb. “Mayonaka, I know you will disagree with me, but I will get out and get some food.”

“Food is good.” Mayonaka stated.

“Alone.” Naraku added.

“That is not good.”

“Go tell the others.” Naraku waved at her. “I’m going to change.”

Naraku continued her climb on the stairs from the storage room to the courtyard, and with her hand she reached out to the handle. Suddenly the door got pulled open and a voice yelled right into her face. “ARE YOU CRAZY?!” Blade yelled at her.

Naraku looked back at Mayonaka. “I’m impressed.” She said to the dark-skinned princess.

“I panicked!” Mayonaka defended herself. “I had to use telepathy!”

Naraku ignored Blade and saw the others came running as well. The only ones who didn’t come, were Rain and Kai (for obvious reasons). “No room for discussion, people.” Naraku stated, but the others followed her.

“It is suicide!” Matsuru told her.

“That’s why I don’t want to drag anyone else into this hunt.” Naraku decided. “There are no wolves to protect you and you asked me to keep my powers hidden, so they won’t know what I am capable of.”

“But we can go along.” Mah-Lin tried.

Naraku walked the stairs to her room, still being trailed by everyone. “They know we need food. I expect them to put up traps.”

“I don’t have to hide my magic; I can go along.” Ao threw back.

Naraku shook her head. "No, Ao, you need to stay here and protect the castle if needed. Kai and Rain are out of the game right now, so you are the only defence left." She opened the door. "And now I'm going to change, so please, stay outside."

"Try and keep me out." Clover snapped.

"I'm going to hide your clothes!" Sushi added, grabbing every piece of fabric in sight.

"We won't let you go." Mayonaka added as well.

Mah-Lin agreed. "You will not pass."

Naraku sighed as she closed the door. Magically, she pulled the clothes out of Sushi's hands. "I won't let you have them!" Sushi screamed, grabbing the floating clothes.

With her magic, Naraku captured the girls in a magical sphere. Calmly, she undressed and put her hunting clothes on. "This is not fair!" Mah-Lin screamed.

"Don't do this, Naraku." Mayonaka tried. "It's not worth it."

Naraku took her sword. "I don't want to see my friends suffer." She ignored them and walked to the door.

"Let me out of here!" Sushi pounded on the sphere.

"We'll find another way." Mayonaka tried.

"There is no other way." Naraku opened the door and walked out of her room. "The girls might need a hand." She said to the boys.

The boys looked back, spotting the girls in the sphere. Realising the girls were safe, they ignored them, following Naraku. "I won't let you leave this castle." Blade hissed.

"Blade, get your butt back here and get me out of here!" Mah-Lin screamed from Naraku's room.

"Not now, honey!" Blade yelled back.

Magically, Naraku captured everyone, except for Matsu, in another sphere. "I will protect you all, no matter what." Naraku said stubbornly. "I have a better chance alone. I can outrun them. I don't want to risk losing any of you." Her eyes went to Matsu. "And you?" She asked. "Will you try and stop me as well?"

Matsu doubted, looking to the ground. "I can't." He whispered. "You want to do this on your own, and without or with force, you will leave here. I just pray this isn't a mistake."

Naraku looked to the ground as well, but then looked up with a smile. "I'll bring home food." She promised. "Maybe not much, but I will take what I can."

Naraku walked to the gate, taking a large bag along for her preys. "Stop her, Mat!"

Blade banged on the sphere. "Don't just stand there! Stop her!"

"Blade!" Mah-Lin screamed again.

"NOT NOW!" Blade yelled back. "Matsu, I swear..."

Naraku glanced back, raising her hand. Matsu did the same, even though it was breaking his heart, waving her goodbye. With her powers, Naraku opened the gate, and soon it closed behind her again. It seemed so simple...

To Matsu it felt like his little girl was not only growing up, but also that he was losing her... No, he wasn't losing her. That would never happen.

"Mat!" Blade yelled at him. "How could you?"

"Let's get you guys out of there..." Matsu ignored his friend. "But Blade will be last. Who will protect me from him?"

"He will first have to face me!" Mah-Lin's voice sounded from Naraku's room.

Calmly, Naraku crossed the valley. Her feet crunched the snow softly, making little sound. 'Let them see me.' Naraku challenged them. 'Let them see and know I am no coward, and that I will do anything for my tribe. This is my challenge. Try and catch me!'

Caron listened to the report. "Well done, Voyce." He said to his tribe member and excused him.

"Huh?" Keiran asked. "You're not going to attack? She's alone!"

Caron smiled. "She's challenging me, Keiran. She wants to be attacked, so she can slip through our fingers."

"Yes, I know." Keiran surprised Caron with his response. "But she's alone; if we set a trap, we can have MorningSnow before nightfall!"

"Keiran, she expects us to move." Caron said back. "Right now she's ready for anything."

Keiran sighed and sat onto the table. "Then are we just going to let her go?"

"Nah!" Caron jumped up and slammed on Keiran's back. "We'll just let her hunt and cut her off on the way back. I hope she will catch a squirrel. It has been a while since I had that. Do we still have that sauce?"

"Caron, I will never understand you." Keiran sighed.

"Good!" Caron smiled. "That will mean she won't understand me either."

Naraku packed a squirrel in her bag, looking around. Why was it so silent around her? Yes, she knew she was being observed. It was one thing she had picked up in the past few weeks, but why didn't they make a move? She was all alone!

Maybe Caron would think this was a trap. No, how could they think she was trying to trick them? Maybe the fact she was alone was what made them cautious.

Curious, Naraku tried to find anything the Yami left behind. She knelt, looking for traps. "I hope to find more soon..." She whispered. "We don't have much left..."

Suddenly the feeling that she was being observed was gone. The Yami that had been following her was off to report again. Not wasting any time, Naraku set off to hunt for more preys. What she had now, was barely enough for a day.

"All right, I'm going after her!" Blade decided and took his sword.

"No, you won't." Matsuru forbade him.

Blade gasped. "What?" He yelled. "Nara is all alone out there!"

"I know." Matsuru admitted. "But this is her fight. She will return. Just believe in her."

Blade lowered his sword. "I believe in her." He admitted. "But I don't trust those stinking Yami!"

"She sounds sincere." Voyce reported again.

Caron nodded. "Well, she probably isn't lying. What makes me wonder, is why she said it out loud."

"Eh, whispered." Voyce corrected him.

Caron started thinking. "She wants a challenge. That is her trap. She thinks she can easily escape and mock us."

"Mocking us?" Keiran mumbled. "Is that a trap?"

“Between leaders and tribes, it’s a vital thing.” Caron told. “What happens today will be important.”

“What should I do?” Voyce wondered.

Caron pondered. “If we make a move, one of the two leaders shall get mocked. If we don’t make a move, they will restock and still mock us.”

“So, we lose either way.” Keiran mumbled. “Unless we mock her.”

Caron stood up. “Keiran, what would you do?”

Keiran was flabbergasted! Caron asked *him* for advice? “Wah?” He started.

“That doesn’t sound very strong.” Caron grinned.

“Eh...” Keiran thought fast. “I’d say we accept her challenge. And we’ll win.”

“How can you be certain we can win?” Caron wondered.

Keiran looked up strong. “Because we are Yami.” Keiran said with pride. “We are stronger than some little girl!”

Caron turned around, nodding. “Let it be your hunt.” He decided.

Keiran softly pounded on his chest with his fist. “I won’t fail!” He proudly declared.

“I will show you what I’m made of!”

“The same flesh and blood I’m made of.” Caron smiled. “Which means the real Yami spirit is in there.”

“And today it will come out!” Keiran replied. “I won’t let her get the best of me.”

“So be it, Keiran, so be it.” Caron ended and saw Keiran go. “Just be careful, little brother...” He whispered.

The three moons were rising slowly, and quickly Naraku put a rabbit into the sack. The gain of the hunt was small but should help them last at least another day. Each day was something they cherished, as well as their precious food.

“Good evening, young lady.”

Naraku turned around. “You’re not Caron.” Naraku noticed.

Keiran’s entrance was completely ruined. “Yeah, well, I am not.” The gentleman-air that embraced his brother was not his. “So, you’ll just have to deal with me.”

“Is Caron sick?” Naraku wondered.

“No!” Keiran hissed.

“Oh...” Naraku was disappointed, Keiran could see that. “If that is the case... bye!”

Suddenly Naraku turned around and started running.

“I knew you would be doing that!” Keiran yelled after her.

“Then why aren’t you running as well?” Naraku screamed back, teasing.

Keiran started running. “Because I was about to!” He yelled annoyed. Keiran started the chase, while in front of him various Yami leaped out of the trees, following the purple-haired Chieftess as well. ‘Damn it, they are closer than I am!’ Keiran cursed.

‘She mocked me! Curse you, girl, you mocked me! You will pay for that!’

Agile as a deer, Naraku jumped between two trees close to each other. When one of the Yami tried to do the same, he miscalculated his jump, resulting in his foot being stuck and bashing forwards. “Are you okay?” Keiran checked on him, seeing his bleeding nose.

“I’m fine!” The Yami yelled. “Just go get her!”

“So, that’s is your play, eh?” Keiran went into pursuit again. ‘Getting rid of us one by one? You think you are better than us? Well, girly, you are *wrong!* We are the Yami, and I won’t back off! You will be mine!’

Naraku was quite disappointed she lost one follower already. There were now three young men on her trail. She didn't even consider that loser in the back. What was his deal anyway? Why did Caron replace himself with that guy? Please, like that guy could make a difference. Sure, he had some speed, but he acted without thinking first. That elbow in the ribs... a real hunter would have been able to see that one coming! Heck, why not pick on him some more? Naraku grabbed a branch, used it to twirl around and kicked two Yami in the face. When she landed, she kicked the third with a spinning kick, letting him bash against the other two who tried to get up. Keiran was surprised when he saw that; this girl was fast! Suddenly she jumped over the Yami on the ground and looked him straight into the eyes. Stunned, Keiran didn't know what to do when Naraku leaned over to him. "Tag, you're it!" She whispered in his ear, teasing, followed by placing her hands onto his shoulders. Naraku flipped over his shoulders. Amazed, Keiran didn't know what to do, especially when Naraku suddenly pulled him over her shoulders and he flew through the air! The encounter with the tree was hard and unexpected. Keiran fell to the ground. When he opened his eyes, he saw the smile of a young girl. Her giggles filled the forest, as she turned around and she led them away once more. Fuming, Keiran jumped up. For the first time in his life, the anger within him was enough to forget any pain. "Let's get her!" He ordered and encouraged the others. They crawled up and followed their leader into this chase. Filled with pride and a dash of superiority, Naraku felt like she could slow down. Only then she noticed she was running *away* from MorningSnow. Somewhere she had taken a wrong turn and she would have to turn around. Naraku knew the Yami were quite cunning; they would find a way to cut her off and then she would lose this challenge. Realising she had to find a way to let the Yami pass her without them noticing it, Naraku looked around for a place to hide. She noticed the waterfall on her right; maybe she could hide behind it.

"Uhn..." Rain moaned, letting Kai look up surprised.
"Rain?" Kai wondered, getting up. Maybe it was another nightmare.

"Keiran, her tracks stop here!" A Yami knelt to the ground.
"Did she hide in a tree?" Another Yami looked around.
Keiran looked around as well. A tree? Would she be able to use trees as they would? No, the tracks on the ground did not suggest someone leaping into the air. At least not high enough for a tree. The sound of falling water was the only thing they could hear. Unwillingly, Keiran's eyes were pulled towards it. It was as if a hand was guiding him.
"She's behind the waterfall. I just know it!"

"G... get out!" Rain's head went from one side to another, still captured by his nightmare.
Kai didn't know what to do. Should he try and wake him up? "Rain... what are you dreaming about?" He wondered, sad.
"Get... away..." Rain continued.

With a pounding heart, Naraku saw the Yami stepping into the freezing water. The waterfall blurred her vision, but this was something she could not only see, but also feel! And there was no way out!

Naraku had really done it; she had cornered herself. Her teeth softly clattered; Naraku hadn't expected the water to be this cold. It felt as if she was freezing. Hiding behind the waterfall was the worst idea ever. And Caron's replacement, that boy... how did he know she was there? She had to admit she'd underestimated him.

Keiran was the first to reach the rocks near the waterfall. He climbed onto them, forgetting the numbness caused by cold water. How he knew she was behind there, he didn't know and couldn't explain. It was just like when he first saw her. He just knew they had to get away from there before she would get really angry. It was an indescribable feeling of knowing her, while he had hardly seen her. Maybe it was indeed his Yami-leadership-blood that was finally showing through. Caron would be proud of his little brother. Tonight, Keiran would no longer be a boy to him. Tonight, Keiran would become a man!

"The water..." Rain mumbled. "They are coming!"

Kai was worried. "Who?" He asked. "Who are coming?"

Naraku's heart pounded harder. What should she do? She looked around, but she was surrounded by solid rock. Could she fight? With what? Throw them into the water? And then what? How would she get out?

'Ready or not... here I come!' Keiran grinned.

"Naraku!" Rain yelled and jolted up in his bed, with eyes wide open, filled with terror. "...Naraku..."

Episode 159: Freezing darkness

It was as if her heart was going to fly right out of her chest. How could she have been this stupid? Why did she pick a hiding place with no escape? This was it; this was her punishment for underestimating and mocking her enemy.

However, Naraku noticed something else... another pounding heart. She was not the only one who was scared and nervous. She realised someone else was feeling the exact same way as she did. And it was that young man who was getting closer and closer...

When Keiran reached the entrance of the cave behind the waterfall, he hesitated. He didn't need to ask himself why he wavered; he knew the answer. Keiran was scared. What if that girl was not behind the waterfall? The raging water prevented him from hearing any sound and what if he turned out to be wrong? He was the leader's brother, and this was his hunt! He couldn't mess up! Caron would never forgive him.

Blade paced over the battlement, nervously. "What's taking her so long?" He hissed. "I'm going after her."

Matsuru stopped him. "Please, have faith in her. She will return, I just know that."

"I know, I know!" Blade admitted, raising his hands to the sky. "But all this waiting is driving me crazy."

"Maybe you should apologise." Someone suggested from behind. Blade jolted and wanted to ask what or who this dark-skinned girl was talking about, but she didn't allow him to ask any questions. "She's in the library." Mayonaka told him. "And frankly, since Naraku is safe, she is your priority..."

"Naraku?" Kai wondered, looking at Rain, who flopped back to his bed. The Fire User noticed Rain was still asleep. "Oh, it's just a dream..."

"The water..." Rain mumbled, bathing in sweat. "Naraku..."

Keiran took a deep breath, and then jumped right through the waterfall. Ready for whatever attack that might follow, he quickly observed his surroundings... empty. Surprised, Keiran lowered his knife, as several Yami followed him.

The cave was small and there was barely place for everyone. Confused, everyone looked around. "What the...?" One of his followers noticed they were the only ones there. "But... there is no way out."

"Are you certain you saw her getting in here?" Another asked.

Keiran bit his lip. He actually never saw Naraku fleeing in there. It was just a feeling. But he couldn't admit that. This was it; he really screwed up. Caron would probably hang him upside down in a tree again, just like when they were kids. Okay, back then it was just sibling rivalry and all, but now...

Suddenly, he spotted something. There, in the corner of the cave. Keiran walked to it and knelt. "What is it?" One of his men asked.

"A squirrel..." Keiran took the cold animal in his hands.

The Yami weren't impressed. "It probably starved to death in here." One shrugged.

Keiran let his fingers touch the wound. “No...” He observed the animal. “This squirrel was killed with a knife. A long and thin one. And it was killed today.” He looked up, no longer surprised but confident he was right. “She was here.” Keiran got up and looked around the cave. “What?” The Yami gasped. “But there’s no way out!”

Keiran didn’t answer. Suddenly, he jumped into the water next to them, worrying his friends. “Keiran!” They called out, as they saw their leader diving under water. With his hands, Keiran followed the rough wall, trying to find an underwater passage. He did find a weird place with warm water, and a very soft current upwards, but... he didn’t feel her.

Gasping for air, Keiran reached the surface again. “There’s no passage underwater.” He concluded.

“Get out of the water, Keiran!” One of the Yami ordered him. “Are you crazy? It’s freezing!”

“She was here, I’m sure of it!” Keiran cursed while he climbed out of the water. “I don’t know how, but she escaped.”

“Look, we’ll go back and look for her tracks again.” One of the Yami promised him. “She couldn’t have gone up in smoke.”

“Let’s go.” Keiran walked to the waterfall again. “If we hurry, then...”

“No, Keiran.” The Yami revolted. “We need to go home. We are wet and cold. If we won’t get out of these wet clothes, we might get sick or even freeze to death.”

“Nothing is lost.” One of the four Yami reassured him. “Not even Caron would have found out how she escaped from here.”

Keiran looked to the ground. Caron... he had failed him...

Carefully, Blade opened the door. He peeked around the corner, cautiously walking into the library. This time, he had to face something far more dangerous than the Yami. No sword or magic was strong enough to protect him from this.

Silently, Blade walked to a ladder. “Eh... Mah-Lin?” He whispered.

“Ah, look who we have here...” Mah-Lin snarled, picking up a book and flipping through it.

“Eh... Mayonaka said you were angry with me.”

“I indeed am.”

“Care to tell what I did wrong?”

Mah-Lin was completely silent. At that moment, Blade realised that this was the most stupid question he had ever asked. If this wouldn’t cause war...

“Excuse me?” Mah-Lin hissed.

Blade spread his arms. “From the bottom of my heart, I apologise!” He tried.

“Excuse me?!” Mah-Lin threw the book to his head. “You left me stuck in some magical prison and then you don’t know what you did wrong?!”

“Oh, that...” Blade mumbled and immediately realised his next mistake. He slammed his hand to his mouth, as if he wanted to take back the words. “Mah-Lin, I...” A book flew to his head. Another one. The third one Blade had to jump away from.

“Mah-Lin...” Blade started, when a fourth book hit him in the face.

“Don’t you dare go Mah-Linning me now!” Mah-Lin yelled, throwing more books. “I needed you and you didn’t even come to help me.”

Blade crawled back, avoiding another book. “I had to stop Naraku!”

“Naraku?!” Mah-Lin screamed. “Again Naraku! I am you Sonai! I should be your number one!”

“But you are!” Blade tried. “Don’t be jealous!”

A shower of books came down. “Jealous?” Her voice was high. “I have accepted that you and Naraku have a strong bond and I allowed that, but I won’t accept being your love toy whenever *you* want to!”

“Love toy?” Blade gasped, flabbergasted. “Mah-Lin, I *love* you! You are *everything* to me!”

“Oh, am I?” Mah-Lin huffed. “So, if there was a fire, who would you rescue first?”

“That is a very mean question.” Blade threw back. “I can’t pick between you two!”

Another shower of books went down. “So that’s how it is!” Mah-Lin screamed. “You only see me as your toy!”

“No, I don’t!” Blade tried.

“You wouldn’t even care if I got hurt!”

“Of course I do!”

“Oh, so if I would fall from this ladder, would you catch me?”

Blade sighed. “Of course!” Blade spread his hands. “I would never let you fall!” He almost tripped over a book. “But with all these books...”

“Then prove it.” Mah-Lin simply said.

“Prove what?” Blade looked up, surprised, but then he realised it. “No!” Blade gasped.

“Don’t jump!”

“Why not?” Mah-Lin answered angrily. “Can’t I trust you?”

“Of course you can, but with all these books around my feet...” Blade tried to reason, when the unspeakable happened. “Mah-Lin, no!” His words were futile, as he saw the young woman letting go of the ladder and falling backwards.

It was as if his heart was being torn apart. Everything went in slow motion. She was falling... his beloved was falling... He could never reach her in time! White as a sheet, Blade almost tripped over the books as he tried to get closer.

In an unknown place, silence was the only thing that could be heard. Nothing could be seen as well, as darkness was all around her. A few small coughs broke the silence, as she shivered in the darkness. She couldn’t see her hands, as she pushed a strand of purple hair out of her face. What on Seken had happened?

Naraku remembered that, as a last resort, she had jumped into the water, hoping to hide in the small cave underwater. When Keiran and the others entered, she had pushed herself towards the back, hoping she wouldn’t be seen and that the Yami would leave soon.

However, she suddenly felt like something without hands pushed her upwards! Surprised, Naraku didn’t know what happened, until she realised she could breathe again! Exhausted, Naraku pulled herself onto the cold stones, where she started shivering.

A strange sound filled her surrounding, but it faded just as fast. Curious and frightened, Naraku tried to see something, but she couldn’t.

Gambling, Naraku tried to remember Kai’s lessons and she created a small fireball. In front of Naraku was a small pond. There was warmth coming from it, but the weird sound could no longer be heard. Quickly, Naraku looked around. On all sides, black

walls prevented her from seeing the sky. Realising she was in a cave, she also realised that she managed to escape the Yami.

A chilling stream of air reminded her of her wet clothes and body. Shivering, Naraku realised she was alone and took her clothes off. She created bigger fireballs and hoped they would dry her clothes without burning them. Trying to become as small as possible, Naraku tried to warm herself by the flames.

In the camp of the Yami, a dripping Keiran reached his brother. “What in the name of the High Ones and Seken happened to you?!” Caron gasped, seeing his younger brother and the other Yami.

Keiran didn’t dare to look up, being ashamed. “I... I...” He tried to find the words. “Get yourself dried before you get sick!” Caron pushed him inside, worried. “You can report later.” He noticed his brother walking away with an air of shame. Quickly, he turned to the other four Yami. “You should get changed as well.” He said to them. “But first, I want to hear what you have to say, before I hear him out.”

One of the Yami nodded. “Your brother was great tonight, Caron.” He proudly declared. “He managed to hunt her down to the waterfall... but after that... she just... vanished...”

“Vanished?” Caron wondered, seeing the other Yami nod. “All right, go get changed; hurry!” Worried, he saw the shivering men leaving. What if one of them got sick? He couldn’t afford to lose someone. Then he noticed something from the corner of his eyes. Before the window of their cottage, Caron saw Keiran getting out of his wet clothes and putting on dry ones. And suddenly... suddenly Caron felt so proud of his little brother...

When her clothes were almost dry, Naraku put them on again. Suddenly, that strange sound returned and Naraku quickly turned around. The small pond, the underwater passage... there were suddenly bubbles coming from it! Naraku came closer, but then realization hit her like lightning. “A geyser...?” She gasped.

Astounded, Naraku sank to the ground. Mayonaka had taught her about them, and how water sometimes burst through to the surface... but she had never expected one to be here! Let alone underwater! It surely would explain the stream of warm water. “A geyser...” Naraku gasped. “I was saved by a geyser...”

Mah-Lin looked around. “Wow.” She said, impressed. “You *did* catch me.”

With his heart almost beating out of his chest, Blade lay on the floor with the love of his life in his arms. He wanted to scream at her, yell at her that she should never do anything like that again, but he couldn’t. Part of him was just amazed that he managed to reach her in time, while the other part was still too shocked.

“Well, since that part is solved now...” Mah-Lin stepped up, but Blade couldn’t find the strength to do the same. “...let’s get this mess cleaned up.”

Feeling terrible, Keiran walked to Caron. “Hey...” He mumbled and sat down.

“So, how did it go?” Caron asked, curious.

Keiran didn’t look at him. “I messed up.”

Caron was silent. “Messed up? As in, lost the battle or...?”

"I made a fool out of myself!" Keiran blurted out. "I let her make a fool out of me three times! Three times!"

Caron crossed his arms and nodded. "Tell me everything." He instructed.

"What is there to tell?" Keiran sighed.

"Everything."

"I knew where she was!" Keiran admitted. "I could feel her pounding heart! And suddenly, *poof*, it was gone."

Caron was confused. "You could hear her?" He wondered.

Keiran shook his head. "I can feel it when I'm near her, Caron." Keiran confessed.

"Maybe this is a gift or something, I don't know, but whenever I'm near her, I can feel her. I can feel her presence." Caron didn't know what to reply. Never during his reign had he met someone who could feel someone else's presence, nor did he recall any stories about that. "I'm a freak and a loser... A disgrace to the Yami."

"Now, now." Caron stopped him. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You said it yourself, she was suddenly gone. Were there any tracks left?"

Keiran shook his head and showed a dead squirrel. "This was all she left behind."

"Don't feel bad, Keiran." Caron smiled. "She is cunning and resourceful. I don't know if I would have done it any better."

Keiran sank to the ground. "You can do everything."

Caron sighed, as he knelt next to his younger brother. "Maybe, but you have something I don't have." Keiran looked up surprised. "You can *feel* her, Keiran. And she doesn't know that. Let's keep it like that. Then we finally have an advantage!"

Caron stood up again. "So, how do you want your squirrel? After all, this is your prey."

Naraku looked around. Surrounded by her small fireballs, she could finally see something. The cave surrounded her completely, except for a few corridors, going into various directions. "Well," Naraku gathered her courage. "Since I have no choice..." She mumbled and picked a corridor. "I just hope this cave will end somewhere."

Rain carefully opened his eyes. Surprised, he looked around. Was this his room? Sitting up in bed, Rain realised it was indeed his room. On his left, he heard a soft snore. Moving his eyes, Rain found Kai asleep on a chair next to his bed. One leg was placed over the chair's back, and Kai was almost hanging upside down.

Sighing, but also annoyed, Rain created a small droplet of water. The drop danced towards Kai and burst open above his face. Kai, however, didn't wake up from it and decided to roll over. Right now, you must imagine a young man, hanging upside down in a chair, trying to roll over. Yes, you are correct, what followed was a lot of noise, as the chair tipped over and the young man landed onto the ground.

Yet, this still wasn't enough to wake up Kai! When Rain softly sighed, Kai's eyes immediately burst open and he jumped up. "OH-HIGH-ONES-YOU-ARE-AWAKE!" Kai yelled loudly and with the speed of a raging bull.

"It seems." Rain calmly said. "Eh... why am I here?"

Kai looked up surprised. "You don't recall?" He asked.

"Something vaguely." Rain touched his head. "But... hey... where is Naraku?"

"Naraku?" Kai was surprised once more. Why would he ask for her?

Rain tried to remember. "I think I had a dream... about her." Rain mumbled. "Maybe a premonition... no, I don't think this will happen..." "Something bad?" Kai wondered. Rain looked up. "I think she's safe now." He only said, confusing Kai even more. What on Seken did Rain dream about?

"Move over." Mah-Lin sighed as she tried to pull a thick book from under Blade, who was still on the floor. She used all her effort, pulling hard, and finally she managed to pull it free. "Instead of lying around, you should try and help me." She snapped at him.

Blade raised his finger, wanting to say something, but then decided it was not worth it. From now on, Mah-Lin would always be right. Whatever the case was, Mah-Lin was right about everything. He would even be her devoted slave, if that would mean this would never happen again.

Never... *never again!*

"Hey, look at this." Mah-Lin noticed when she took another book. She showed it to the young man on the floor. "It's a map of the valley. And the forest, look here." She flipped the page and Blade looked at the drawing of a forest. It showed only a small part of the forest, but the next page showed the actual size of the forest, in comparison of the valley. Apparently, the forest was huge.

Still lying down, Blade flipped a few pages. "Hey, this is the territory of the Snow Wolves." He noticed. He flipped some more. "Is there a map of the castle as well? Maybe we can find out what some of the rooms were supposed to be."

Mah-Lin took the book and flipped the page. "I hope so. I so need a room that is bigger than yours. You keep on hogging up on the matras."

Blade bit his lip. It was not worth it. It was just not worth it. "You are so right, honey..."

Episode 160: Following the path

Naraku folded her arms, sighing deeply. “This is the third corridor that has a dead end...” She grumbled, turning around. “And why do I keep on smelling fish? Maybe I should just blast a hole in the wall; that should get me out of here...”

Naraku walked on, trying to warm her hands under her armpits. The little balls of fire that accompanied her, to light her way, did not radiate enough warmth. Eventually, she ended up where she began. The geyser bubbled up again. It still amazed Naraku. If that geyser had not pushed her upwards... she might have not discovered this cave, and she might have been taken by the Yami.

“This is the last path I take.” Naraku decided. “If this path doesn’t get me out of here, I’ll make my own way out.”

Rain and Kai had been staring at each other. Both didn’t know what to say or do. Rain didn’t seem to remember what Naraku had told him. Uneasy, Kai wondered if he should bring it up again. Would it cause the fever to return?

“Eh...” Kai started.

“I think I saw my parents.” Rain said, suddenly. “They told me not to blame Naraku. She only wanted to protect me.”

Kai looked up. “You... know?” He asked.

“It’s coming back again.” Rain admitted. His calm and almost emotionless responses worried Kai. Maybe this was still part of the shock. Maybe the realisation still had to sink in. “Did she go out again?”

Kai nodded. “Yes, she wanted to go out alone. She said she would have a better chance, but she hasn’t returned yet.”

“Really?” Rain wondered, calmly. “You don’t need to worry; the water helped her. She is safe now.”

Kai leaned forward. “How do you know this?” He asked, confused.

Rain looked up, surprised. “I am the water.” He only said.

Keiran slowly ate the squirrel that Caron had prepared for him. “Are you sure you don’t want anything?” Keiran asked. “There is more than enough!”

Caron waved at him and took a baked mushroom. “Nah, don’t worry. You can have it! It was your hunt.”

“Yeah, but I know you wanted this, and I’m most willing to share.” Keiran tried again.

“Really, you are my brother, I don’t mind sharing.”

Caron looked up. “Is it that bad?” He asked.

“Like eating burned grass.” Keiran admitted.

Caron laughed. “I’m sorry, I am not a cook.”

“You didn’t have to poison me to prove that; I would have taken your word.” Keiran pushed the plate away.

Both brothers teased each other, until a knock on the door followed. “Always open!”

Caron smiled, being in a good mood. “Ah, Cisse, Aidee, come on in. What is it?”

The two young men looked uneasily at each other. “Well... Rehn decided to go to bed early. He wasn’t feeling that well.”

"I hope he won't get a fever." Caron sighed. "That wild-water-adventure was not a top choice for a winter-activity." He turned to his little brother, who avoided his eyes. Because the men didn't leave, it told Caron and Keiran there was more news. "What is it?" Keiran asked worried. "Did anyone else...?"

"No, no!" One of them waved his arms. "The others are fine."

Caron got impatient; he hated it when people beat around the bush. "Then what is it?" He tried to hide his impatience. "Tell me, Cisse!"

Cisse was nervous and he gathered his courage. A true Yami could never show fear.

Caron may not be a tyrant, but they respected him too much to disappoint him.

"She... she isn't home yet." He finally managed to say.

Caron was confused. "What do you...?" Caron started, when Keiran suddenly jumped up.

"She's still in the forest!" He yelled, running out of the door.

"Keiran!" Caron yelled after him. "You don't even know where to look!"

"I will find her!" Keiran yelled back. "I promise, in the name of the High Ones, she shall be mine!"

The other Yami joined his leader and Cisse. "Should we follow him?" He asked him.

Caron shook his head. "No, this is his personal hunt." Caron forbade them. "Aidee, Cisse, go home, and warm up. It will be cold tonight."

"Yes," Aidee started. "but Keiran forgot his jacket..."

Caron looked at the warm coat hanging near the crackling fire. "...Crap."

Naraku leaned against the wall. "You hate me, don't you?!" Naraku pointed at the ceiling of the cave accusingly. "Heck, what did I expect? You always hated me." Tired, Naraku sat down on the floor. "I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I can't eat what I caught today. It's for my tribe..." She leaned her forehead on her knees. "And why do you torture me with that scent of fish anyway?!"

Rain stepped out of his bed. "You shouldn't get out of bed." Kai warned him. "The fever..."

"Which fever?" Rain cut him off. "I feel fine."

Kai looked to the ground. "But... but... just hours ago you were in a coma."

"No, I was not." Rain shook his head. "I talked to my parents. They explained it to me."

"Everything?" Kai wondered.

Rain nodded. "Naraku will protect us. No matter what."

"Nah, too small..." Mah-Lin sighed, and let her fingers flip over the pages. "Why are all the rooms in the castle the same size?"

Blade looked at the map as well. "Well, this one is quite big."

"Oh yes, I'd just love to sleep above the stables." Mah-Lin groaned.

Blade sighed. "You're right." He only said, not wanting to risk another fight.

"You know, if you keep on saying I'm right to avoid discussion, you'll sleep on the couch tonight."

"We don't even have a couch." Blade blurted out.

"The throne room and the library both have couches." Mah-Lin simply stated. She flipped another page. "Ooh, this one is quite big."

“That’s Naraku’s room.” Blade mumbled.

“But *this* one is *not!*” Mah-Lin proudly pointed. “All right, let’s check it out.” She grabbed Blade by the arm, dragging him away. Blade just let it all happen. It would take a while before he had the energy to stand up against her again. Today he would just be her puppet.

In the cave, Naraku had moved on. “Okay,” She started. “why am I talking out loud?” She sighed, annoyed. Being locked up in a natural maze all alone was not something she enjoyed. “Fine, whatever, this hunger is driving me crazy. And what am I smelling? No, not the fish, the other scent.” She stomped on the ground, following the scent.

Surprised, Naraku looked up. “What are those?” She wondered and walked to the wall. “Are those mushrooms? Cool.” Naraku touched them and let her thoughts be heard. “Can you eat these?” She plucked one from the wall. “Ao should know that. Maybe I should just take them along. If we can’t eat them, Sushi might be able to use them in a potion.”

Naraku gathered some mushrooms from the wall and opened her bag. For a moment, she just stared in the bag. “Well...” She said eventually. “That would explain a lot...” She looked at the fish in her bag. They were small, but there were fish in her bag. They must have gotten trapped when the geyser ‘dragged her’ into the cave.

Night fell, and the freezing cold took over. While most creatures took refuge in their warm homes, a young man was still looking in the forest. “I will find you!” Keiran hissed, looking everywhere and ignoring his own freezing body. “You will be mine!” Suddenly, Keiran tripped and fell to the ground. Sliding from a small hill, Keiran ended up at the bottom, buried by a mix of leaves, mud, snow and what not more. Cursing, Keiran hit the ground with his fists.

“Why are you doing this to me?” He growled. “Why are you doing this to me?!” From above, a pair of worried eyes followed him, as the young man struggled. In one of his hands, he held a warm jacket, but Caron knew not to intervene with his younger brother’s hunt... no matter what the cost.

“Mm, this looks promising.” Mah-Lin nodded approvingly. “What do you think?” Blade looked around. All he saw was a room in a tower, filled with broken furniture and rags. Obviously, they hadn’t been able to clean this room yet. “Well... it is spacey.” Blade agreed.

“Over there, we will have our bed.” Mah-Lin pointed. “And over there a fireplace.” “But we aren’t allowed to use that much firewood.” Blade said to her.

“Then you’ll just have to warm me.” Mah-Lin teased Blade and tapped his nose with her finger. “And over here, we will build a huge closet.” She turned around. “And this wall is just *perfect* for all our swords!”

Blade looked at the empty, cracked wall. “All our swords? We only have two.”

“We are warriors, we need to have a collection.” Mah-Lin smiled. “You know, this would be the perfect wedding gift.”

“Oh, so you didn’t plan on getting married within the next ten years?” Blade sighed back sarcastically. What was the use of this? First Mah-Lin made his day into a living