

- Relieve me !
- Stop moving bitch : You're mine !
- Back off you filthy dog !
- You're nothing but a slave, a whore !

Yatika woke up and almost fell from her bed. She was crying, short of breath and sweating. Silver moon rays were still filtering through the shutters. A young servant knocked on her door. Yatika took a few seconds to gather her mind.

- What is it ? she finally said.
- The Matriarch asked for you. She's waiting in the great hall, Warden.
- I am... Thank you.

She stood still in silence, focused on the fresh air brushing her skin. When fear and anger dissipated, she put on a linen shirt and tied her long dark hair in a loose ponytail. She left her room, walked by the priestesses dormitories, to the hall.

The Matriarch waited in a large chair close to the fireplace. Behind her waited a tall, intriguing elf. Pale, with long dark hair, in a black dress, a bustier highlighting her silhouette. A silver saber was hanging on her hip. Usually they were two, though, Yatika didn't see the other Watcher of the Temple in a few days. The young woman bowed and took also place by the fire.

- We received a message, said the Matriarch. This owl brought it earlier and is now waiting to carry back our answer.
 - Is it from the Duchess ? We know pirates are wreaking havoc on the coast.
 - It is true, though, it is another out of the ordinary woman requesting our assistance. I speak about Tiara, the isolated druid.
 - The outcast ?
 - She leaves in the far south, near the Erdenband source. It's a particularly wild region of the forest, even Sylvan Guardians avoid these lands.
 - They do not go in because *SHE* settled there, isn't it ?
 - Probably, added the old woman with a smile. Nevertheless, we need to help her identify the nature of a magical creature.
 - Her animal affinity is not enough ?
 - I guess not. The said "creature" could be one of a kind.
- Yatika sighed, crossing her legs.
- She fears it is a dark creature. One that has nothing to do with nature.
 - Our spells might be better suited to reveal that kind of origins. We can not know more without going, my child.
 - The sisters would be defenseless against any threat !
 - That's why I asked for you. You know the appropriate incantation, and you can fight if you feel the need to.

Yatika gasped, her gaze alternating between the two women. In the silence, a shower of sparks sprung from the embers. The owl hooted.

— You want to know the outer world better. I am here to help you in your journey, my child. This temple is your home, but these lands need a kind soul like yours.

Fear choked up her throat. She was yearning to put her skills to use. Though, at this moment, shame overthrew her will. She had never left the temple, never healed anyone without help, and never fought a real opponent. Training was a start, but the world was not a playground, and she would not have a second chance. *Such an idiot ! she thought. I'm a child trying to be someone else. I have no use for anyone, I'm a stupid... A useless girl... A slave, a...*

The Matriarch squeezed her hand. The young woman sobbed while she looked at her kind eyes. She felt her infinite motherly love upon her. The dean understood many things, even those that were not said in words. Yatika wiped off her tears and added :

— I accept. I will help the druid.

— So be it.

Yatika stood up. The old priestess did the same, with less ease though.

— The owl will now go. Tiara will be informed of your arrival. You leave tomorrow morning.

— Understood. Oh, Mother ? asked Yatika. Can you tell me where is Alhuia ?

— She took the road north with the man who showed up at the gate a few days ago. You might not have seen him. These two had things to do elsewhere.

— Very well...

— Do not worry, my child. We will see them again soon.

Yatika left the temple early. Servants were setting the table for breakfast. Priestesses were busy waking up the old Temple of Yre. Leaving the comfort of such a place, she climbed the steep path leading out of the gorge, toward the Sylfan Woods.

This forest was spreading upon miles and miles, covering most of the Sylfan territory. The remaining lands were cliffs and beaches along the west coast. Yatika, however, was far from these idyllic landscapes. She was progressing between dense thorny bushes and gigantic trees. Wild beasts were all around her, some scared, others, hungry. She fasten her pace and reached a small clearing. She knew what was coming, thus, she waited. A high pitched whistle resounded, and another. Then, a wooden platform dropped down from the treetops. Elven archers invited her to hop on and the lift went up again. Yatika was allowed here for a single reason : she was a "servant of Yre", some of the very few not considered as threats.

More elves awaited her up on the Treetops Paths. One of them greeted her with a warm smile.

- You're quite far from your cozy temple, human.
- And that is just a start, friend. I'm happy to see you, Tallion.
- So am I ! And yes, reaching the far south will take you several days, even by the Paths.
- News seem to travel faster than I do...
- Matriarch Judith sent a homing pigeon, warning us of your arrival. We are here to make your journey easy and quick. At least until you leave the Paths. Then you'll be on your own again.
- Do you know where I am heading ?
- I do. Please, be on your guard. There are many rumors about this outcast. Non is rejoicing.
- I know, I will be careful.

While talking, they progressed fast, taking advantage of the Paths safety. They took some rest in one of the many camps scattered along the bridges, catwalks and stairs. They would not reach the next camp before nightfall. After a good meal, they sat near a small stage where a few musicians were about to begin a show. An elven lady — the singer no doubt — appeared, in a white embroidered dress. Yatika stared at her, long enough for the artist to notice her gaze. Embarrassed, the young human turned back and asked a random question to Tallion. Music started soon after.

- The concert was splendid, even for a small band on a makeshift stage, in a military camp. Tallion and Yatika talked and laughed. Then, the ranger added :
- I have things to do in the east garrison. I'm leaving now. Enjoy the comfort here, you have a long day tomorrow.
 - Be safe, friend. I hope I will see you again.
 - That would be my pleasure.

Not long after Tallion departure, another elf sat next to Yatika. The later recognize immediately the singer in her white dress, a large smile on her lovely face. She asked if her and the rest of the group could share the table with her. Yatika agreed despite her mind telling her to run. They all shared another meal, Yatika only pecking in plates from time to time. She was more thrilled by the extraordinary stories musicians were sharing. Then, the singer leaned against her arm so the human can hear what she was about to say.

- You must be a spacial one to be able to enter the woods and navigate the Paths.
- I come from the temple of Yre.
- Oh ! A priestess then ? No, not with that blade on your hip.
- I am... Well, let's say I am the Matriarch protégé.
- You don't look like you need any protection.
- No, I mean... It is a long story.
- One I would gladly hear.
- Sorry, I do not want to talk about it.
- Don't be sorry, friend.

They talked for a long time. Most elves were asleep or about to. The singer, Rahat, talked about all the places she visited. She never went outside the Sylfan Cradle though. Wood elves were not found of traveling outside their own borders. At one point, she yawned, stretched her arms and looked at her new human friend.

— I don't have much more to say about me, Yatika. So, what can we do if you still want to remain silent about your life.

Yatika stayed quiet, looking at her empty cup. She tried to talk, but her emotions were storming inside her. Any word would have made her cry or fall into Rahat's arms. At that moment, she felt a touch on her cheek.

— Don't say anything then... Just show me, whispered the singer.

— You...

— Hush. Show me.

Yatika stayed still, despite Rahat getting closer and closer to her. She smelled her fruity perfume, felt her heartbeats against her arm, her breath on her skin. She stifled a moan. Her hand though, reached for the elf's thigh. Yatika stared at Rahat. The elf's cheeks blushed while she bit her lip. Before the human could do anything more, the singer leaned forward and kissed her. For one second, Yatika thought about pushing her away, before surrendering to the elf's passion. She kissed her back, desire quickly filling her whole body. The singer let her fingers run on Yatika's neck, twisting locks of her dark mane, pressing her body against hers.

— My room is not far...

— Lead the way, elf.

She started up in fright, as if danger was near. Instead, she found Rahat asleep beside her. The skin of her back glistening under the first rays of dawn. Yatika smiled, bitter to leave so soon and dressed up in haste. She was about to push the door when a sleepy voice prevented her from leaving.

— Were you about to vanish without a word?

— We might never see each other again.

— I know. That hurts already enough as it is, so at least, let me taste your lips one last time.

The young woman walked back to the bed. Rahat spread her arms, revealing the small pale orbs of her breasts. Yatika bent over and kissed the elf. The singer chuckled.

— You hide your game well, silly. The things you did to me? I will never forget...

— Stop it. I have to go now.

Rahat knew how to hide things too. Once Yatika finally closed the door, her playful mood faded and tears ran down her freckled face.

Three days later, Yatika left the Treetops Paths. This region was something different entirely. Deep crevices like giant claw marks scarred the ground, silent streams running at the bottom. Gnarly brambles were spreading like traps below massive ferns. This was an impossible maze of immense proportions. The very air

was heavier, full of strong hearty smells. Animal sounded different. Huge mushrooms were growing on tree trunks. Some trees with cracked bark were oozing red colored sap. Swift tiny birds were feasting on it, changing color as they drank this odd nectar. This decor was right between a fairy tale and a nightmare in the making.

A large white deer with beautiful sculpted antlers appeared unawares. He shook his head and stomp the ground several times. He then looked at the intruder before walking south. The young woman followed him closely.

— Let us meet your mistress.