

Something told her it was going to be a good day. Tiara woke up slowly, got out of her bed, shook her fiery mane and went out, completely naked. Her pale skin shivered under the cold morning air of the forest. Sun was still too low to pierce through the thick foliage. She walked behind her shed, to a small pond. The elf bathed, humming, while small fishes twirled around her athletic legs. It was time to pick up mushrooms.

Tiara dressed in haste, grabbing only some panties, belts with pouches and her boots. Then, she ran into the shaded woods. While looking for the tastiest fungi, she sang a few verses in ancient elven. Soon enough, a great deer appeared and bowed before the elf. She saluted him back and they resumed the gathering.

In fact, it was more a patrol than a simple walk. Tiara was making sure that no evil was settling in this region. Darkness was rising in the north, and this disturbance was enough to transform animals, plants even rocks into monsters. She stopped by a circle of mossy stelaes. Everything was in order. A bit farther west, she checked the purity of a source. It was perfect. She decided to go back, sat on the deer's back.

— This will make a heartwarming soup, Haradaa, she told.

The elven redhead dedicated the next hours to gardening and brewing some potions. Plants she was taking care of were rare and fragile. She offered them her love and care. Besides, she knew some of these beauties were worth a lot of gold in the alchemical markets. Though, this was of little use for her. Kicked out of her home, scorned by her kin, she had very little interest in trading with the Sylfans. She was alone since childhood and intended to keep it that way.

The woods got agitated. A growling filled the air. Branches cracked, animals fled. Bushes shivers and a loud voice resounded. Out of nowhere, a woman jumped, axe in her hand. She rolled in the grass before turning back to face the giant reptile behind her. Tiara sighed.

— Vainbhaum ! What are you bringing me this time ?

This hunt in the cursed elven woods was a bad idea. They knew it from the start. Two of them were already dead. One choked after getting stung by an insect, his throat swollen like rising dough. The other one... no one knew what happened to him. They knew they were unwelcome, though disappointing their mistress would lead to a more atrocious fate. Thus, they were here, after days of tracking and bitter defeats. Sadora was right there, close to a small elven gal. The scaly beast went back in the forest. They just had to strike fast.

— Do not make any step further, human, shouted the redhead. You are not welcome. Answer my questions.

Sadora curled back, evaluating her chances.

— Don't even think about it, hissed Tiara.

The bandits jumped on their prey.

Her instincts did not betray her. As the snake left, she felt presences in the shadows. Sadora was counting on their attack to get out of this mess. When the assassins attacked, she was ready. Her axe split a man's skull before he could raise his weapon. Screams mingled with the clash of steel. Blood tainted the grass under the furious eyes of the druid. Sadora was uncontrollable. No killer was able to get close. The only survivor after the skirmish ran into the forest. The woman roared, lifting her blood soaked blade above her head. Tiara called out to her. Sadora turned around, her mind still fogged by her frenzy. She approached fast. A mistake.

Tiara drew signs in front of her before hitting the ground with her heel. The ground moved, releasing whip-like roots which wrapped around Sadora's arms. She fought back, not for long though. More roots trapped her, pinning her where she stood. Soon, a cloak of vines, thorns and roots imprisoned the intruder.

Tiara pushed back her hair and walked closer to the human. She inspected her for a few seconds and then grimaced.

— If you want to keep your arm, drop your weapon.

Sadora growled as her only answer. Tiara chuckled and waved her hand. Vines tightened and started twisting the woman's arm. Tormented by pain, the human released the axe. The elf hissed, making the plants stop.

— You will pay, witch !

— As dumb as the others, sighed the redhead. I will be quick then. You can not go any further. Apparently, you are a walking disaster and I will not allow that you disrupt this land's peace.

— I need to go.

— On that, we agree, but I will not let you cross this clearing. You have to go back.

— Impossible.

— Here we are, then.

— Wait for it, elf. I will get out of this and...

— No, you won't.

— Bitch !

— One more insult, and you will miss a hand in addition to being stupid.

To emphasize her words, she made the roots pull on her wrist. Sadora stared at the elf, clenching her teeth. Tiara added :

— I am aware that you are but a single minded killer. Though, it might be enough to answer some questions, am I right ?

Sadora growled again.

— So, what are you doing here ? You are not a Sylfan guest, obviously.

— I was escaping these men.

— A success !

— They are dead, I'm fine with that option too. More will come though, worse ones.

— One more reason to prevent you from going north. You would lead them here. The elf circled around her prisoner, arms crossed.

— What have you done ?

— I pissed someone off.

— A very susceptible person, it seems.

— A mad bitch.

— Are you always calling women bitches ?

— I didn't say it was a woman

Tiara chuckled, a slight grin on her lips.

— My conditions remains unchanged. You have to go back. I can indicate you a way towards Mareno. From there you will be able to reach the kingdom of Laa...

Sadora broke free, tearing the plants, ripping them from the ground. She jumped towards Tiara. The druid was already reciting an incantation. More roots swarmed the intruder. Grabbed by the neck, she gasped and slipped in the grass. Tiara made sure that her spell did not kill her, though the human was lying still. She rolled her on her back, just to notice the cut in her forehead, where she hit a rock in the ground.

— Well, fuck, the druid sighed. This was such a good day until now.

The smell of incense woke her up. Pain surged into her head. She tried to stand up, only to realize that she was back into the plant net. She felt too dizzy to do anything more. The shed door opened, Tiara appeared again. Sadora cursed, the redhead lifted up her chin.

— Do not be mad. You are still alive. You escaped such a ridiculous death, she laughed. Though, I must admit that if you did die, I would have been able to focus on more important matter

— I have a solution.

— Let me guess...

— Setting me free. I'll be on my way, and we can forget each other for good.

— Did you not understand what I said, human ?

— You don't get it, witch !

— Careful, language !

— Stop playing ! I need to leave for my survival as much as yours !

— Is that a threat ?

— A warning.

— I might be the greatest danger in this woods.

— You... You are...

Sadora fell unconscious.

Night had fall. Sadora felt movements around her. Animals she knew all too well were gathering behind the cover of the trees. She stood up, but roots pulled her back down immediately. Fear crawled into her mind. The wolf pack crept out the

forest, closing on Sadora. Tiara was not around. The predators walked in circle under the moonlight. They were so close.

— That is a surprise ! shouted the druid.

She ran out as soon as she felt the wolves presence, only to discover them asleep around Sadora. She tried to speak but the redhead interrupted her :

— I knew you were hiding something.

Thus, a few hours later, after dawn, the elf came back, a bowl in hand. Wolves were still around, roaming the clearing. She saw confusion on Sadora's face.

— This is not funny, tell them to leave.

— I not responsible for their presence, confessed Tiara. Besides, I can not reach their spirit. It is...

She grimaced, bothered by impossible thoughts. The druid crouched in front of her prisoner and soaked her fingers in the bowl of gray paste. She lifted her hand towards Sadora's cut but as she brushed against her skin, a dreadful feeling struck them both.

Tiara felt a presence so dark that she jumped back in fear. Sadora grunted, pain deforming her face. Tears rolled on her cheeks. Then, she heard the voice :

— Kill her ! You are not one of these failures ! You were destined to become so much more ! Shame, traitor ! You dishonor us all.

— What are you doing witch ! shouted Sadora. Leave my head !

— I am not doing anything. It can not be the... Could it be a curse ?

Her face went pale, every gleam of malice left her eyes.

— Let me go, whispered Sadora in a trembling voice. You are unaware of what is happening outside your forest.

— I know enough of the world, she hissed. And I know I need help. If you are cursed, it is even more necessary that you stay under control. My control.

She wrote a note in haste. No need to beat around the bush, she did not know how much time she had left. Back out, she chanted a few ancient words. Plunging from the treetops, an owl landed on a rock. Sadora was certain it bows before the elf. He took the parchment before flying north.

The owl was supported by unnatural winds. The forest was helping him reach the Verdant Temple of Yre. He landed on the balcony and hooted several times. The matriarch came out, leaning on a cane. The bird let the note fell in her hand.

— What can it be, my winged friend ?

The owl danced from one feet to the other, a green glow in his eyes. Back inside, the woman read the message at a candle's light.

— Oh by the goddess, she whispered. The darkest hours of our lives are upon us. We can not remain passive anymore.

She headed towards the main hall, a Watcher by her side. She asked a servant to wake up Yatika.