



Forever Young Eternity 5: The rise of darkness

Kim Houtzager

*In the white snow,
there are little steps,
following ones made before.*

*Marks made by eternity,
having learned so much,
that life chooses to ignore.*

*Their marks still so small,
But in their eyes already alike,
impatiently awaiting their chance*

*For now the lead and follow,
Eternity and Life,
forever in a dance.*

*Maeh dani tsani,
yunuoa erahm notika,
nettoh wallon loo.*

*Notikemon zellob-esta moosurah,
ambia-esta cyamon,
yume biyomin quita.*

*Ello notikemon nesdam thé erahn,
mourah lirogub ello bidesam myno,
fyndah matèh ello ryn.*

*Nesdam ésa-yonyn obo wamee,
Moosurah obo Yume,
moosurah betooh.*



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The story thus far...

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

One day, a girl woke up in a forest. She knew nothing of the world around her and people considered her new to this world, despite looking like a young adult. When Maturu met this girl, he decided to take care of her and raise her as if she were his own. He taught her how to speak, how to behave and even how to fight. This girl, named Naraku, seemed to have amazing magical powers, which became the source of their many adventures.

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

After a journey to the desert and back, Naraku found out who she is: discarded Magic of the High Ones, the eternal gods of this planet. She was supposed to die, but against all odds, she survived everything one of her mothers, Yunakara, threw at her.

Naraku's greatest adversaries so far were the Yami, a small but highly skilled tribe. Due to an accident, the Yami killed two of The IceHunters, resulting into a hopeless war between the two tribes. Nothing seemed to bring the tribes together, not even when Naraku found her Sonaï within the Yami's ranks. However, when a bloodthirsty monster attacked MorningSnow, the Yami and IceHunters were forced to work together and finally, they ended the war.

Despite Naraku's magnificent display of Magic, the High Ones were not convinced she was in control. They called forth an ancient curse: The four Chosen Ones. If Naraku could defeat them, it would prove she could handle her Magic, earning the right to live.

After she had proven worthy, Naraku barely prevented a war between MorningSnow and the Seven United Tribes: people from the seven nations that once formed the country Stellus. Stellus and MorningSnow were old enemies, and it seems some people had not forgotten that feud...

Chapter 13: Little Moon



Episode 301: The new heir

We are not alone in this universe. There's a piece of space far away from us. So far away, we'd never be able to reach it within a lifetime, not even with the equipment and ships science-fiction series show us.

This piece of space is quite empty. It only has one sun, three moons and one planet. The planet is slightly larger than Earth. One side of the planet is covered by water, while the other side of the planet is covered by land. This planet is called 'Seken' by its inhabitants and they don't know any other world besides their own. As a matter of fact, they even believe the world is flat and that if you go too far, you will fall off the planet.

Does that sound familiar to you? That is possible, because Seken has a lot of similarities with our own medieval times. Knights, princesses, kingdoms, and chivalry... it could be considered a romantic planet. To add to that, this planet is also magical: mythical beings, Elves, humans who can control the elements...

Even if the outside of the planet does not look special, what roamed the world is. On this planet, where people believe in gods named The High Ones, the creatures all have the blessing of an eternal youth and life, but the pointy end of a knife is still as lethal as anywhere else. You might expect that there would be an overpopulation because of the eternal lives, but frankly, there aren't that many people. Accidents, illnesses, but mostly wars keep the world in balance, making it a miracle if people reached their two-hundredth birthday. Nobody likes it, but this is all they knew.

In the cold north of Seken, there was a small country named MorningSnow. In the young days of Seken, MorningSnow was a prosperous kingdom, but during a short ice age, it was abandoned. Only a few years before this story, the kingdom was reinstated by Queen Naraku, the head of The IceHunters: a small but already famous tribe on Seken.

This tribe, The IceHunters, lived in Castle MorningSnow and consisted out of the strongest Magic Users and warriors of Seken. They began with a group of ten humans and Elves and despite the loss of several members, it had now grown to a tribe of fourteen people.

The head of this tribe and the kingdom was Naraku, who had more powers than anyone had ever seen. She was unique; there was honestly no one else like her in this world. Created by The High Ones to get rid of their abundance of magic, Naraku kept on living despite all odds and was the first and only Secret Child of the High Ones.

Still, despite her ability to do whatever she wanted, she was not perfect. Besides that, on Seken, Magic attracts Magic and thus Naraku had already faced many wars, thieves and evil sorcerers.

However, it had been peaceful for quite a while now and this purple-haired woman did not worry when she slept in her warm bed. Around her was the arm of her beloved, a simple human without any magic. For him, his wife was the best thing that ever happened to him and despite her quirks, nothing surprised him anymore.

Naraku looked like an adult, while in fact she was only seventeen years old. While relations and marriage with anyone below eighteen years were forbidden on Seken, Naraku and Keiran's marriage was allowed because Naraku had been an adult from the day she was born. Not only that, she was not really human and thus the human laws of love didn't apply to her.

The sun shone into the room, announcing the new day. It tickled the Chieftess and queen in the face, slowly waking her up. However, her bed was so nice and comfortable, Naraku had no intention of getting up already. She rolled over, snuggling a little closer against her beloved, without a single worry in the world. This was the first day she had off in a long time and she was positively certain she would be left alone today. Yes, today she would be able to sleep long and enjoy the company of Keiran. Nothing was going to happen. Nothing at all. Today was a sleep-day...

"Mom, mom, mom!" A sudden flash jumped onto the bed, waking up the two with the force of a hurricane. "Mom, it's morning! I want to play; can I? Can I? Do you think Graven will already be up? I want to build a snow fortress again, can you help us? I want it to be even bigger than last time!"

The Chieftess turned around, burying her face into the mattress, and exclaiming a sound of annoyance the little one did not understand. With a smile, the blue-haired young man got up, taking the little one from his wife. "Yume, what did we tell you about letting mommy sleep?"

"But she's not asleep." The little girl pointed at her mother. "Look, she's awake. You're awake, right, mom?"

The only reply the girl got, was even more growling from her mother. "Why don't you get your clothes and I help you get dressed?" Keiran smiled at the girl with lilac-blue coloured hair. "And then you can go and see if Graven is already up."

"Okay!" Yume jumped up and rushed towards a stairway that led to her room upstairs. The noise she made already proved the girl was making a huge mess and cleaning up was not her strength.

"Why won't she ever let me sleep?" Naraku grunted, annoyed.

Keiran pulled the pillow away from his wife and enjoyed her desperate face. "It's your own fault, you know?" The man grinned. "You insisted on calling her 'Yume'." He mentioned the Seken word for 'life'.

"She's even more energetic than Kai after a barrel of sugar." Naraku mumbled, ticked off, as the patter down the stairs announced the return of her daughter.

"Did you clean up the mess?" Keiran asked his daughter, while tying her wild hair into two high, thick pigtails. Yume nodded as a reply, putting on a pair of warm boots. "You didn't stuff it into the drawers again, like last time?"

Yume shook her head. "Do I have to go practise with Uncle Rain again today?" She asked her father, while he was tidying her clothes.

Keiran pulled down his daughter's skirt at the back and helped her back onto her feet. "No, not today." He reassured her. "You did very well with Magic Practise last time, so you and your mother can have the day off."

"I'm going to ask if Graven wants to build a fortress again!" Yume decided and hurried towards the door.

“Don’t use your magic to play hide and seek again!” Keiran warned his daughter.

“I don’t want to get you off a tower-roof again!”

“I won’t!” The girl promised and continued her way to the door. “Mom!” She then called out loud. “Whisper is in front of the door and won’t get up!”

Naraku screamed into her pillow and had trouble not sounding like a cranky woman. “Then take the other door!” She snapped at her daughter. The girl ran back to the stairs and her room. “And stop running through the room!” The girl ignored her and opened the door that connected her own room to a stairway around the tower she lived in. With a slam loud enough to wake the dead, it was closed once again. >Don’t slam with the doors!< Naraku called after her daughter, using her telepathy.

While the girl could receive telepathy, she wasn’t very good at using it herself yet. Rain, the Magic Teacher and Water User of the tribe, had told Naraku that was to be expected. After all, the girl was only five years old and had a lot of magic raging through her body that needed to be contained. “When she’s ready for it, she’ll start using it.” He had reassured her.

Suddenly, the door to Naraku and Keiran’s room opened again. “Mom!” Yume called out, letting in a cold gush of wind. “Can Whisper play along?”

“If she wants to.” Keiran called out, hearing his daughter call for the grey wolf they had adopted. “And don’t try to ride on her back again; you’re too heavy for that!”

“I won’t!” Yume promised and let the wolf calmly walk outside, slamming the door behind her again. While wolves are wild creatures, there were two wolves who lived in MorningSnow. One was Grasshopper, a cursed wolf who could turn into a human girl at will and the other one was Whisper, a lazy wolf who was the daughter of Shadowhunter; a wolf who was sent by The High Ones to kill Naraku. Despite the wolf being lazy and friendly, she still had instincts that had to be considered. She joined their hunts quite often, proving to be a worthy asset to the tribe, while at the same time she enjoyed playing with this little girl.

“Good morning, Yume.” A young man with bright orange hair greeted her. “Up already?”

“Good morning, Uncle Kai!” Yume greeted him back cheerfully. “Have you seen Graven?”

Kai shook his head. “No, I haven’t.” He admitted. “I think he’s still asleep.”

“I’ll go ask Aunt Mah-Lin and Uncle Blade!” Yume decided and passed the Fire User and cook of the tribe.

“Don’t forget it’s your turn to clean the hen house today!” Kai called after her.

“The chickens are your responsibility!”

“I won’t!” Yume waved back. “Not this time!”

“That’s what you said last time.” Kai tried to sound strict, but knew he couldn’t.

To give the children a sense of responsibility, they were often given minor chores, like cleaning the stables, feeding the animals, and going along to the forest to gather nuts, mushrooms, and herbs. However, while the boy named Graven was always serious about his tasks, Yume often slacked off with cleaning, sometimes even to the point that Kai had to do it himself again!

Still, Kai was not worried. He himself used to slack off as well, but he turned into a fine young man himself. “Maybe I should put some extra salt in Rain’s porridge...” Kai pondered, revealing he was also the prankster of the tribe. The little girl rushed over the battlement, followed by a calmly strolling wolf, towards the other tower that was turned into a room. Being polite, the girl knocked on the door, but her knocking was always accompanied by a loud voice. “Graven?!” She yelled, waking up whoever was still asleep. “Are you up yet?! Graven?!”

A few words Yume didn’t know yet sounded from inside the room, coming from the man Yume had come to know as Uncle Blade. As always, another voice snarled back to the man, telling him to calm down. Then, the door opened, and Yume looked at an eastern woman, who had long, dark-blue to black hair.

“Graven is already up...” The woman yawned.

“He is?” Yume pondered. “Aunt Mah-Lin, do you know where he is?”

“I think he’s in the library.” The woman rubbed her eyes.

“What is your son doing in the library?” It sounded from inside the room.

“He’s your son too!” Mah-Lin snapped back, showing she was not impressed by the man in her bed. “High Ones, just let your son be!”

Yume ignored the spat between the top hunter and top warrior of the tribe and thanked the woman politely. She then rushed down, heading towards the main castle and the library.

The library of Castle MorningSnow was one of the largest of Seken and kept on growing because of the librarian called Mayonaka. She was the princess of the Desert Kingdom, but preferred the life of a librarian and teacher in this rough north. While most of her friends were only allowed inside under (her) supervision, there was one she fully trusted with these valuable items.

He alone shared her love for reading and studying, despite his young age. While Graven, the son of hunter Blade and warrior Mah-Lin, was heading towards his ninth birthday, he rather spent his spare time in the library than practising with his parents. They had expected he would be a chip of the old block, but the child turned out to be the complete opposite. Calm, rational and quite smart for his age, Graven often hid in the library... even though he could never hide from *her*.

“Graven!” Yume popped up from behind a bookcase. “There you are!” She didn’t notice how the boy released a sigh of annoyance. “Let’s play!”

“I want to finish this book before breakfast.” Graven grunted. “So, I’d rather read.”

Yume climbed next to the boy and looked at the book. “Okay, what is it about?” She asked. “Is it a story book? Are there pictures?”

Graven tried to keep the book away from her. “It’s a book about animals.” He told her. “It tells me how...”

Suddenly Yume dove onto the book. “What a funny animal!” She pointed at a large animal. “What is it?”

“It’s a Buru...” Graven sighed. Most people on Seken were illiterate, but thanks to Mayonaka, most IceHunters could read quite well. Graven surpassed all, except his teacher, but chances were this was because Graven enjoyed reading and the others only read when they had to. Some only knew the alphabet and a few word-symbols,

like his father Blade, so the only books they could read were the simple books or the journals. Graven, however, knew both the alphabet and most of the symbols, learning more as he picked up books day after day. “Buru eat...”

“And what is that?” Yume had already flipped a few pages. “Is that a monster? It has a tail between its eyes!”

“That’s an elephant.” Graven replied. “It’s not a monster.”

“This one is funny!” Yume grabbed the book from Graven. So much for reading in peace... “I bet it likes to eat children. Look at that mouth!”

“Hippos don’t eat children.” Graven tried.

“Rawr!” Yume jumped up, not listening to Graven. “I’m going to eat you!”

“No, thank you.” Graven calmly took the book again. “I want to finish this chapter before breakfast.”

“You are no fun!” Yume huffed, placing her hands on her hips.

“Funny, I was about to say the same about you.” Graven turned back to the book.

“Huh?” Yume missed the sarcasm. A moment of silence followed, but as the only girl in the tribe, not to mention the heiress to the MorningSnow throne, Yume wasn’t used to being ignored. “Graven, let’s play!” She decided.

“No.” Graven replied in a cold tone.

“But I want to play!”

“And I want to read.”

“But I’m a princess and you are not, so you have to do as I say!” Yume then tried to pull ranks.

“Whatever.” Graven wasn’t impressed, not even looking up from his book. He knew he was expected to be Yume’s playmate, being the only other child in the tribe, but Graven couldn’t care less. He thought Yume was too spoiled for her own good and wished she stopped acting so childish. Why couldn’t that girl be more like him? When he was five, he already knew the alphabet. When he was five, Yume wasn’t there to play with him, so why should he jump whenever she said so? Because she was the daughter of his Chieftess? Whatever!

“I’m going to tell mom you don’t want to play with me!” Yume sounded as if she was about to cry.

“Fine, I’ll play with you.” Graven finally gave in with a deep sigh. “After I finish my book.”

“No, now!” Yume pulled the book from Graven’s hands, but lost her balance and bashed against a shelf. The shelf toppled over and if it wasn’t for Graven’s quick reaction, the girl would have been buried by the books for sure.

The shelf bumped against another shelf, toppling that one over as well, followed by two other shelves falling over as well.

The noise it caused left a small echo, but the silence that followed would only be temporary. Soon the adults would come, soon they would see the mess the children had caused. Graven had turned as white as a sheet. Not because of the mess, but because of the precious books that were all over the floor.

“Told you, you had to play with me.” Yume smiled happily.

“I found one!” Yume held a walnut high.

“Yume, for the last time,” Rain, a young man with ochre-coloured hair grunted. “This is not a field trip! This is a punishment for the mess you and Graven made in the library.”

“There’s another one!” Yume dashed around, looking for nuts left behind by squirrels.

“I told you this was a bad idea.” Graven mumbled to Rain. “You should have told her to clean the stables. She hates that.”

“Watch your tongue, young man.” Blade snarled at his son. “You’re lucky none of those books were damaged.”

“Yume, get down from there!” An Elfin young man hurried towards the girl, who was climbing on top of some rocks. “You might fall!”

“I won’t fall.” Yume assured him and climbed on, until she slipped away with a scream. In the nick of time the Elf grabbed her, preventing her fall.

“You’re giving me a heart attack!” The Elf snarled at her. “Stay on the ground.”

“Look, Uncle Ao!” Yume ignored what he said and pointed to a tree. “A bird!”

“Why do I get punished anyway?” Graven mumbled. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You know you’re not allowed to play in the library.” Blade looked down on his son.

“I didn’t play!” Graven snapped back.

“Don’t give me that tone!” Blade yelled back. “High Ones, young man, you’d better watch your tongue, or I...”

“Don’t be mad at him, Uncle Blade!” Yume suddenly hurried at them. “It was my fault! Graven didn’t do anything wrong!” Surprised by the sudden confession, Graven looked at the little girl before him. “Graven didn’t want to play, I didn’t let him read!”

Despite her spoiled nature, Yume knew better than to let someone be punished for things they didn’t do. However, Graven wondered if it wasn’t better to be punished for something he didn’t do, than something he did do... “You were reading again?!” Blade bellowed.

“It-it was a book about animals!” Graven tried, knowing how his father thought about reading. “I studied animals!”

“You can’t become a hunter by reading books!” Blade pointed at his son. “You can’t protect anyone with a book! Reading is useless!”

“Calm down, Blade.” Ao tried to calm down the warrior. “He’s still a kid.”

“Yeah,” Rain nodded. “he’s too young to practise with swords anyway.”

“My son will be a hunter and a warrior and not some stupid farmer!” Blade made clear, before turning back to his son. “And from today, we’ll start battle practise, you hear me?” He saw his son was trying not to cry. “It will be for your own good!” However, the child before him started trembling and Blade knew he was pushing things too far. Kneeling before his son, he placed his hands on the child’s arms. “Your mother is a warrior and huntress... I am a warrior and hunter... The three of us don’t have any magic within us. What else can we be but hunters? There are no fields here to grow crops. I know you like to read, but you must remember that all we can do for our tribe is to hunt and to protect. That’s all we non-Magic Users can do.” He saw his son rubbing his eyes. “I love you, that’s why I’m forbidding you to read. I only do this because I love you...”

The hunter picked his son up, who embraced him tightly with his arms, while he tried not to cry. On Seken, reading was a luxury and because of the size of the tribe, it was a luxury they could not afford. Being a scholar did not put food on the table, no matter how smart that person was.

Believe it or not, Blade honestly wanted what was best for his son... and Blade wanted his son to have a future...

“Shall we go home?” Rain suggested. “I bet Kai finished lunch.”

Ao picked up Yume and put her onto his shoulders. “Yeah, we’d better hurry, before that sister of mine eats it all up again.”

Blade nodded, holding his son close to him. “Sure, I think these kids learned their lesson.” He turned around. “Come.” He said to the others. “Yume still has to take care of the hen house.”

“Awe, can’t I do that tomorrow?” Yume pouted.

The others laughed. “No, missy, you are going to do your chores to-...” Ao started, but he was interrupted by a cry from deep within the forest.

“Help me! Someone, please help me!”

Episode 302: The girl who lost the light within her eyes

For a moment, The IceHunters looked in the distance, from where the cry had come. For some reason, they seemed to doubt whether they should react, but when Blade drew his sword, the children knew this was serious.

"I'll go too." Ao suggested, putting down Yume and taking the axe that was tied to his back.

"Dad..." Graven started, but Blade didn't look at him.

"Stay with Rain!" He ordered his son, before leaving the group.

Yume took Rain's hand, who looked at the frightened girl. "Do you think it will be those mean people again?" She asked him, carefully.

"I hope not." Rain bit his lip, knowing better than to lie. He looked around. "And we're too far to contact the others telepathically."

"Don't worry." Graven took Yume's other hand. "Dad will protect us."

"I'm not scared." Yume tried to convince herself. "Are you, Graven?"

"Boys are never scared." Graven answered, but the girl did notice the boy grabbed her hand a little tighter.

Meanwhile, Blade and Ao went through the snowy forest, looking for the origin of the cry. "If this is a trap again..." Ao hissed, holding the small axe tight.

"Ssh!" Blade hushed him, using his telepathy next. >We still have one advantage over those idiots.<

>Unless they suddenly found another mage to help them.< Ao rolled his eyes, following the hunter on the hill. >Remember the last one? That one seriously gave us a lot of trouble.<

Blade signalled Ao he had to be silent, when sounds of distress came from the other side of the hill. Carefully, they peeked over it, looking down. They saw a half-frozen river... and a girl trying to climb out of it. While the river was not deep and getting out should not be hard, the girl seemed to have a lot of trouble.

>What is she doing?< Ao wondered, seeing the girl struggle. >She will freeze to death if she stays in that water.<

>Stay focused.< Blade ordered the Elfin young man, while climbing down the hill. "Is everything all right, miss?" Blade called out, holding his sword ready in case of an emergency.

The words Blade called out, caused even more panic with the girl. She released a cry of fright, looking around wildly. "Whoa, is she blind or so?" Ao pondered.

"I think she is." Blade concluded, seeing the head moving from side to side. "I'm coming your way. I won't harm you."

"Someone... someone else is here too!" The girl panicked.

"That would be me!" Ao raised his hand. "Don't worry, we won't hurt you."

Blade put away his sword and reached out. "I'm going to help you get out of the water." Blade told her what he would do. "I'm going to take your right arm..."

When Blade touched her, the girl screamed. "[Hyena, hyena]!" Blade apologised in the Seken language. "I forgot my right is your left." The girl calmed down and Blade helped the girl out of the shallow freezing water.

“We should get her to Rain.” Ao suggested. “His Water Powers can probably dry her up in no time.”

Blade nodded. “Miss, we’ll take you to a friend of ours, who can help you dry up. Is that all right with you?”

“My parents!” The girl suddenly looked around in panic. “My parents... they... I...”

“What happened?” Ao tried to calm her down.

“Someone... some people attacked me and my parents.” The girl tried to ‘look’ around. “Where are they? I can’t hear them anymore! Mom? Dad?”

“Calm down!” Blade ordered the girl. “We’ll first take care of you, then Ao and I will look for your parents.” He saw her shivering, realising she was far from calm. “We’ll find them.”

Helping the girl up the hill, Blade told the girl where to place her feet. >I must admit,< Ao helped the girl as well. >you’re very good at handling blind people.< >How so?< Blade looked up surprised.

>You’re awfully... chivalrous to her.< Ao grinned.

Blade’s face turned to pure thunder. >One of my parents’ neighbours turned blind when I was a kid.< He growled. >What did you expect me to do? Yell at her?<

“What happened to your neighbour?” The girl suddenly asked, causing the two young men to look up surprised.

“He... he got very old and still lives with his wife.” Blade quickly said, but then noticed Ao’s face. His glance told Blade he knew the hunter lied, but what else should he say? Tell her the truth? That he got trampled by the horse he loved so much?

“High Ones!” Rain saw the three coming their way. “What happened to her?”

“I think they are at it again.” Blade grunted. “Miss, this is Rain. He’s a Water User and he can help you dry up.”

“Is this ice?” Rain gasped, quickly using his powers to let the ice evaporate.

“I hear something else!” The girl started to panic again.

“That would be Yume and Graven, two children.” Ao explained, noticing the shocked faces of the children. “Kids, don’t be scared.” He reassured them. “This girl can’t see, that’s why she was surprised to hear you walking towards her.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that...” Rain apologised. While on Earth, blind people can come along with society quite well, on Seken people believe being blind or deaf is a terrible illness someone should feel sorry for. After all, without ears and eyes, what could one do?

“Ao and I are going to look for her parents.” Blade decided. “Rain, take this girl and the kids home.”

While Rain nodded, another one didn’t agree. “No, dad!” Graven called out worried. “Don’t go!”

“Graven, I have to.” Blade knelt before his worried son. “I have to find her parents.”

“But you said it was them again!” Graven almost cried. “You always told me...”

“I know what I said.” Blade looked at the frightened eyes. “But I can’t leave innocent people behind.” He noticed the child didn’t calm down. “Tell you what.”

He then went to his side and untied the knife that was tied there. “You’re a man

now.” He handed the knife to his son, which was almost a short sword, compared to the size of the boy. “And you must protect Yume, like I protect Naraku. You are her soldier now.” He saw Graven clutching the knife. “Protect her, no matter what, okay?” He saw his son nod. “Go along with Rain, this girl and Yume, and tell your mother not to worry.” Blade got up again, knowing very well the danger he was plunging himself into. “Good hunting.” He wished his son, even though he would not go on a hunt. It was a wish equivalent to ‘good luck’.

“Good hunting.” Graven said back with a soft, trembling voice.

When both parties turned around, Yume immediately dove to the knife. “Wow, can I see it?” Yume reached out for it.

“No!” Graven grabbed the hand of the girl, forcing her to hold him tight. “You are too young for that!”

“But I wanna see!” Yume’s cries were ignored by her new protector, as she was being pulled home.

Back home, the adults only needed to share a few looks, before knowing what was going on. “Yume, go clean out the hen house.” Keiran sent his daughter away.

“But dad...” Yume tried.

“It’s your responsibility!” Keiran pointed, strict.

“Mom...” Yume then turned to her mother, grabbing the long leg.

“I have to help this girl.” Naraku shook her head, seeing the disappointed eyes of her daughter. “That’s the job of a queen: I have to help those who need it.”

“Seems you won’t be lucky today.” Kai grinned at the little girl.

Sulking, Yume turned towards the stable. “Yume, wait!” Graven wanted to hurry after her.

“Where do you think you are going?” Mah-Lin grabbed her son’s arm before he could run away. “And where did you get that knife?”

Graven looked at his mother. “Dad gave me this knife.” Graven replied, honest. “I have to protect Yume.”

“From what?” Mah-Lin said flabbergasted.

“From them.” Graven answered calmly.

“Who is ‘them?’!” Mah-Lin demanded to know.

“I’m her soldier now.” Graven noticed Yume was already leaving for the hen house and hurried after her, before his mother could stop him. “Yume, wait up!” Astounded, Mah-Lin watched him go. “That husband of mine is going to have some explaining to do!” She finally managed to exclaim, angry.

In the throne room, The IceHunters gathered around the blind girl, who was warming herself near the fire. There was no guard needed, as Kai had set up an alarm spell. Whenever anyone with evil intentions would go near, he would know it. They preferred not to use it, but on occasions like this...

They had already found out the girl was named Helena and that she suddenly lost her eyesight when she was twelve years old. While she managed to take care of herself inside the house, she could never leave the house... at least not without one of her parents.

She was now sixteen years old and missed seeing the world around her. The healer of her town suggested she would seek help with Queen Naraku, who had helped several other people before her. If the queen wouldn't know an answer, there was no answer.

What the healer of the town did not know, was that each time Naraku managed to help someone, it was because of pure luck and often exaggerated through stories. The dozens she was rumoured to have helped, were actually only a handful and the 'Curse of darkness' that had made a girl incredibly ugly, was actually a normal-looking girl who was cursed with a simple anti-love-curse.

Not knowing what to do about this sudden blindness, Naraku talked to Irina, the herbal healer and Air User of the tribe. While Irina could heal with the use of herbs and potions, Naraku could use her magic to heal others.

"Sudden blindness can be caused by several things." Irina told Naraku, showing her medical background. "It's often because of an illness, an extreme flash of light or an accident."

"Helena said it happened from one day to another." Naraku was at a loss. "How can I fix something like that?"

"Maybe she was once sick and that it caused the blindness?" Sushi, the red-haired Elf wondered. "Sometimes such a thing goes slowly. Maybe she was turning blind slowly, but never noticed it?" The Elfin maiden was the sister of Ao and unlike her brother, she had no access to Earth Magic. She did, however, have access to witchcraft and Summoning, being a more valuable asset to the tribe than she'd ever admit. The girl was also blessed with a beautiful voice and incredible fashion-sense, so she was also the tribe's singer and tanner.

"Helena said she only had the flu once in a while." Naraku shrugged. "That can't cause blindness, can it?"

The moment Irina wanted to reply, the door opened, and a young man stepped in. It was Matsuru, the young man who had found Naraku and raised her as his daughter. He was a simple farmer and the husband of Irina, with a calm and rational mind. "Irina, Naraku, can I talk to you?" His voice and face betrayed he had bad news.

"We'll be right back." Irina smiled at Helena, who could do nothing else but sit in a chair near the fire.

In the hallway, Naraku closed the door behind her. "Is it the kids?" She worried immediately.

Matsuru shook his head. "No, Mayonaka and Grasshopper are keeping an eye on them in the library." He reassured his 'daughter'. "It's about that girl... Blade and Ao just returned..."

"High Ones..." Irina gasped, knowing what was about to come.

"Was it them again?" Naraku carefully asked.

Matsuru nodded. "Looks like it." Matsuru knew who his Chieftess meant. "Blade and Ao will join us soon, but the details weren't pretty."

"How can we ever tell her this?" Irina shook her head. "Her parents only wanted their girl to be happy again..."

“We’ll deal with those bastards later.” Naraku was steaming up. “But I have to cure her blindness; I have to! I can’t give her back her parents, but I can give her back her sight!”

“Don’t make such promises.” Matsuru warned the girl.

“I’m a High One; there’s nothing I can’t do!” Naraku snapped back.

“Calm down.” Irina instructed the Chieftess. “Right now, you can’t do a thing. We first have to tell this girl... that poor thing...”

Having lived in a large city, Irina had faced much tragedy as a healer. Though she never got used to it, she was someone who had the most experience with bringing the worst news. The cry of the girl broke every heart that was near, as she realised her parents would never come back... She was now truly alone.

“You can stay here.” Naraku reassured the girl, hoping it would make her feel better. “And we’ll get those bastards for doing this!”

“It’s my fault!” The girl sobbed without control. “I begged them to go! This can’t be real! You have to be mistaken!”

“We wish we were...” Irina admitted. “but they didn’t suffer long.”

“How is that supposed to make me feel better?!” The girl cried out. “My parents are dead! Dead! And it’s all my fault!” Helena slapped away all touches. “It should have been me!” She called out angrily. “But I can’t even jump from a tower because I can’t even see that damned thing!”

Naraku looked worried at her friends, but Irina’s face assured Naraku that this was grief speaking. “We’ll protect you.” Naraku tried to make the girl feel better, but Helena didn’t hear the words.

“Maybe you should all go.” Irina suggested kindly. “Let her adjust to the new situation.”

The others nodded and left the room in silence. Feeling sorry for the cries behind them, they decided they’d help this girl no matter what.

“So, we’ve got ourselves a new tribe member?” Blade grunted when they gathered in the library. “Great, another mouth to feed.”

“She’ll pull her own weight!” Naraku snapped at Blade, but then turned to Mayonaka. “She can still do a lot, can’t she?”

The brown-skinned princess didn’t look too happy. “As far as I know, blind people can’t do much.” She admitted. “They can do simple chores like cleaning and cooking, but you always have to supervise them.”

“Maybe we can teach her how to make music.” Sushi suggested. “That’s something she can do unsupervised.” On Seken, the knowledge about blindness was still limited and blind people were often considered a burden. Most blind people remained home, living under the care of their loved ones, as the outside world was a dangerous place for them. The only profession blind people could perform, was being a musician, where the performer would depend on room and board from a single beneficiary.

“I feel so sorry for her.” Naraku sighed. “Bright Stellus is our enemy, not Helena’s.”

“Bright Stellus is against everyone who supports you.” Rain sat down on a table, revealing the enemy that had killed Helena’s parents. “The Seven United Tribes may have buried the past, but Bright Stellus has no intention of doing so.”

In the young days of the kingdom of MorningSnow, a neighbouring kingdom, Stellus, had attacked MorningSnow several times. The third king of MorningSnow managed to defeat Stellus once and for all, by splitting up the country into smaller parts. The inhabitants of Stellus were taught that, due to the pride of the defeated soldiers, MorningSnow was a poison that robbed them of their name and country. When MorningSnow, more than five thousand years after Stellus’ defeat, was reinstated by Naraku, the people of the seven nations made an alliance. Their goal was to defeat the ‘malicious growth called MorningSnow’ and restore the glory of Stellus. They called themselves the Seven United Tribes and they confronted Naraku a few years ago. Challenging them in a one-on-one battle, Naraku managed to prevent the spill of blood and the darkness of war, while both parties kept their honour intact.

The Seven United Tribes left, promising they would do the same thing MorningSnow did so many years ago: gather their nations into one country and make it prosperous. That was the power of MorningSnow and that would be the power of the new Stellus.

However, not everyone agreed with the truce and kept on believing in the glory of Stellus. They split up into splinter groups, determined to bring MorningSnow down. Bright Stellus was the most ruthless one, not hesitating to kill whatever soul they came across.

“We should do what Nyhmar did.” Ao mumbled. “Maybe that will knock some sense into them!”

“Ao!” Naraku jumped up. “We will not do what Irina’s home town did!”

“They poisoned three wells!” Ao disagreed. “Forty-seven people died, including twenty-three children!”

“A raid is not the answer.” Mayonaka agreed with her Chieftess. “From the seventeen arrested people, three turned out to be innocent.”

“So?” Ao wasn’t impressed. “Their names were cleared.”

“That really helps now that they are *dead*!” Mayonaka snapped. “If they would have been given a proper trial, instead of that farce, those poor people would have been saved from execution.”

“At least Bright Stellus left Nyhmar!” Ao yelled back.

“Stop it!” Naraku interrupted. “You two sound like my mother and me!” The Chieftess referred to the High One Yunakara, who hated her daughter deeply. Because of how Naraku was created, all twelve High Ones were her true parents. Still, Naraku considered Matsuru her true father and Yunakara her ‘main mother’. “Do you really think Bright Stellus left Nyhmar?” Matsuru then asked Ao. “Don’t worry Ao, Bright Stellus is still there. Unlike in our forest, they just hide over there.”

“You didn’t see what they did to Helena’s parents!” Ao couldn’t calm down. “You didn’t hear their laughter, taunting us, knowing the two of us couldn’t do a single thing.”

“We couldn’t even bury them.” Blade agreed with Ao. “Bright Stellus, what a load of bullsh...”

“Blade!” Mah-Lin snapped at him.

“...stuff...” Blade quickly said, seeing the wondering eyes of the children next to him. “I thought you two were playing with Grasshopper?”

“I’m hungry.” Yume admitted. “Grasshopper promised to get me something to eat, but she’s been gone so long!”

“Grasshopper is in my kitchen?!” Kai jumped up, scared, leaving the room in a flash.

“It’s getting late.” Mah-Lin decided, standing up and walking to her son. “It’s time this mister goes to his bed.” She picked him up. “Oof, you’re getting heavier with the day.”

When Yume saw this sign of affection, she quickly ran towards her mother and jumped at her. “Mom, pick me up too!” She yelled, but the sudden jump surprised Naraku so much that while the little girl was caught, her mother was soon on the ground as well.

Naraku wanted to correct the girl, but the cry of the cook and Fire User betrayed the wolf-girl Grasshopper had not only decided to get a snack for the little girl, but also a snack for herself. Not much later, a white wolf hurried into the library, trying to find a place to hide. “Grasshopper!” Yume jumped up, accidentally trampling her mother. “Did you get me something to eat?”

However, before she could reach the wolf, Yume was grabbed by her father, who simply carried her away underneath his arm. “Bedtime for you too, missy.” He smiled at her.

“What? No!” Yume almost cried. “I’m not sleepy yet!” However, her father ignored her, carrying the trampling girl out of the room. “I want to play with Grasshopper! I want to play with Graven!”

“Goodness, I wonder what Keiran will do when she’ll be too heavy to carry around.” Mayonaka sighed.

Sushi walked away from Mayonaka, looking at the floor next to her best friend. “Is the floor comfortable?” She asked her Chieftess, who had remained on the floor.

“...I thank the High Ones it’s sleep-day only once a week...” The Chieftess moaned.

Episode 303: How the sound took away the light

A few days passed and The IceHunters were trying to figure out what to do about their new tribe member. While grief was ever present, the girl had accepted her solitude, though she hardly left the library. She sometimes took a few steps, touching the books, smelling them, and turning some pages.

Paper. She always dreamed of learning how to read, but now that dream was gone forever. The words, she could not feel, thus the pages felt cold and empty to her. Just like she did...

The warriors of MorningSnow had ventured into the forest again, giving Helena's parents a proper burial, but like before, Bright Stellus remained in hiding. While The IceHunters knew there were small groups of people in their forest, they hardly ever came across any. Only a few times they did meet them and they barely managed to survive.

Though Bright Stellus was small and scattered, their desire to kill everyone in Castle MorningSnow was grand enough to call them a threat. They never cared if it was a child, a woman, or a man... Many lives in the lands of MorningSnow were lost because of a millennia-old grudge.

Naraku tried to do something about it, as it was the queen's responsibility, but the towns of MorningSnow kept to their own laws and rules, honestly telling the queen 'to mind her own business'.

The woman realised this was a downside of her own rule: the towns were united under one throne, but they could keep their laws and customs. Naraku tried to explain the history of MorningSnow and Stellus, but no one could believe that was the reason.

Mayonaka told Naraku that you can't help a town if they won't accept your help, even if you know a way to save them. "If they won't acknowledge there's a problem, they won't see the use of a solution." Mayonaka told her again, seeing the Chieftess staring into the distance, instead of looking at the book she was supposed to study.

"We managed to show some people the truth, didn't we?" Naraku sighed. "Why can't the others?"

"Some people are just more stubborn." Rain shrugged. "I don't want to sound rude, but I didn't give up Magic Practise so you could mope around."

Naraku sighed one more time and turned back to the book in front of her. "Lucky Yume." She mumbled. "At least she can play..."

"This would be too complicated for her." Irina smiled kindly. "The eye is a delicate thing. If we use the wrong healing magic, we could make it even worse."

"The pictures are gross." Naraku admitted, looking at the picture of an eye cut open.

"It's a biology book." Mayonaka replied, annoyed. "Would you rather cut open an eye yourself?"

"No, thank you!" Naraku quickly said.

"I never knew the eye was hollow." Rain admitted. "And that this thing here works the same as the glasses some people use."

“Actually, glasses were based upon the lens in the eye.” Irina smiled. “The only difference between glasses and the eye’s lens is that the lens can stretch and...”
“Ew, there are strings attached to it!” Naraku had flipped a page.
Irina turned away from Rain. “Since there is nothing wrong with Helena’s lens, the problem must be in one of these strings.” Irina guessed. “Maybe there’s an infection, or maybe they are twisted...”
“How would we know that?” Naraku wondered. “And how can we fix that?”
Irina pondered. “Well, you can use your magic to ‘see’ inside her and probably even untangle the veins, if that’s what’s causing the blindness.”
“And what if it’s not?” Mayonaka wondered.
“Then perhaps what Naraku should do, is follow them.” Irina guessed. “I have to admit eyes are not my field of expertise; I never met anyone who was specialised in eyesight; only someone who made glasses.”
Naraku leaned back and sighed. “This is going to be one weird field trip.” She admitted. “So, when shall we do this?”
“We’ll have to get her consent.” Irina told her Chieftess. “She’s also quite weak, because of the events, so perhaps we should do this in a week or two?”
“Let’s ask her.” Rain suggested, getting up.
“Oh, you won’t find her in the library anymore.” Naraku stopped her Magic Teacher. “Sushi came to pick her up; she wanted to see if she could learn how to play an instrument.”

“Okay, so maybe a flute, a harp or guitar isn’t your thing...” Sushi quickly took away the guitar from the girl.
“I’ve told you: I’m tone deaf!” Helena grunted. “I can’t hold a rhythm; I was chosen as the Town’s Worst Dancer!”
“How about drums?” Sushi suggested, getting a small drum and placing it in front of the girl. “You can use your hands. Just follow my example: Tap-tap-tappity-tap.”
The blind girl tried to follow the example, but like all instruments, she couldn’t follow the easiest rhythm. Even if she got it right once, she could never reproduce it. It wasn’t because she wasn’t trying; it was honestly pointless.
“Maybe singing is your thing...” Sushi suggested.
“No way, no way!” Helena immediately jumped up, almost tripping over the drum. “I’m not going to sing! I have the voice of a cow!”
“It’s probably not that bad.” Sushi tried to reassure her. “I often sang off-key on purpose, just to make others smile. I bet you have a beautiful voice.”
“My own mother said I had a terrible voice.” Helena mumbled, but then remembered the ones she missed so much.
“I fail to believe that.” Sushi smiled softly. “Just try it, okay?”
The girl sighed, gathered courage, and then opened her mouth:

*They have said,
there’s a maiden locked.
In a tower, near the sea,
she awaits her prince.*

*Do you have the courage,
do you have the skill?
Be careful of the monster,
it hides in the depths below.*

*The monster is her greed,
it shall devour you whole.
Beware of maidens in towers,
a shade always hides within!*

Helena closed her mouth and noticed the silence around her. “Miss Sushi?” She asked, looking around.

“I’m never going to question your mother again.” Sushi replied, laying on the floor, holding her long ears tight.

Even though only three days had passed, Helena seemed to cope quite well, despite the fact she was an orphan now. Deaths happened all the time and the girl was welcomed in a warm, though sometimes strange, family. At moments, she was sad and preferred to be alone, while at other moments she seemed like a grumpy brat. Now that it turned out she could not even perform the one job blind people could do, Helena felt more useless than ever.

“Aunt Helena?” Yume popped up next to the blind girl, startling her.

“Oh, hello, Yume.” Helena tried to smile. “Please don’t call me ‘Aunt’; I’m too young for that.”

“Can I call you sister then?” Yume asked boldly. “I want a big sister, but mom won’t get me one. She says I have Graven, but Graven is a boy and not a girl.” Yume stood on her toes and whispered in Helena’s ears. “And Graven looks really weird in a dress!”

Helena couldn’t help but giggle. “All right, I can be your big sister.” She smiled.

“But I can’t really be a really good one.”

“You can tell me a story before bedtime!” Yume looked happy.

“But I only know one story.” Helena sighed. “Why don’t you ask Mister Kai? He’s a really good storyteller.”

“I don’t mind.” Yume leaned on the chair’s arm. “I’ve heard all of Uncle Kai’s stories already and dad’s stories are really boring.”

“But I already told you the one story I knew.”

“I don’t mind!” Yume smiled. “Please? I really like that story!”

“All right then.” Helena smiled back. “But only if your mother says it’s okay.”

“Oh, she won’t mind!” Yume immediately said. “Thank you, Sister Helena!” Yume then turned around. “Mom! I got a big sister!” The girl yelled while dashing off.

“What story did you tell her?” Kai asked Helena, curious.

“Oh, it’s not really a story.” Helena replied, startled. “It’s about the founder of my home town, Worahn, and how he met his wife.”

“Oh, you’re from Wypell.” Kai recalled. “I actually only know what happened during the founding of MorningSnow; not what happened afterwards. Our logs only focus on the castle and important things in the kingdom.”

“Oh, it’s such a romantic story!” Helena started enthusiastically. “How people wanted him to wed this rich lady, but she was really snobby. A peasant girl who liked him saved him, but the rich lady...” She then stopped. “Hold on, let’s start at the beginning.” She then smiled. “Worahn was one of the soldiers who fought bravely in the first war of MorningSnow.” Helena began, completely silencing Kai. “Would you look at that?” Keiran pointed at the mesmerised Kai and the happily chattering Helena. “I think something nice could be blooming there.”

“How so?” Naraku wondered, looking at the two, while trying to let Yume behave. “Helena manages to make Kai forget about dinner!”

“Do you think Kai’s in love?” Naraku gasped.

“Not yet, but I wouldn’t be surprised if something would grow between those two!” Keiran then noticed something. “Yume, get those potatoes out of your hair!”

After dinner, Kai and Helena walked over the battlement. “Thank you, for taking me outside.” Helena softly thanked the man, who was almost one-hundredth-and-thirty years her senior.

“No problem.” Kai smiled back. “I can still do the dishes in an hour or so.”

“Maybe I can help?” Helena suggested. “I often helped my mother.”

“I would really like that!” Kai replied, seeing her smile softly and with a blush on her face. A moment of silence followed, but then Kai gathered his courage.

“Helena, I know this will startle you... but I really like you.”

“I really like you too.” Helena whispered back.

Kai noticed her soft face, trying to avoid his eyes, which didn’t really work. “I love how you tell stories and I really enjoy your company... but you’re not a Full Grown yet.”

“Is it because I’m blind?” Helena asked carefully.

“No, it’s not.” Kai wanted to shake his head, but knew that was pointless. “But I made a rule for myself: I’ll never pursue a married woman and I’ll never go after a child.” Kai turned away. “I haven’t been the luckiest one, when it comes to love.” Kai admitted. “Believe me, if you would have been two years older, I would have tried it...”

Helena raised her hand. “If love is out of the question... then I’m glad you told me now.” She admitted. “Because I really started to like you.”

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings.” Kai scratched his head. “I want to keep on hanging out with you.”

“And who knows.” Helena rested her head against his arm. “Two years isn’t that long...”

“Yeah...” Kai couldn’t help but blush when the girl touched his arm. He liked her, he really did, but he didn’t want to give her another broken heart this soon after the loss of her parents. Though... why did he tell her this? Why did he open his heart and feelings this easily? He told her things he never even told his best friend!

Not even Rain knew about his unlucky love-past! So why did he want to be honest with this child?

“It’s a beautiful night.” Helena sighed.

“Oh?” Kai looked up, surprised.

“Yes, can’t you hear the Night Hummers?” She mentioned the bird species that sang during the night. “They must be singing for us.”

Kai looked around, but didn’t see or hear a thing. “I can’t hear them.” He admitted.

“How can you not hear them?” Helena laughed. “Their song is so loud and beautiful!”

Kai looked again, but again he didn’t hear a single sound but their own. “I’m sorry, Helena...” He admitted. “But I honestly can’t hear them. Besides, Night Hummers never leave the forest.”

Helena stopped in her tracks, turning as white as a sheet. She hummed a few tones along with what she heard. “Then... then why am I hearing them?” She grabbed her head, almost in panic. “Please, tell me you are kidding!” She grabbed Kai’s vest. “You must be hearing them! Or at least that owl! Tell me you hear that owl!” Kai didn’t know what to reply or how to calm her down. Suddenly, the girl before him became silent. “It’s silent now.” She whispered, looking shocked. “A fox silenced them...”

“How is that possible?” Naraku looked at Irina, Rain, Ao and Kai, while Mayonaka was calming down Helena with a cup of tea. “I know I often sense things, but I never sensed a fox hunting!”

“Something weird is going on.” Ao agreed. “When we first found Helena, she heard what Blade and I were saying... through telepathy!”

“If it would have been magic, we would have sensed it.” Rain disagreed. “Naraku can sense the slightest fragment of magic.”

“But what else could it be?” Kai wanted to know. “Only people with magic can pick up telepathy.”

“People who hang out with Magic Users can ‘borrow’ some magic, so they can learn telepathy as well.” Irina referred to the non-Magic Users of the tribe.

“If Helena’s parents had magic, don’t you think she would have mentioned it?”

Kai said back.

“Maybe they never told her.” Ao shrugged.

Naraku looked at Helena, who was sitting in a chair near the fire. “I guess there’s one way to find out...” She sighed and carefully stepped towards the girl.

“Your Majesty!” Helena jumped up suddenly, spilling half her tea.

Naraku was surprised the girl had heard her coming, but there were more strange things going on. “Helena, you may call me Naraku.” She reassured the girl. “And please, sit down.” The warm voice let the girl sit down at ease again. “Helena, you know I have magic, don’t you?” The girl nodded in reply. “Well, I’m going to use my magic to see how I can help you.” Naraku looked into the blank eyes of the girl before her. “Maybe I can find out what caused your blindness.”

“Will it hurt?” Helena asked, worried.

“Of course not.” Naraku smiled. “It may tingle a bit, though. I’m not going to do anything. It’ll be as if I’m walking through a forest to explore things. I won’t do anything without your consent, all right?” The girl nodded again. “I’ll place my hands on your head. Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you.”

Calmly the Chieftess placed her hands on the sides of Helena’s head. While the girl stared into the darkness, the Chieftess closed her eyes to focus her magic on this one girl. It was as if Naraku started to see what Helena was seeing... nothing. However, even though Naraku wasn’t seeing a single thing... she did hear a lot! While Rain and Irina told her blindness could enhance other senses, this was ridiculous!

A mouse scurrying through the library, Whisper having dreams near the fireplace in the throne room, Blade and Mah-Lin having a fight about Graven’s knife in that same room, Grasshopper transforming into a human girl in the kitchen, so she could climb onto a cabinet and get some food that was placed upon another cabinet, Matsuru and Keiran talking about her and... A sudden blush formed on Naraku’s face, and she calmly let go of Helena.

“Your... eh, Naraku?” Helena asked, curious.

“Well, that was very informative.” Naraku tried to sound formal. “So, eh... You’re not hearing what Keiran and Matsuru are saying, right?”

Helena shook her head. “I can hear them talking, but I taught myself to focus on what is near me, instead of what’s going on in the other room. Why, should I...?”

“No, no!” Naraku waved her hands. “You’re doing great! Keep on doing that! I’m just going to... talk to Irina again. The eye is a delicate thing; we don’t want to make things worse, now do we?”

Helena shook her head and Naraku quickly walked away. “Well?” Kai asked.

“She honestly hears everything!” Naraku replied, embarrassed, whispering so softly she was almost silent.

“But is it magic?” Rain wondered.

Naraku hushed them. “Irina, can you take a look?”

“But Rain is a better Magic User than I am.” Irina pointed at the Magic Teacher of the tribe.

“Please?” Naraku only said ‘please’ because she really wanted Irina to look at the girl. Dragging the herbal healer through the room, Naraku and Irina were closely followed by the other Magic Users.

“Hello, Helena.” Irina introduced herself. “Do you mind if I take a little look as well?” Helena shrugged; Naraku’s actions hadn’t hurt her, even though the little ‘exploration’ had increased her senses for a moment. Irina too placed her hands upon the girl’s head, and even though the Air User had little experience in this field... she easily reached the same conclusion.

“So, I was right!” Naraku exclaimed. “It is of the same type!”

“What is?” Helena replied, frightened. “Is there something wrong with me?”

“No, no!” Irina smiled at the girl. “It’s just... How to put this... Sweetie, your blindness... We found what is causing it.”

“Can you cure it?” Kai wondered curious.

“Yes, Naraku can.” Irina saw the girl looking up, rejoiced. “Quite easily as well.”

“But?” Ao asked, wondering why they took so long.

“It’s just...” Irina didn’t know how to start. “Sweetie, your blindness isn’t caused by an illness... It’s caused by magic.” Helena’s mouth dropped open. “Air magic, to be precise.”

“How can magic cause blindness?” Mayonaka gasped.

Irina got up again. “Well... it seems the focus of Helena’s magic is somehow focused right behind her eyes. Don’t ask me how it got there; magic is usually focused right underneath the heart.”

“So, I’m a Magic User?” Helena whispered, frightened. “And my magic is causing my blindness?”

Irina nodded. “Yes, it is.” She admitted. “Somehow the focus of your magic is growing behind your eyes.”

“But doesn’t it make sense?” Naraku wondered. “I mean, considering her powers...”

“So, Helena is an Air User, like you?” Rain asked Irina.

“Yes and no.” Irina decided to complicate things. “She hasn’t got the skills to control the flow of the wind or the energy to manipulate lightning...”

“But she can control sound.” Naraku concluded. “Helena is a Sound User!”

Episode 304: The first of all

“...I’m a Sound User?” Helena didn’t sound impressed at all. “Sound Users don’t exist!”

“They do now.” Irina replied, kindly. “Helena, you are the first Sound User ever recorded!”

“This is so exciting!” Mayonaka clapped into her hands. “I have to write this down into our journal. Where is my pen? Defrost the ink!”

“It does explain how she can hear things that are miles away.” Rain nodded, approving. “And since sound is caught by the ears, the placement of her focus is logical as well.”

“Phew.” Kai sighed relieved. “For a moment I worried something terrible would have been going on.”

“But without the proper training...” Ao mentioned. “Amazing how she managed to keep herself from going crazy.”

“Stop it!” Helena jumped up. “Stop it!” All looked surprised at the trembling girl. “I’m not a Sound User! That’s totally ridiculous!”

“Aren’t you happy?” Naraku wondered, innocently.

“Happy?!” Helena screamed. “I’m blind! I’m blind and I have powers over something useless! And those useless powers are the reason I’m blind! And now you say I should be happy!”

“But sweetie...” Irina reached out for Helena.

“Stop calling me sweetie!” Helena slapped the hands away and stepped back, but by doing so, she almost tripped over the chair. “I don’t want to hear everything I’m hearing! I want my eyes back!”

Kai helped Helena and embraced her from behind, hoping to calm her down.

“Lena, magic is not something you should be afraid of. Magic is wonderful, especially if you have a special power like Sound.”

“I don’t want magic!” Helena cried. “I want my eyes back!”

“If you really want that...” Naraku came closer. “I can take away your magic... steal it... and there is a possibility it will cure your blindness.”

“But there is also a possibility it won’t.” Irina admitted. “Your magic damaged your eyes while growing. There is a possibility you won’t regain your eyesight.”

“And then you’ll have lost both.” Rain told Helena.

Silence filled the room for all but Helena. She could hear things that were happening in rooms far away, things no one else could hear. How could such a thing be a blessing? No, she wanted to be rid of those powers! She didn’t want to hear the things! She didn’t...

In desperation, Helena turned around and buried her face into Kai’s vest. She cried salty tears, having yet another trauma to deal with. Not only that, she also had to choose whether to keep her curse or not.

“Isn’t there another way?” Ao whispered, feeling sorry for the girl. “Can’t we move that magical focus?”

Rain shrugged. “I’ve only been a Magic Teacher for seventeen years now.” He admitted. “And thus far my only students were Naraku, Grasshopper and Yume.”

“I never heard about the possibility of shifting focus.” Irina added her voice. “But maybe Ion has!” Naraku called out. “Ion has been a Magic Teacher for decades; he even went to a special Magic Teacher School!” Rain grabbed Naraku’s arm and pulled her closer. “Naraku, mind your tongue! The village thinks Ion is Master’s grandson, so they don’t know Ion has been to Magic Teacher School!”

Naraku gasped when she realised she had blurted out a secret, but luckily Helena was too distressed to notice it. In the town Animuk, the one closest to MorningSnow, a man called Ion lived. They thought he was the grandson of their beloved Master; their missing healer and Magic Teacher, while in fact Ion and Master were the same person!

Ion had taken the form of Master to hide from his sister, Soleil, the Sage of the Sun, who had gone crazy with power. He himself was Lune, Master of the Moons. The two siblings were the personifications of both the sun and the three moons. To preserve the existence of the heavily bodies, twins were born who could be killed by no-one but each other. It often resulted in one sibling killing the other due to their unique magic. It always sparked the birth of a new twin, as if destiny knew when the dreaded prophecy of the twins would happen again.

As Master, Ion had gone to Magic Teacher School, to understand his powers, the prophecy and to find a way to end his dark fate. Even though he was unsuccessful in finding a ‘cure’, he did graduate as an official and licensed Magic Teacher, finding a home in Animuk. He trained several Magic Users and his last student was an Air User named Hane. After a clash with his sister, Master ‘left’ town and Ion, ‘the grandson’, took his place.

“But Ion knows a lot more than we do.” Naraku pondered again. “Maybe he can help Helena better than we can.”

“I don’t want these stupid powers!” Helena cried again. “I want you to take them out of me!”

Kai touched Helena calmly. “Lena, we can’t ‘just’ take them out. It might not cure your blindness and isn’t it wonderful you are the first Sound User in existence?”

“No!” Helena called out. “I don’t want to be special!”

“We’ll take you to a friend then.” Irina decided.

“I want it out now!”

“Helena, stop being so foolish!” Irina showed her healer’s nature. “If we rush this, we may end up making things worse! We’ll go to Animuk tomorrow evening and ask a friend for advice. If he says it’s wise to ‘steal’ your powers, then we shall respect your wish... Just be certain it is indeed what you want!”

“Now that we know what causes it, don’t you think this is a choice that has to be thought over, instead of rushing?” Kai asked Helena kindly. “You’ve lived with your powers for years now; taking it away would mean taking away a part of who you are.”

“I will do what you ask of me.” Naraku told Helena. “But only after Ion has given his advice, whatever that advice will be.”

Even though Helena had agreed to asking Ion for advice, she didn't sleep much. If it would have been her choice, they would have left for Animuk that same night, but arrangements had to be made, not to mention people were tired.

In the morning, they discussed who would leave with Helena to Animuk.

"I'm really curious about Ion's opinion." Rain expressed his desire to go along.

"If you go along, Naraku, I have to stay here." Irina added. "We can't leave the tribe without a healer."

"I can heal!" Yume jumped in-between.

"No, you can't." Keiran picked up Yume and put her into his shoulders. "Not yet anyway."

"But I can heal!" Yume pouted.

"Healing yourself is different from healing others." Rain grinned at Yume.

"Then I can go along!" Yume decided.

"In your dreams!" Kai laughed. "With Rain and me along, we don't need another Magic User... especially not a Mini User like you!"

"I'm not mini!" Yume accidentally pounded onto her father's head. "I want to go along!"

"Next time, okay, Little Moon?" Keiran begged her to stop.

"If you take this [ruma] along," Mah-Lin pointed at her husband, calling him a fool.

"make sure he won't go hunting for Bright Stellus."

"Who says she will pick me to go along?" Blade blurted out.

"Would you let me go?"

"Absolutely not!" Blade burst. "If she'd pick you, I'd lock you into our tower."

"Hence why I'm not even volunteering..." Mah-Lin shrugged, "even though I'd totally win from you."

"Is that a challenge?" Blade grinned, sharing a meaningful glare with his wife.

"Maybe it is..." Mah-Lin whispered back.

"You left the keys in the drawer." Graven tucked his father's shirt. "In case you lose them again."

A silence followed, giving the parents completely red faces, turning them even more red when the other adults (except Naraku) started grinning. "Why is everybody laughing?" Naraku asked, innocent.

"I don't know." Yume admitted from her father's shoulders. "You two never tell me anything." She pointed at her embarrassed father.

"Oh, mom and dad were play-..." Graven started but was grabbed by his father.

"That's nice, son." He quickly said. "Don't you have a book to read?"

"So, who will go along?" Rain quickly said, trying to avert the attention from this awkward moment.

"Ah, yes." Naraku quickly returned to the subject. "I pick Rain, because he probably understands what Ion will say. I also pick Kai, because of his powers and I pick Blade, because of his skills."

Irina nodded. "A wise choice." She smiled. "Sushi, Ao and I can protect the castle in case of an emergency."

"The horses will love the trip." Keiran agreed with the choice. "Helena may borrow Silversun."

"When will I get my own horse?" Yume looked down from her father's shoulders.

“The next horse that will be born will be yours.” Keiran reassured his daughter.
“But Graven got Amorite!”
“Amorite is my horse?” Graven asked his parents.
“Well, it was supposed to be your birthday gift...” Mah-Lin sighed.
“I want a horse too!” Yume almost threw a tantrum on Keiran’s shoulders.
“The next one, okay?” Keiran tried to reason with her. “Stop pounding on my head! Yume, stop it, or you’ll get Milky as your horse!”
“I don’t want a cow; I want a horse!”
“Yume, behave yourself!” Naraku was fed up with her daughter. “Or you’ll spend your afternoon in your room!”
“I’m a princess; I want a horse!”
“Yume, be silent, or you’ll clean the stables for a week!” Kai threatened and immediately Yume stopped.
“We’ve got to remember that one.” Keiran mumbled, putting Yume on the floor. The little girl started sulking, but luckily the possible foresight of the stables was enough for her to know her place.
“Princesses don’t clean stables...” They heard her mutter.
Naraku wanted to reply that if Yume would start behaving as a princess, she wouldn’t have to be punished, but Keiran advised against it. For now, Yume had learned that she had to be patient and that not everything could go as she wanted. Both parents knew they had no one else to blame for their daughter’s behaviour but themselves.
“She’ll grow out of it.” Irina reassured the young parents. “And don’t blame yourself for loving her.”

That evening, Kai helped Helena on Silversun, Keiran’s horse. After that, he climbed on Komodo, riding next to the girl. Naraku elegantly jumped on Apple, after saying goodbye to her little girl and beloved. The past few days, Naraku had had little time for her daughter, and she promised the two would play together when they’d return. Blade sat down on Dusk, after ruffling through his son’s hair and kissing his wife goodbye.

“Don’t go looking for Bright Stellus!” Mah-Lin warned her husband. “Or you will sleep on the couch for a week!”

“I won’t, I won’t!” Blade rolled his eyes.

Rain was the last to climb onto his horse: Amante, lifemate of Blade’s horse. “Will you keep up with us?” He asked Grasshopper, who was in her wolf form. The wolf nodded, something she had picked up from her human companions. Due to an accident, the snow wolf could transform into both a human and a wolf, often mixing behaviour. She had never managed to learn how to speak, so she used both telepathy and sign language to communicate.

“Be careful!” Keiran yelled after his wife, seeing her leave through the gates.

“Bye, mom!” Yume waved with her little hand.

The gates closed and Naraku felt a sudden loneliness crawling inside her heart. She couldn’t recall the last time she was separated from her loved ones. Sure, she had gone hunting, but the hunts never lasted a day. Now she’d be gone for at least three days.

“Don’t worry, Lena.” Kai seemed to have given her a nickname. “We’ll be in Animuk soon.”

Helena held the bridles tight. Being out in the open, where anything could happen, frightened her. What if she’d come across those evil people again? Though she now knew she had magic inside her, she wasn’t reassured. The power of sound, what good could that do? So what she could hear a bird flapping its wings a mile away, hurray, hurray. So what she could hear a bee buzz on the other side of the forest, woohoo. So what she could hear footsteps... footsteps!

“I can hear someone coming!” Helena called out, frightened.

Immediately, Naraku, Kai, Rain, Blade and Grasshopper turned around and took a protective stance around Helena. In silence, they stared around, their swords and magic ready. However, nothing seemed to happen. Naraku closed her eyes and tried to use her own enhanced senses, but the result was nothing.

“Could it have been someone in MorningSnow?” Rain whispered.

Helena shook her head. “No, this one was different! I heard branches snapping!”

Naraku looked around one more time. “I don’t think it was anything near.” She whispered. “But stay on guard.” Naraku turned to Helena. “Helena, I want you to keep your ears open. If you hear anything again, let us know!”

“But you said there was nothing!” Helena was confused.

“Helena, Bright Stellus is with I-don’t-know how many people. We are with five.” Naraku sounded snappy. “I’d rather stop ten times for a false warning than ignore a single truth.”

Helena looked worried. “Lena, you can hear things we can’t.” Kai tried. “Your powers can keep us safe, so please, if you hear something, tell us.”

The girl nodded, clutching the bridles again. The group went on again, cautious of whatever might come. However, the silence made them careless and soon the girl did what she always did: ignore the sounds. She picked a single sound and focused on that: the tales of the Fire User next to her. Though she couldn’t see him, she imagined he looked very handsome. He had told her he had orange-coloured hair and brown eyes and even though it was hard, the girl managed to form an image of him in her mind. Oh, if she could only see again... she’d gladly give up that useless power of sound, just to have her sight back again.

Dreaming, Helena drifted away in the void of her dreams, where she could finally see again. She dreamed of a life with Kai, helping him in the kitchen and with the animals... and on her eighteenth birthday, he would propose to her. She was absolutely certain of it! She would wear a beautiful yellow gown... No wait, a green one! And her hair... she must look awful now. Because of her ‘illness’, her mother cut her hair short, so Helena wouldn’t be hindered by it. Helena never liked short hair on women, so she probably looked like a boy. Maybe that was why Kai decided to keep her at a distance! It had to be! Such a wonderful young man...

“What was that?” Rain asked, stopping the group.

“Helena?” Kai asked the girl, snapping her up from her dreams.

“I do!” She accidentally blurted out.

“Do you hear something?!” Blade grabbed his sword.

Helena didn't know what to do and waved her hands embarrassed. "No, no, wait!" She apologised. "I didn't hear anything, I was just..." Ashamed, she admitted it. "I... I was dreaming."

"Helena, we told you to listen!" Kai replied and out of worry, he created a ball of fire. "We all counted on you!"

"I-I'm sorry!" Helena felt awful. "I didn't mean to! It was an accident; I..." Then, she suddenly stopped. "I hear metal." She whispered. "Footsteps... twelve... no, sixteen. Men; one woman... or a very light man." The way she spoke filled everyone, especially Helena, with a grave sense of worry.

"From where?" Blade demanded to know. Sixteen against five... How could they ever win that?

"Behind us!" Helena snapped her head back. "No, wait, from the right! High Ones, they are so close!"

"Your close or our close?!" Naraku yelled; trying to calm her horse down.

"A string..." Helena turned as white as a sheet. "A bow... an arrow..."

"I'd say both!" Kai reacted immediately and grabbed Helena from Silversun. A small flash went through the sky, barely missing the horse and the girl who had sat on top of him. "Get between the horses!" He ordered the girl, putting her onto the ground.

The warmth of five horses suddenly pressed against the skin of the girl, letting her know she was surrounded by them. "Kai?" Helena called out, scared. "What is going on?"

A horn's call filled the air and the five IceHunters readied themselves. "For Stellus!" A cry filled the woods, followed by a united voice. "Bright Stellus!"

"If I won't make it today," Blade saw how the men jumped from the bushes. "let Mah-Lin know I wasn't looking for them!" Then, a grin formed upon the warrior's face. "But she won't mind if I drag some along with me..."

Episode 305: The power of silence

“For Bright Stellus!” The united cry went through the woods, as sixteen men plunged themselves forward, towards the five IceHunters. The blind Helena was being protected by the bodies of the horses, but the girl had to be careful not to be accidentally trampled.

Kai used his Fire Powers to create some sort of a barrier, while Rain used his skills to create small, but dead-sharp balls of ice out of the moist of the air. Soon, blood was being spilled, on both sides.

Blade had to jump in-between to help Naraku, who was attacked by five men. She battled like a fury, but even though Naraku was a good fighter, she didn’t excel at anything. Her agility was what kept her alive, though she already had several cuts on her arms and face.

The sounds of the battle frightened Helena, until a strange new sound filled the air. She couldn’t tell if the sound’s origin was far away, or that it was just very soft... but fright filled her heart.

“Where is Grasshopper?” Helena called out worried, missing the snarls of the wolf.

“Where is that girl?” A soldier referred to Helena. “She got away last time because of that man, but this time...” However, his voice stopped. Uncertain, his mind went blank. Where did that girl come from? White hair, yellow eyes... and completely nude!

Forgetting the world around him, the soldier left the battle and walked to the girl who looked like a forest spirit. Never had he seen such beauty and pale skin... He didn’t care if this girl was from MorningSnow; she would be his slave forever!

Another soldier noticed his stunned companion and when he turned his face, he too noticed this unclothed pretty. “Hey, she is mine!” The soldier pushed away the man who had seen her first.

“I saw her first!” The other replied and struggling they crawled to the white-haired girl... who suddenly smiled. A soft growl escaped her throat, a signal was formed with her hands... and within the blink of an eye the two arguing men were trying to get away from a deadly white wolf! One scream died abruptly and the other, belonging to a crippled, crying man, didn’t even stand a chance.

Two men were defeated, and Grasshopper turned around, blood on her white fur, ready to grab the next soldier who threatened her family.

Injured and tired, Rain did his best to create spikes of ice from the snow around them, but the men were with too many and using his Magic was tiring. >Naraku, you have to... do something!< Rain begged, close to panic.

>Use your magic!< Naraku ordered Rain, being injured herself. >We managed to stop four of them already!<

>It’s no use!< Kai lost hope as well. >We can’t win this! Not if you won’t use your powers!<

>Let Seerah go!< Blade knew the situation was dire as well. >She can handle them!<

Naraku bit her lip; no! She couldn't let Seerah, the personification of all her anger, fear and hate, out. If that creature of Black Magic would get control of her, of Naraku's magic... then Seken would be doomed! She'd rather die!

One of the swords scrapped Apple and her neigh was mixed with Helena's cry, who was startled by the moving horse. "Helena..." Naraku whispered. >Helena, use your magic!<

"But what can I do?" Helena cried, frightened. "I can only hear things!"

>Block out the sound!< Naraku ordered. >Take away all the sound!<

"But I don't know how to do that!" Helena panicked. "I-I don't know..."

"Do it!" Kai yelled at her, having caught the telepathy. "Wish for it!"

>Focus.< Rain bit on his lip, trying to ignore the pain. >You have the power over sound. Deep within you, you have the power to kill all sound around you!<

Helena didn't know what to do, rubbing her eyes in panic, as well as trying to do what was asked of her. Barely a day ago she had heard she was a Magic User and now everybody depended on her! Sound, a useless power, what good could it do? And then... silence. Helena looked up, opening her mouth, but no sound came out. She tried to scream, but nothing happened anymore. >Well done.< Naraku's

warm, reassuring voice calmed her down. >You did wonderful.< A smile appeared on the Chieftess' face, seeing the panicking men around her.

>I'm so proud of you.< Kai grinned, gathering his strength to form a fireball.

>Keep it up.<

Using their telepathy, The IceHunters used their advantage to coordinate a counter-attack. The soldiers of Bright Stellus, not being able to communicate anymore, became an easy prey. It was a good thing the only child in their middle couldn't see, because the result wasn't pretty. Blocking out all mercy, The IceHunters took revenge for all who were killed by these murderers. Even though the forest wouldn't be cleared after tonight, they at least would give a warning to all who'd try to attack the innocent.

The soldiers tried to fight back, but the sight of their comrades being killed so easily, made them weak and erratic. Still, they managed to hurt Naraku's friends, before the last one went down.

>Helena, you can return the sound.<

The girl shook her head. "...o I do... Oh, like that..." She noticed how the sound floated back. "Where did everybody go?"

"They ran off." Kai lied, stepping over a body. "The silence you caused scared the heck out of them."

"It did?" Helena couldn't believe it; she had scared them off? Just like that? She couldn't help but feel a little proud. She, a simple blind girl... had saved them all! "You did great, but it's not over yet." Naraku stayed cautious. "We're injured and I need to use my healing powers." She saw Helena grabbing her mouth. "I need you to focus and warn us if anyone else gets near."

Helena nodded quickly. "Of course." She said, focusing on the sounds. For a split second she dreamed of being in Kai's arms, telling her how strong she was and how she saved them all, but she then shook her head. No more dreaming; no more! She had to focus; they all depended on her! This time she wouldn't let them down.

However, the moans of her protectors told her they were injured more than they wanted to tell her. She heard Blade hiss that his leg was starting to feel numb, as well as Rain telling Naraku she had to be careful. The warmth Helena felt, proved the Chieftess and queen was using a lot of her healing magic. Wouldn't that exhaust her?

No, she couldn't focus on that. She had to focus on protecting her new-found friends. What if the escaped soldiers returned, having told their allies about Helena's powers? She couldn't scare them with silence anymore! They knew about her powers now, surely, they would be prepared next time.

"I... I have to see if... the horses..." The weak voice of Naraku moved, but a sound right after betrayed the Chieftess had collapsed.

"The horses are fine." Blade sounded worried. "Start thinking about yourself."

"Helena..." Naraku stretched out her hand.

"Helena is fine." Rain assured her.

"I heard Apple..." Naraku didn't want to think about herself before all her friends were attended to.

"Just a minor scrape; I already cleaned it." Rain knelt next to Naraku. "You have to heal yourself now, Naraku."

"Everybody is fine, but you again." Blade grunted. "This is getting ridiculous! You always forget to take care of yourself."

"I have to sleep now..." Naraku whispered.

"No!" Helena cried out, being held back by Kai. "You can't go to sleep!"

"Don't worry." Kai took Helena in his arms. "Naraku needs to sleep, so she can heal herself. It's the only way she can preserve her magic and still heal herself."

"I just wished she wouldn't let it get this far." Blade grunted, raising Naraku into the air. "She always pushes herself too far, but when it comes to her own life..."

Rain took Naraku from Blade, allowing him to mount his steed, so he could take Naraku back in his arms.

"We'd better leave." Kai agreed, putting Helena onto Silversun again. "Helena, did you hear anything?"

Helena shook her head. "No, I didn't hear anything... Well, not footsteps anyway. Just forest-noise."

"All right, then we're on the move." Rain turned towards Amante. "Do you think you can run for a while?"

>Run.< Amante nodded, showing her telepathy skills. >Fast. Long.<

"Don't exhaust yourself." Rain forbade her. "Are you ready, Blade?"

"You'd think with all the times this lady passed out I'd be used to riding around with one hand." Blade growled. "Try to avoid jumping, Dusk." He ordered his horse. "And not too fast."

"Will Naraku be okay?" Helena asked Kai, worried.

"She'll be fine." Kai reassured her. "But Blade is the only one who can hold someone while riding fast. I'd have to tie her to my horse, and she wouldn't like that when waking up."

"Naraku won't wake up until we reach Animuk or unless something else happens."

Rain rode next to them. "We all depend on your powers, Helena." He saw the girl nod; insecure, but discovering the advantages of her skills. "Let's leave this place."

“What if those evil people come back?” Helena worried.

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” Kai didn’t look back, as they left the scene. “You scared them good. They won’t come back for a long time!”

“Where’s Yume?!” A purple-haired woman jolted up, startling all around her. She looked around, noticing she was not in her bed.

“Well, good morning to you too, sleepy head.” Blade grinned, seeing Naraku waking up in the morning sun. “Right on time as well. We’ll reach Animuk within the hour.”

Naraku stretched herself, slowly regaining her memories. “Is everybody all right?” The Chieftess noticed the young Helena in Kai’s arms. “Don’t worry.” He could read Naraku’s worries from her face. “Helena was exhausted, but she’s a brave kid.” He looked at the sleeping teenager in his arms. “She wanted to stay up no matter what, but she couldn’t any longer.”

Apple walked next to Dusk and Naraku climbed onto her own horse. “Anymore trouble?” She inquired.

“I think we left a message.” Blade smiled, wickedly. “Helena said she heard some screams in the distance, but they faded soon after.”

“Good.” Naraku nodded, still angry. “May the other ones come to their senses.”

“Stupidity is the one illness you can’t cure.” Blade shrugged.

Rain rolled his eyes. “Always the positive one, aren’t you?” He mumbled. “Naraku, I know it’s early for you, but what are the plans? For when we reach Animuk?”

Naraku yawned again. “Well, I think it’s best if we rest first.” She suggested. “I hope Kyla won’t mind...”

“She and Levin took over the inn; it’s their job to welcome tired travellers.” Rain shrugged.

“But it seems so impolite.” Naraku mumbled. She thought about the woman they had known for so long and who had become a link between Animuk and MorningSnow. They often visited each other, sharing news in person, instead of letters. While some letters were brought back and forth by Sushi’s summoned creatures, such magic cost the Elfin Witch quite some energy. Because of this link and the history they shared, Kyla was sometimes referred as an unofficial IceHunter: having the same heart, but living elsewhere.

Whenever The IceHunters visited Animuk, Kyla was the first to be warned, but unlike other days, it was her husband Levin who welcomed the travellers.

“Welcome to Animuk, Chieftess Naraku of The IceHunters; Queen of MorningSnow.” Levin bowed politely. “How can I be of service?”

“May the light shine, Levin.” Naraku smiled back. “Is Kyla all right?”

Levin nodded. “She’ll be happy to see you, but the midwife, Ion and Wint all instructed her bed rest.”

“Is everything all right with the baby?” Naraku jumped off Apple, caught by worry.

“Due any moment.” Levin guided the young woman through the town. “But no one wants to take any risk.” The young man looked sad. “We already lost two...”

“This one won’t be lost.” Naraku tried to reassure him. “Ion and Wint are growing into fine healers and the midwife has a lot of experience.”

Levin called for a boy in the stables. "Can you take care of the horses?" He asked him, even though it was an order. The boy nodded and walked away, followed by the horses. Because of the many visits, everyone in Animuk knew the horses were special and had their own will.

"Is Ion in town?" Naraku asked Levin. "We came to see him."

Levin looked up surprised. "Sure. I'll take you to Kyliya and then go and get him."

"Oh, please don't rush." Rain interrupted. "We're exhausted; especially Helena."

"No, I'm not!" The blind girl huffed.

"After we visit Kyliya, we'd prefer a short rest." Naraku had trouble admitting it. "If it isn't too much trouble?"

"Never, my queen." Levin bowed with a smile, opening a door. "[Ninmei?]" He said the Seken word for 'Beloved'. "Are you decent?"

"How decent can you be, bloated like a cow?!" The voice replied crankily, but softened the moment she recognised the purple-haired woman. "Naraku! How wonderful of you to come!"

"Hello, Kyliya." Naraku entered, followed by her friends. "How are you doing?"

"Ugh, this little beast is kicking me all over." Kyliya grunted. "But at least this one kicks..."

After a short moment of silence, Naraku tried to change the subject. "We saw a lot of construction on the side; are you enlarging the inn?"

Kyliya nodded. "Yes, more visitors are coming to Animuk, especially when there's a market." She repositioned herself. "We should be able to create five more rooms, this way."

"If you ever need any help; with food, money..." Naraku offered.

Kyliya raised her hands. "MorningSnow's reputation is doing wonders enough for the town." She smiled. "Though is it really true you fought an entire army barehanded?"

"I did?" Naraku looked up, surprised. "When?"

"Ah, another false rumour." Kyliya shrugged. "Already thought that one was too exaggerated. The stories some people make up... There's even this story about our town's founder, about him slaying three dragons in one day."

"There are dragons here?" Naraku looked confused at her friends.

"Oh, don't worry!" Kyliya giggled. "That story has to be fake. So, how can I help?"

"We actually came to see Ion." Rain filled in. "Levin said he'd get him for us, but we're exhausted."

"Don't tell me you had a brush with Bright Stellus!" Kyliya gasped, worried.

"Calm down!" Naraku quickly ordered the woman. "We're fine! But we'd really like to get some sleep, if you don't mind."

"Of course not!" Kyliya got up despite the protests from The IceHunters. "Elke! Elke!" She called from her bedroom. Upon her call, a young girl came running towards Kyliya, making a short bow. "Elke, could you prepare a few rooms for our guests?" She saw the girl making a small curtsy. "We noticed a lot of the teenagers were bored outside the harvest season." Kyliya explained while the girl named Elke hurried away. "So, we decided to employ the kids. We can't pay them much, but it keeps them off the streets, plus it gives them some experience."

"Do they help with the construction as well?" Blade wondered, curious.

Kylia nodded. "A few. They have to be monitored, but some show talent for carpentry." The mother-to-be answered, while climbing back into her bed. "Oof, I'll be happy when this monster will finally be out of me... that critter honestly caused me to pick up knitting again! Me! Knitting!"

"A dreadful fate." Kai grinned, opening the door when they heard a soft knock. "The rooms are ready, milord." Elke bowed again, addressing the first she saw. "Shall I take you to them?"

The guests greeted Kylia and wished her well. "Don't forget to send the bill this time!" Naraku warned the hostess.

"Maybe I will." Kylia laughed. "I'm such a scatterbrain these days."

The girl named Elke guided the guests to their rooms, opening the doors for them and showing them the beds. "Do you wish to use a small breakfast?" She inquired. "No, thank you." Naraku smiled, seeing Blade flop onto a bed, kicking out his shoes. "I'm curious though; when the harvest season arrives, won't that leave Levin and Kylia short-handed?"

Elke shook her head. "No, milady, because hardly anyone travels during the harvest season."

Naraku thanked the girl for her hospitality and closed the door behind her. She looked around, seeing Helena sitting calmly on her bed, while Blade was already sound asleep. Rain and Kai would share another room, opposite to theirs. "Blade sure snores a lot, doesn't he?" Naraku smiled, walking towards the large bed she and Helena would share.

"If I hadn't known it was Blade, I would have thought it was the sound of an earthquake." Helena joked.

Naraku laughed softly, sitting down on the soft bed. She took off her shoes, before laying down. "High Ones, I'm so tired." Naraku admitted. "Aren't you, Helena?" "Not yet." Helena said, looking into nothing. "I want to sit here. Just do nothing for a while."

"If you want to." Naraku yawned, closing her eyes. "We're safe here."

"I know." Helena smiled, trying to look back, not moving from her spot. She closed her blind eyes and... started to use her powers willingly. In a room on the other side of the inn, she heard a mother-to-be praying this child would finally be hers to keep. She hummed a lullaby, while softly clicking her knitting pins together. In the stables, she heard a stable boy arguing with the horses, who teasingly had stolen his hat, passing it from one to the other. Poor boy; he'd never win from the clever horses of MorningSnow!

In the kitchen, she heard the girl named Elke pour a liquid into a bowl; probably milk or water so she could create a bread. The kneading that followed made a unique sound and Helena decided to lay down onto her bed, so she could enjoy the sounds a little bit longer.

Softly, the girl dozed off, for the first time in a long while with a smile on her lips. Within her mind, the girl started a small prayer for her parents, who were hopefully looking down on her with pride. She had not only saved her new family, but was also one of a kind... Helena, the first Sound User of Seken...

Episode 306: The curse of a choice

“Give me back that roast!” A girl ran through the inn, following a white shade.
“Your masters paid for that!”

Levin saw the white flash going by, followed seconds later by the girl. “Elke, it’s okay!” He called after her. “You can’t keep up with that wolf!”

Angry, the girl gave up the chase. “That wolf stole the queen’s roast!” Elke pointed back. “Now what must I serve the queen?”

Levin laughed. “Grasshopper is a special wolf.” He smiled. “And the queen won’t mind paying for it, nor would she mind a humble breakfast. She’s not a queen like in those fairy tales.”

“Maybe she should have been.” Elke huffed. “Fairy tale-queens don’t keep wolves. Especially not such hungry ones.”

Levin guided the girl back to the kitchen. “Even if you managed to capture the wolf, what did you plan to do with the roast? You can’t give a roast with wolf-drool to guests... or anyone else, as a matter of fact.”

“One day...” Elke hissed, turning back to the fire. “One day I will get that wolf! I won’t be tricked a sixth time!”

Levin left the young girl alone in the kitchen, shaking his head with a smile on his face. The queen had changed a lot; that was for sure. In the past, girls would stay at home, taking care of the household, but ever since Naraku visited Animuk, the girls started to look for jobs outside the house. They all wanted to help building the town into a prosperous one, more than once telling the men they couldn’t do it alone.

Elke often reminded Levin of Kyla, who was once the only emancipated girl of the town. However, while Kyla was a decent cook, Elke showed skills that would surpass everyone, if given the proper practise and training. Maybe he should talk about it to Kai, now that he was here. He knew no better cook than that Fire User, so if anyone could give Elke the proper training, it would be him.

“...split up Stellus into seven nations.” Levin heard the Fire User speak in the large room of the inn, that mostly acted like a ‘restaurant’. “They never recorded the names of the new nations and we couldn’t really ask The Seven United Tribes, but we’re quite positive one of them grew into the kingdom of Lord Zashjan.”

“Lord Zashjan?” Helena wondered. “Who is that?”

“Who *was* that, is a better question.” Rain mumbled. “I’m trying to enjoy my brunch, Kai, could you save the stories for later?”

“You always love my stories!” Kai pouted. “Why are you so mean to me?”

“Can’t you be quiet for once?” Rain snapped at his best friend.

“Rain...” Naraku whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I know Lord Zashjan is responsible for your parents’ death and that you want to take revenge... but he’s dead now. I destroyed him.”

“You knew it!” Rain jumped up angrily. “You could have told me, right after the battle, but you kept it from me for years! How the heck do you expect me to close something like that off?”

“Rain...” Naraku sighed, knowing he was right.

“He should’ve rotten for eternity.” Rain hissed, walking away from the table. “He should’ve been punished for his crimes.”

Naraku wanted to go after Rain, but Blade stopped her. “Just let him be.” He advised her. “We all have our sore spots and Zash-dude is Rain’s. According to Rain, Zashjan got off the hook way too easily.”

“A lot of our tribe members were born in the Kingdom of Zashjan.” Naraku sighed, sitting down again. “His Black Knights were responsible for your parents’ death as well.”

“Let’s not bring up that again, shall we?” Blade grunted, hiding his mood with a fresh bun.

“Good afternoon, you all.” Levin decided to step into the room, hoping they wouldn’t notice his eavesdropping and that his entrance would lighten the mood.

“I hope you slept well?”

“Ah, Levin, good afternoon.” Naraku bowed politely. “Yes, we slept wonderfully. Thank you for your hospitality. And please, give our compliments to your cook; even Kai is impressed!”

“I will surely pass it on to Elke.” Levin smiled, partly dreaming that he could one day state that the best cook in MorningSnow started her career in his inn. “I talked to Ion and he let me know you’re welcome to visit him whenever you are ready.”

“Ah, we shall leave imme-...” Naraku started, but was pulled down by Blade.

“Let the dude clean his house.” Blade ordered, making Naraku wonder how Blade knew Ion was cleaning things. “Finish your breakfast; Ion isn’t going anywhere.”

“Why do you think Ion is cleaning his house?” Levin asked what Naraku was wondering.

“The dude lives with Wint, right?” Blade ate a piece of bread. “Two single guys in one house... if they are anything like Kai and Rain, the house is probably a big mess.”

“It’s not that bad!” Kai huffed.

“Dude, you two desperately need a girlfriend.” Blade didn’t notice Helena’s red face. “I’ve seen what Mah-Lin has done and trust me, it’s for the better. Unless the two of you...”

“We are not together!” Kai jumped up from his seat, pointing at Blade. At the same time, with the exact same words, another finger pointed at Blade. Kai looked to the ochre-coloured haired young man next to him. “Hey, you’re back soon.”

“I eh... ran out of bread.” Rain quickly took a bun and stuffed his mouth.

“Not this again.” Naraku sighed. “The joke of you two having a thing going on is as old as Graven. Best friends, not lovers, end of story. Can we please move on now?”

“Yes, please.” Rain sat down again, taking another bun.

For a moment, a silence filled the table, until Kai decided to stir things up again.

“But wouldn’t we make such a cute couple?”

“I knew it!” Blade jumped up, pointing at the embarrassed Rain, ignoring Naraku’s sighs and not even seeing Helena’s completely red face.

“Welcome, welcome!” Ion opened the door and let The IceHunters in, while Wint was hiding some stuff in a closet. “Please forgive us for the mess; we’ve been really busy.”

“Get a girlfriend.” Blade suggested while walking in. “It helps.”

“Always the charmer.” Naraku rolled her eyes. “So, how have you been doing?”

“Fine, thank you.” Wint came into the room with a large jar of water. “Just let me get some mugs.”

They sat down on a few benches, watching Wint leave the room. “Wint is doing great.” Ion admitted. “He can’t read, no matter how often he tries, but his memory is amazing.”

“He can’t read?” Rain was curious.

“He keeps on mixing up the symbols.” Ion sighed. “Especially the ‘c’ and ‘l’ and the ‘a’ and the ‘u’.”

“Didn’t Clover have the same problems?” Rain turned to Kai.

Kai nodded, thinking back to the yellow-haired warrior, who passed away years before. “Yes, now that you mention it... She too kept on mixing symbols, but eventually she managed to recognise a few words, like her name.”

“Really?” This intrigued Ion, who thought he had already discovered everything in those hundreds of years he had lived. “Wint and Clover aren’t related... Do you think more people have that problem?”

“Don’t ask me.” Kai shrugged. “Though at the Fire School I attended, people who couldn’t read were often thought to be too stupid for it and got other, easier assignments.”

“I’ve got to research that.” Ion pondered, seeing Wint entering the room again.

“Hey Wint, we’re going to start an experiment.”

“Huh, what? Again?” Wint had no idea what this was about. “Does it involve fire again? I think I finally got my eyebrows back.”

“You still complain about that?” Ion rolled his eyes. “Where is your sense for adventure? Your quest for science?”

“My sense of adventure drowned with that water-experiment.” Wint sat down annoyed. “And my quest for science seems to be lost within my quest for survival. Why don’t you ever get to play test subject? I wanted to become a healer, not your test bunny.”

“But look at how much we learned!” Ion said back. “Did you know that if you dissolve salt in water and boil away the water, the salt returns? And that if you do the same with sugar, it stays gone? And yet the two look alike so much...”

“It totally killed my taste buds...” Wint grunted.

“But the salty water did help with your tooth ache!” Ion pointed out.

“You still had to pull that thing out!” Wint snapped back.

“But the salty water helped preventing another infection!” Ion proudly stated. “See? We really learn a lot from each other!”

“Wow, it sounds like the two of you always have a lot of fun!” Naraku exclaimed innocently, not seeing the awkward faces of the others. “Maybe we should start some experiments as well!”

“Let’s not do that.” Rain quickly decided, imagining the horror Naraku and Yume combined could do. “Well, we’re glad to see you are doing okay, so maybe we can state the purpose of our visit?”

“Ah, yes.” Naraku stood up and presented Helena to Ion. “This is Helena, the very first Sound User on Seken... as far as we know, anyway.”

“Hurray?” Wint didn’t see what was so special about that.

“That’s so cool!” Ion jumped up. “So that’s what I felt! What can you do?”

“Hold on, you felt her powers?” Wint stopped Ion. “You have magic? Since when?”

Shocked, all stared at Ion. Had he never told Wint he had the power to sense different kinds of magic? Sweating, Ion didn’t know what to say or do. What could he say to keep his secret... or would he have to tell his friend the truth?

“Aren’t you Master’s grandson?” Kai quickly said. “Master had the same skills.”

“Ah, yes, indeed!” Ion quickly played along. “I inherited my skills from my grandfather, but since we don’t have any Magic Users here anymore, I totally forgot to tell you about that. I sincerely apologise; I should have told you.”

“So, Leekuh...?” Wint narrowed his eyes.

“Not a witch, sorry.” Ion tried to save his skin. “The stupidity was all yours.”

“Drats.” Wint snapped his fingers and sat down on the bench, sulking. “Now she’ll never want to see me again for sure.”

“I warned you not to call her a witch.” Ion sat down as well. “Though I think, thanks to your accusation, she started to pick it up for real. But if she ever offers you a vial... run. Very hard.”

“Nothing is more dangerous, than a woman’s scorn.” Blade grinned. “So, back to our Helena. Sound User, blind because of it... is there a way we can let her see again?”

Ion sat back, thinking deeply. “I assume, since you mentioned her magic turned her blind, her Magic Focus is the cause?” Naraku nodded, explaining it was right behind her eyes. “I advise against trying to move the focus. It would be like trying to move a heart: not going to work.”

“But what if we take the magic from her?” Rain suggested. “Kind of like stealing her magic?”

“That is tricky, but possible.” Ion pondered. “Still, you can’t fully steal her powers; such a thing would kill her. I advise against that. It would be like trying to rip out the heart: not going to work.”

“Well, what if we take almost everything away?” Kai suggested. “Shrinking her magical powers to a minimum?”

“That would be the only way.” Ion agreed. “But magic grows, so in a couple of years, she’d be blind again. If magic remains unused...”

“Are you saying my head could explode if I don’t use my magic?!” Helena panicked.

“Whoa, calm down!” Ion jumped up. “Don’t worry! You’re already using your magic all the time. That’s why it’s still contained.”

“But it could happen, couldn’t it?” Helena gasped, especially after hearing a hesitant confirmation. Due to her panic, she never heard Ion say it would only happen if she wouldn’t use her magic at all for like, five hundred years. “Take it

out, take it out! I don't care if it will keep me blind; just take it out! I don't want my head to explode!"

"Helena, calm down!" Kai tried to calm her down as well. "Ion said that would only happen if you wouldn't use your magic at all and you use your magic all the time."

"But Ion said that even if you shrink it to a minimum, it would be big enough to make me blind again in no time!" Helena panicked.

"That's because it doesn't need much to make you blind again!" Ion yelled, trying to get her attention. "Your magic focus is like a film of honey around your eyes; not even close to being able to explode your head. Because you use your magic all the time, although unwillingly as far as I understand, it stays that size. It took twelve years to get that size, if we teach you how to use your powers better, it will probably stay like that, or it may even get smaller!"

"You think she could be able to see again, if she learns how to use her powers?" Rain wondered curiously.

"There is always a possibility." Ion admitted, seeing the crying Helena. "But after sixteen years of untrained magic, it probably damaged her eyes. Even if we manage to let her fully control her powers and even shrink it... there's a chance the damage to her eyes can't be undone."

"So, you advice against Magic Stealing and suggest Magic Practise." Blade summarised. "Phew, was already worried Naraku would have to turn into a Magic Vampire."

"Guess that means a new student for you." Kai slammed Rain on the back.

"But I don't know a thing about Sound Magic!" Rain admitted, forgetting he knew nothing about Shining/Blessed Magic before he met Naraku either. "I already have enough problems with Naraku and Yume's magic. What the heck should I do with Sound Magic?"

"You can help her see..." Ion whispered, silencing all, staring at the shocked Helena. The young man then jumped up, running up the stairs. The noise that followed, sounded as if a building was about to collapse, but not much later, Ion came back down, holding a bunch of papers that were bound together.

"What is that?" Wint asked curiously.

"This is my... grandfather's notebook from Magic Teacher School." Ion huffed.

"I... he wrote down the things he never wanted to forget." Ion flipped some pages, muttering some words softly. "And yet I keep on forgetting the things I wrote in here..."

"Where did you find it?" Wint liked to know. Why hadn't Ion told him that?

"It was in the chest within my room." Ion answered absent-minded.

"I never saw it in there." Wint mentioned.

"Hidden compartment." Ion confessed, but then realised what he had said.

"Found it when tripping over the chest last week, but forgot to tell you about it when Kylia seemed to have troubles again."

"You certainly forget to tell a lot of things." Wint mumbled, insulted. "Maybe you should research a cure of forgetfulness."

"Interesting, but not possible, although Snow Lickerish helps when extracted and mixed with milk." Ion replied.