

A Shadow of Doubt



Prologue

After some disagreements between Maya and the King about rights of outsiders, the King suddenly passed away in the night. Circumstances made the obvious culprit Maya. She is exiled along with a few others who agreed with the viewpoint that letting in too many foreigners was a dangerous game to play given the fragility of paradise life. Maya, thinking that she escaped alone, for a time survived in a hidden part of the jungle amongst her beloved plants. A servant whom the King had treated like a daughter followed Maya into her retreat. The servant, Sati, was terrified to show herself to Maya. If Maya was the murderer, surely she would have no issues with disposing of Sati, being nothing more than a mere outsider. Yet, given the strife between outsiders and natives back in the village kingdom, she could easily find the same fate back there. Sati could not hide for long, as Maya's knowledge of the forest was far greater. Grudgingly, she tolerates Sati. She may not have trusted her, but there is no need to take the life of someone who does not pose an immediate threat, the best move for Maya was to watch Sati closely. Being at a standstill, Maya decides it's best to consult some old allies...

A Vision of Poison

A calm, familiar atmosphere wrapped around Maya as her poisonous allies subtly emerged from the darkness as colorful lights. She was relieved to be in the presence of familiar entities. Being exiled from home in combination with constantly having Sati nearby had taken a larger toll on her mental state than she realized.

"You called?" A voice from one of the plants echoed in a whispery tone.

"Thank you for showing yourself," although these allies felt like family, Maya always gave an official sign of gratitude before working. It is never a good idea to step on the toes, or roots in this case, of a poison. "I come to you in a state of exile from my home and need guidance. Someone has killed our king. Many blame me -"

"Was it you?"

A twinge of irritation ran down Maya's back. All in good humor though, that particular flower, despite being one of the deadlier varieties, always did have a stinging sarcasm.

"No," Maya put bluntly. Eerie giggling sounded around her. It's best to go straight to the point with these beings, "I must know how to restore the kingdom back to paradise."

"Trust Sati," the whisper was brief, subtle, yet clear.

"What? She's an outsider, and it was likely an outsider that killed the King."

Maya's vision grew dark, and the distinct feeling that she was being scolded overcame her, "your judgement is clouded..."

Her lip curled in a snarl, every muscle tensed. No, she refused to trust that irritating, dirty foreigner! There had to be another way, just one more option - any other option. The darkness flooded over, and from it emerged a vision of her paradise home rotting. Her friends fought, digging claw and fang into flesh. Her plant allies abandoned the kingdom, leaving it dull and grey. The clear water smelled of rotten fish and swirled with decomposing bodies. Her king sat on the throne, but he wasted away, his eyes begging for an end. She could hear his voice wailing, "Close your heart, but the attack is from within. Your waters are poisoned!"

The horrifying vision was more than enough to throw Maya out of her trance, snapping out with fur bristled and bones shaking. Sati lay curled up in her own bed, likely she fell asleep hours ago, as Maya's journeys were long. She knew what needed to be done, and it would be done. After all, it is never a good idea to defy the advice of a poison.

The Ways of the Jungle

"Wake up, you filthy foreigner!"

A rude awakening for Sati, but immediately she could see that Maya was distraught, "What's happening, have we been discovered?"

"Of course not, we're the only two that know about this place. Unless you told someone-" Maya caught herself tensing up and spewing out words of distrust. Opening herself to an outsider was going to be a tough task. "Just... do what I tell you to do. You will sleep when I tell you to sleep. You will leave only if I dismiss you."

Sati's heart sank, what did she get herself into? Compared to Maya's wrath, suddenly going back into a warring kingdom seemed like a doable option.

In the following days an unfortunate rainfall clouded the sky, monsoon season always seemed to start when it was least convenient. Maya quietly inspected her environment, occasionally whispering some kind of incantation, then handing a small sample or flower for Sati to carry. Sati liked it when she was like this, it was easier to stay out of her way, and there were far fewer orders being barked at her. On occasion Maya would call Sati fourth.

"Pay attention to how this one grows... Never cut this one at the base, and for this one, the flower must be cut like this... Which plant should we see if this plant is around?"

"Um," Sati paused and thought hard. This was the part she didn't like. Although Maya was gentle in these moments, there was a stern darkness that never failed to intimidate her. She could never tell if Maya was going to snap at her for a wrong answer, although she surprisingly she never snapped. "It should be the pink flower, the one that looks like a flame, right?"

Maya moved a large leaf aside to reveal the flower Sati had pictured. She didn't cut this one with claw, instead Maya used her gift of energy manipulation to cut and place it in her own pack.

"The whole plant will kill. Don't cut this one with your claw, you'd run the risk of poisoning yourself. We only take it if we have a specific purpose," Maya moved on, straightforward as always. Sati couldn't help but wonder, what exactly was that purpose?

Broken Illusions

Months must have already passed since Maya last smelled the damp temple stone. She had that distinct "coming home" feeling where something feels slightly different, but the familiarity would make it easy to settle back in. She was brisk in making her way to the King's work space. This may have been a quiet time of the day, but being wanted for murder, she was sure that one wrong step would lead to a fate worse than exile. A burst of confidence pulsed through Maya as she stepped into the stone circle. She had spent many hours here, strategizing with and advising the old King. They may have disagreed on almost everything, but she took pride in her work, and she knew out of all Shisa in this clan, he trusted her with no doubts. Her heart dropped. The finality of his death suddenly hit her. Now who would trust her with no doubt?

No time for sentiments. Besides, he was a pushover, who knows if that trust was due to her hard work. Maya pushed the emotions aside, instead going for his last transactions as king. Contracts were the King's specialty in magic. With ease he could take a simple object and bind into it a powerful contract that sealed the agreement on the level of spirit and body. Of course, he preferred specially made objects, but probably not for the reason most people would think. He was a practical being, and liked the objects which were easily stored away and organized. Maya was thankful for this habit as it made finding his last records easy. And lucky for her, since she was head of the guard, she was the only one other than the King who knew the secret stone which they were hidden behind. It would seem all records were intact.

The last contract was made between the tribe Sati came from and Maya's own paradise. A twinge of suspicion spiked through her, but it was quickly quenched by the King's wailing voice from her vision, "your waters are poisoned..."

A closer look revealed that Sati was to become Queen of Maya's beloved kingdom. She paused, shocked. She knew the King thought of the filthy outsider as a daughter, but she wasn't even mated to his son, it would be unheard of to just give the kingdom to a stranger. The contract went deeper; all things come at a price. Any future lines from Sati would be bound to this land. There was an oath for Sati to protect the paradise with her life. Maya's eyes carefully watched the binding words playing out before her. Having already been bound by oath, there would be no way Sati could have put the kingdom into this kind of disarray. And a bigger question, why wouldn't the King leave the kingdom to his own son?

Possibly it was her paranoid mind playing tricks, but she could just hear the light patter of paws on stone closing in on the stone circle. Frantically, Maya looked for another contract. There had to be another, there couldn't be a conflict in ruler ship when he died. Either a marriage would take place, or a ranking system, or... something extreme. The King had found a way to completely sever his family ties to the land. Moreover, not only was the son not the rightful king, but the son had broken a family oath. No wonder the King severed all ties; this land should never fall into such treacherous paws.

"Ah, Maya, thank you for opening these for me. I needed to take care of some records. Judging by your shock, I imagine you've figured out why," the King's son stood under the archway leading to the chamber.

"How dare you?!" For a moment Maya could not sputter out much beyond those words, but hours of focus paid off and she gathered her mind enough to throw out a warning, "destroying the physical documents doesn't destroy the agreement."

"Maybe not on one level, but it does a great job at destroying the agreement in the memories of others."

"You spoiled brat!"

"Oh stop. Out of all I would think you would understand! Sati is nothing but a stranger to us, a filthy outsider!"

A filthy outsider. The words echoed in Maya's mind, and it was then that she realized her own reflection stood before her. She finally saw clearly what killed the King, what put her paradise in danger. It was not an individual, but instead simple poisonous thoughts - "dirty foreigner", "stranger", "filthy outsider." Indeed the waters were poisoned from within.

In that moment, the records were not important, the top priority was to protect Sati's life and leave with her own life. Maya did her best to make it seem like she agreed, but the shocking news understandably threw her off game.

"Well," Maya stuttered, "I suppose if that outsider was next... well, I'd obviously rather see you on the throne."

"Hold on," he blocked her way, "You're my ticket out of any wrong doing. If I present your head to anyone with suspicions..."

"Well, aren't you clever," the idea that she might be sacrificed to the ends of some stereotypical, poorly thought out murder drama agitated her more than Sati following her around and the exile combined. "But you forget I was head guard for good reasons."

Maya presented the poison flower from her bag. "Spending all day cutting these beautiful poisons with my claws, I imagine you're clever enough to know what one swipe from my paw could do." She calmly replaced the flower, hoping he wouldn't catch her bluff. But just in case, she rushed at him not allowing a moment to think.

"Help!" He shrunk back in fear, back against the stone wall and out of Maya's way.

She took the opportunity to leave, but before she escaped she threw in a snarl, "hmpf, coward." Then with a swift leap, Maya bounded away to devise a plan between her and Sati.

Poison or Truth?

"A few more moments. If you haven't fallen by that time, then you can move onto the rice."

Understandably, for the next few weeks the King's son had been extra cautious about testing for poisons in his food. The servant was beginning to think the King's son was outright paranoid. Rolling his eyes the tester paused and moved onto the rice. On the positive side, at least he was able to eat some quality food. Since the King passed, good food was hard to come by; the King's son was certainly not as generous as the King himself. The son ate the meal with vigor. Really, it was a mental feat for the King's son to hold back from eating each of his meals, such dark times that royalty must discipline their body. As the sun set on his jungle home, shadows grasping every corner of the stone temple space, he ordered the drinks and drink tester to enter.

In the dim lighting, details were a struggle to see. The silhouette of the drink tester didn't fall. That's all that matters. He lapped up at least half of the bowl.

"You should have waited longer."

Confused, he gazed upwards. The shadows formed into a face he could recognize, that of Sati.

The King's son spat, "Poison! Wait, you lie. You drunk it too, you wouldn't do such a foolish thing!"

"My oath was simply to protect the land, and my body is bound to this paradise. It has done its job." Sati must have been spending too much time with Maya, the blunt words flowed from her with such ease.

"What? You are mad! Foolish!" the King's son coughed and gagged, dramatically writhing on the floor. His vision blurred, and muscles went limp, and similar to a drunk, he began to mutter out truths as if in a final confession. Into the room rushed several concerned Shisa, catching Sati as her muscles went limp and pausing to watch the son's embarrassing confession in its entirety.

"The kingdom will go to no one, our paradise is lost! I wouldn't have let filthy outsiders like you in. What are you all standing around for, avenge me! You're all useless, why did my father ever treat you with dignity? You're all a bunch of servants, nothing more. And you Sati, why would my father adopt a slave from another land? What's so special about you? All useless, it's best that I took the old King out." He began giggling uncontrollably, his own madness clutching his mind, "you all thought it was Maya. What a twisted fate, that instead she kills me- and I'm on her side!" Laughter turned to sobbing, "It's not fair..."

The witnesses took Sati outside of the room where she could explain all that had ensued since her disappearance. Of course in that explanation was a debriefing about the truth serum her and Maya had used on the treacherous son. No deadly poison was dealt that night, only truth along with the side of a humiliating confession.

Back to Work

Maya stepped with confidence into the old King's stone circle, this time with no fear for her life. Sati would have acknowledged Maya, except that she was being kept more than busy being shown her new duties as ruler. Surprisingly, Maya realized that she felt a fondness for the young Shisa. She never thought she would be at peace with seeing a non-native on the throne, but one thing was different with this relationship in comparison to the last King. She knew that with this new Queen, she felt, beyond the shadow of a doubt, a certain bond of trust and a knowing that Sati's devotion was to the spirit of the land. A smirk flew across Maya's face; her job could be interesting with this new perspective.