

Note: This story contains elements of gender and body transformation, pregnancy and birthing.

Warning: This story contains elements of dysphoria and abuse.

*Legends speak of a cursed woods in the far north.*

*Walk in as a hunter.*

*Maintain your caution.*

*Lest you lose your way and lose yourself.*

*And be consumed by the trees forevermore.*

\*

Hada carefully examined his arrows, carefully readjusting the feathers on the end or discarding them if they had warped too much from the damp. Tedious, slow work. But it was also calming.

“What are you doing?”

The dry old voice made him freeze for a moment before turning around and bowing his head slightly, “Grandmamma.” Before returning to his work.

The old woman’s expression tightened, “I asked you a question.”

“I set some traps in the woods a few days ago. I want to see if anything has been caught.”

“You are not going.”

Hada paused and glanced back at her, “Why?”

“There is danger in the air right now.” she looked away from him and narrowed her eyes, “the coldness feels... thick. There is risk of losing yourself in the woods right now.”

“But... my traps.”

“If they are good, they will keep for a few days longer. We are not wanting for food right now. Come with me. We must inform the rest of the village.”

Hada pushed up from the ground, rolling his eyes lightly before following his grandmother out of the shed. The sharp cold air bit into his face as the cold snow crunched below his feet. He glanced around for a moment before spotting his grandmother, who was already talking to another couple, and he quickly ran up behind her.

The couple was nodded softly as they walked away to share the information, “...thank you, chief.”

“Hmm...” His grandmother sighed, “Say what you want.”

Hada hesitated for a moment before steeling himself, “I... I would only be in the forest for a short while. Less than a quarter of the day. If my traps have nothing, I would be back even sooner.”

“If your traps have nothing, there is no reason for you to go, is there?”

“I... I wish to be sure.”

“Do not risk your humanity boy.” His grandmother clicked her tongue, “this world is dangerous and will show you no mercy.”

“I...”

“Enough.” His Grandmother waved him down before approaching another person and continued to spout her warnings.

Hada sighed and walked away from her and towards the home of a young girl; his friend, about his age. She was already sitting outside waiting for him.

“You alright?”

“Grandmother says we cannot go to the forest for the next few days.”

“Oh dear. That’s a shame...” Then the girl shrugged, “But we can still wander the village, yes?”

“Yes, I think so...” Hada paused, “I... I want to go to the forest.”

The girl paled, “Hada. That’s not a good idea.”

“I just... my traps...”

“Your traps?”

“I... I might’ve caught some rabbit.”

“Hada.” The girl leaned close, “You know that is too dangerous. We will be safe in the village. Your grandmother knows best. She has kept our home safe for decades, no?”

“Hmm” he offered a non-committal response that clear just made his friend more concerned.

“Hada. You cannot go into the forest. Stay with us... with me.”

He glanced up at his friend and nodded softly.

She smiled at him, kindly before taking his hand gently, “Good. Now, let us tell the rest of the village. And then I will bring some spiced wine home for you and your grandmother, okay?”

A small smile crossed his face, “Grandmother loves your family’s wine.”

“I know she does. I think that’s why she tolerates me.”

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Hada sat in the corner staring into the fire as his grandmother continued to chant her hymns between sips of wine. How long had it been since it was just the two of them? His whole life... She was his grandmother but also the only parent he had ever known.

He glanced at her, as she swayed in her position, her chanting rising in tempo. He had heard this specific mantra so many times in his life. A prayer for protection. To guard one's soul against outside forces. There was something comforting about its rhythmic sound, but at the same time, he felt his muscles itch under his skin.

The heat in the room felt oppressive and the cold felt invasive. How suffocating... He rose from his position and moved to step out of the house.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To the shed. I want to continue with my arrows."

"You cannot leave the-"

"I'm not leaving. I'm just getting prepared, so I don't need to worry about when this... this is over."

"Hm." A dry note of acknowledgement and he left for the shed.

Everything was as he left it. His knife, his bow, his arrows in their quiver. He stared at them for a few seconds before quickly strapping them to his body and peeking out of the shed. No one was around; the night was cold and dark. The moon was gone from the sky, but the snow still reflected some invisible light.

*I'll be quick. Just a few hours at most.*

He darted towards the edge of the village and came to a halt at the edge; a small stream separated the forest and the village. He felt strange; like there was some sort of wall between him and the darkness ahead. Something was holding him back.

He swallowed before shaking himself and dashing over several rocks above the water and into the woods.

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It was darker in the woods than he was expecting.

*This was not a good idea...*

He swallowed softly to himself as he kept low to the ground to avoid any unnecessary attention. He could see vague tracks in the dirt and snow; he had a vague idea of where he was heading, but that sense of uncertainty still lingered overhead.

His ears strained against the oppressive darkness that was smothering his eyes. His nose twitched. His skin trembled. There was a feeling that he should turn back now. That if he did, all would be well. All would be the same.

And so, he pushed forth.

Pausing at his first trap, he examined it closely. The rope looked in good shape, but nothing was within it. Not a rabbit. Not even a squirrel. He sighed sadly. This did not bode well.

He followed the map of his mind towards his second trap. He had only placed a few out, so, if this next one had nothing then the others probably didn't either and-

*Crack!*

Hada came to a halt and moved low to the ground, quickly drawing his knife. He held his breath and positioned himself with his back to a tree. The dark was so consuming. He couldn't see his hand before his face, let alone a predator coming for him... He swallowed deeply positioning his knife close to his body. His bow might've been better, but he had no desire to shoot arrows into the dark and never find them. No, the closeness of the knife felt good and comforting.

*Crack!*

It was closer. It was moving towards him.

Hada could feel the cold sweat on his brow dribble downwards. He felt so cold. So lost. He licked his lips slowly.

“Hello?”

Hada blinked. The voice that approached him was deep and kind. Strong and warm. As if the darkness itself was relaxing, he could feel his eyes adjusting to a strong figure approaching him from the dark. The figure was broad-chested and sturdy, wearing light clothing and sporting a calm smile, “Hello?”

“I... H-hello?”

“Are you new here?”

“N-new?”

“Yes. I've lived here for years now. My family has stayed on this land for generations. I don't think I've met you.”

“N-No... I... I haven't... I... I...”

“Are you alone?”

“I... I am?”

The figure frowned, “That’s dangerous. Its dangerous out here at this time to be alone.”

“I... I’m sorry.”

“Come with me. My family is close; we’ll take care of you.”

The figure took Hada’s hand gently and led him through the woods. His hand was broad and gentle. So very unlike the people of the village; their hands were usually tough and calloused from work. His hands were tough as well, but from... something else...

“T-thank you.”

“Do not worry.” The figure’s voice was kind and soft, “Where are you from?”

“T-The village... a-across the stream.”

The figure paused for a moment before continuing to walk, “That is a strange place. My family and I don’t like it there.”

“M-My family and friends live there.”

“I see. We avoid it.”

*That explains why I’ve never seen this person...*

“Here we are.” The figure spoke as they emerged into a bright clearing. The warm sun was beating down on them as Hada stepped forward and truly examined his savior.

He had warm brown skin and a causal gait to his stance. His hair was long and loose. He looked... strong. Stronger than anyone Hada had ever seen.

“I... W-What’s your name?”

“Cervus.”

“I... I am Hada.”

“It is good to meet you, Hada.”

“I... I need to get home. T-The sun is... I’ve been outside too long. My... My grandmother will be...”

Cervus shook his head, “You are tired. You need rest. Stay for a short while. Eat. Then leave if you must.”

“I...” Hada felt his voice fade as his legs grew weak, “W-Will you stay with me?”

Cervus seemed surprised by the question before nodding, “Of course.”

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Hada blinked and shot up quickly.

*Where am I?*

“Ah, you are awake.”

A new voice. Hada turned towards it and saw a strong woman stepping towards him. She had a proudness to her movement; but at the same time, there was a maternal twinkle in her eye. something that betrayed a kinder part of her soul. Like Cervus, she seemed dressed lightly.

“You’ve been asleep for some time now. You should eat.” She gestured towards small bowl before tilting her head, “You’re a proud one, aren’t you?”

Hada blinked and lowered his head awkwardly, “I... I d-don’t mean to insult...”

“Hm.” The woman snorted softly before seating herself and gesturing to the bowl again, “Eat.”

The substance in the bowl was tough and earthy to taste. It took several minutes of chewing to even get one mouthful down, but once it was in his belly, it felt immensely satisfying.

“T-thank you...”

“Hm. Cervus tells me you are from across the water.”

“Y-Yes. Right across.”

“You lived with the ones clad in fur and skin?”

“I...” Hada frowned. The wording sounded so strange, but so familiar, “Yes. I lived with them.”

“How did you not die?”

“I... I lived with my family. They took care of me.”

“Interesting. Who was your family?”

“J-Just my grandmother.”

“Did she clad you?”

“...Yes.”

The Woman reached out softly and touched Hada’s face, “...You should’ve come to us so long ago.”

“I... I’m sorry.”

“You did not know better. You are safe with us.”

Hada smiled. He felt safe. He felt warm here.

The Woman rose up, “I am Sheeka. I take care of our own and I will take care of you, young one.”

“T-Thank you.”

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Hada dipped his feet into the cold water before lowering his face and sipping deeply, quenching his thirst. The cold had long since dissipated and the world felt fresh and new.

“Hada!”

He pulled his head from the water and glanced back at several others; many like him, all smiling, “We are going to play. Come with us!”

He nodded quickly and followed them, running freely in the open grass. The wind felt so good. Everything felt so good. With them, he wanted nothing. Food was easy to find. Space was open. He felt a closeness with everyone that he had never felt before in his life. His skin felt loose and open; like he was flowing into something bigger than himself. Something accepting and loving.

He felt someone bump into him and he laughed running even faster, bumping into others well. He felt so strong! So light! So perfect!

He opened his eyes and slowed down, catching his breath before pausing and staring. A short distance away was Cervus. Sitting below a tree in his calm majestic manner, slowly chewing on a blade of grass. His eyes were closed but he clearly wasn't asleep. He seemed to be lost in thought.

“Hada?” a small voice popped up and he glanced around; A new friend, Hiran, “What's wrong? Do you not want to run any longer?”

“I... I do. I was just...”

She frowned and glanced at Cervus before a small smile crossed her face, “Oh, I see.”

“W-What?”

“Nothing!” Hiran giggled, “Cervus is just... I understand.”

Hada frowned for a moment then blushed, “N-No! Its... Its not!”

“Shhh...” Hiran stepped closer and cupped Hada's face in her hands, “Don't feel ashamed for feeling.”

“I... I'm not.”

“Cervus is a wonderful male. When the time comes, make yourself known to him and he will respond well.”

“W-When is the time?”

Hiran glanced up at the trees, “When the leaves begin to fall. Then, is the celebration! We all will find the one we want to be with for that year.”

“W-What if... if he...”

“Then simply wait for the next year and try once more!” Hiran did a silly twirl, “We have all the time in our lives!”

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Hada adjusted themselves awkwardly. It was their first season of affection, and they were nervous.

“You look fine.” Sheeka stepped towards Hada and examining them, “You are stressing yourself too much.”

“I... I don’t want to do this wrong.”

“You won’t.” Sheeka’s voice was uncharacteristically soft as she leaned forward and nuzzled Hada gently, “You’ve become a good child to our family.”

“I... I am grateful you took me in.” Hada touched their skin gently, “I...”

“Hush now.” Sheeka helped Hada stand properly, “Go now. Enjoy yourself.”

Hada walked out into the celebration hesitantly, as Sheeka wandered into the crowd as well. Everyone seemed...

*So many of us...*

They scanned the crowd as best they could, searching for Cervus excitedly. They could see Hiran with Yegnik. They could see Cerb with Sierva and Elafi. So many of them. So many... So many...

But no, Cervus.

Hada frowned softly. *Where is he?* A deep panic began to itch in his heart. Was he gone? Did he choose someone else already? Was he too late?

“Hada!”

A voice, but not the voice they were expecting. Hada turned to see another young male approaching. Hert. Hada knew him, but he was not one they had interacted with much...

“Hada!” Hert skipped through the crowd towards Hada and gave them a wide grin, “You’re looking beautiful.

“O-Oh!” their face felt so warm and their body... the pit of their belly was throbbing, “T-Thank you...”

“You know, I’ve had my eye on you for a while.” Hert grinned.

“I... I’m sorry, I did not... I did not realize.”

“Not a worry!” Hert waved one hand casually, “I was not concerned if we weren’t close. I was going to make my move now, anyway.”

“I... I wanted...” Hada took an uneasy step back, “I don’t know.”

Hert stepped closer, “You’re playing coy. Come with me. I’ll make you feel good. Our family will be wonderful!”

“I...” Hada swallowed. Their belly was burning so deeply. Would it be wrong to just be with Hert? He smelled so good... So strong.

“Hada?”

That familiar warm voice. Hada twisted around and stared at Cervus’ dumb face, “I... I was searching for you.”

“C-Cervus...”

Hert snorted, “I found her first!”

Cervus grinned, “Then I challenge you for her.”

The two young men grinned darkly as she circled each other before charging, smashing into each other with terrible force. Hada winced at the impact. They did not want to be the cause of pain. Hert was not a bad male. No... but...

*Cervus...*

Hada watched as the two males continued to throw themselves at each other. Each blow sending shivers through their body. Every moment seemed to dictate a new potential winner.

And then Cervus knocked Hert down to the ground. Hert shook his head a few times before clicking his tongue, “Fine!” and he ran back into the crowd.

Cervus let out a deep breath before shaking the dust off his body and glancing at Hada, “It... It, um... It was hard to see you in the crowd.”

Hada inched closer to him, “I... I was looking for you too.”

“O-Oh!” Cervus seemed a little stunned, “I... I didn’t know.”

Hada shook their head, “I didn’t know either.”

Cervus hesitated for a moment before reaching out and taking Hada’s hand, “Would you... be with me?”

“mm.” Hada nodded softly before Cervus quickly led them aside.

“I... I did not know this would happen... When I found you among the trees that night.”

“N... Neither did I.”

Cervus’ hands felt so cool against their burning skin.

“I... I am glad I found you that day.”

“A-As am I.”

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Hada moved slowly. She could no longer maintain the pace she used to, just a few months before. Her belly felt so heavy, but the child within felt so delicate. She could not bring herself to push her body. She did not want to.

“Hada?”

She glanced towards her mate and smiled at him, “It... It has been almost a full cycle of seasons, hasn't it?”

Cervus nodded, “Are you feeling well?”

“Yes. Yes, I think so. I am just... anticipating.”

“Good.” Cervus nuzzled her cheek lightly, “I cannot wait to see them.”

“It won't be long now.”

Cervus smiled and then strolled off, once again leaving Hada alone with her thoughts.

A cloud of happiness drifted through her head. This would be her first child. Their first child. What would they name it? Was it a boy? A girl? Should they decide multiple names beforehand? Or perhaps just wait for them to be born and decide then? Would they take after their mother or father? So many questions. So much happiness. So much hope.

*Crack!*

Hada jerked her head around and stared at someone walking towards her. She frowned. Whomever it was, they looked familiar. They made slow deliberate movements as they approached her.

“Hello? Can I help you?”

The figure paused before slowly moving closer again. There was something about them that made Hada's skin itch. She took a few steps back and the figure froze.

“It... alright...” the words were broken and strange; as if they were unable to speak clearly.

Hada frowned again. Something felt wrong. Something felt wrong! She swallowed. Her eyes glanced behind the figure, and she could see more; so many more. Just like it. Familiar. Similar. Wrong.

There was a dense silence for what felt like ages. The air felt so thick that she couldn't move.

Then the figure darted forward; it's shaping changing into something different. Something wrong. Hada tried to dart away, but felt something tight and heavy fall over her, pinning her to the ground. She screamed. She screamed as loud as she could.

“CERVUS!!”

Hada watched as everyone in the tribe lifted their heads. They saw her. Then they saw the figure pinning her down. A moment of confusion. Her mind raced before she screamed again, “RUN!!”

Everyone responded instantly. Darting away from the figures who quickly gave the chase. Hada struggled against the heavy bindings that held her down. Then she felt the figure push her harshly before speaking again, “Don't... move...”

“HADA!”

Her eyes were pulled up by the sound of her name and she felt cold when she saw Cervus fighting the tide of running bodies, racing towards her. A pang of joy struck her heart.

Then she watched the figure step forward, drawing an iron spear and she felt herself go cold.

Cervus similarly froze when he saw the weapon, slowing himself down and carefully pacing around the figure, occasionally moving forward only to jump back to avoid the rapid spear jabs. Each moment the spear made was like ice; cutting through the air with unnatural speed.

*Slash!*

One single thrust; punctuated by the tearing of skin and the spilling of blood. Cervus darted back, grimacing in pain as blood dribbled from his side.

“Cervus!”

He glanced at Hada on the ground. For a brief moment, they locked eyes.

*I'll find you again.*

She nodded.

And then he ran.

And Hada was alone.

The figure waited for several seconds before turning towards Hada and staring at her. There was something strange in its eyes. Recognition. Anger. Hatred.

The figure knelt and touched Hada's forehead firmly, “Return...”

Hada screamed again. Not out of panic, but pain. Her skin felt hot, but not comfortably so. It was like fire. And then it felt tight. Like she was being placed between two rocks and pressed. She felt like she was going to ooze out from the pores of her skin...

“Can you hear me now?”

“Uuh... Uhh...”

The voice... It was familiar... Hada stared at the figure, letting her eyes focus on the wrinkled, old skin.

“G-Grand...”

“Good.” The Old woman rose and gestured. Hada felt the net being pulled from her back before being replaced with a thin cloak. She struggled to stand but her legs felt new. Different. She looked at her hands. Thin and delicate. Her chest was heavy, and her stomach was heavy.

“W-Wha... Wha...”

The Old woman didn't respond, simply turning away from him, “Let's leave this place.”

“I-I...”

“It's alright.” Hada felt a gentle hand on his back and turned her head. A woman... Her friend.

“Y-You...”

“You remember me?”

Hada hesitated for a moment then nodded slowly.

“That's nice. Come. Let's get you home.”

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Hada fiddled with her fingers awkwardly. How long had it been since she had fingers? The clothes felt strange on her skin. She hadn't needed them in so long...

“How are you feeling?”

She glanced up and stared at her friend. She looked different. Older. More mature.

“D-Different...”

“I can't say that's surprising. You've been lost to us for a few years now.”

“I... I...”

“Don't worry.” Her friend carefully sat down, “No one is expecting you to recover in a few days.” She reached into her bag and held out a dried piece of meat, “Here.”

Hada awkwardly reached for it, pinching it between her fingers, “T-This is...”

“Meat.”

“Meat...” She shook her head, “I... I can’t...”

“Oh. Of course not.” Her friend took the meat back, before digging through her bag again and pulling out an apple, “This better.”

“Mm.” Hada nodded, carefully taking it and nibbling it lightly. It was sweet and juicy. It was nice.

“Your Grandmother is still upset with you, you know.”

“Hm.”

“I don’t know if she’s angry you disobeyed her or that you’ve been tainted.”

“...T-Tainted?”

Her friend paused for a moment before deciding to speak, “You... You lost perspective of yourself.”

“W-What happened?”

“...You lost your humanity. Your body, your sex... You were an not-human... Shifting.”

Hada said nothing.

“Your Grandmother said it might’ve been because of the spirits of the woods. But we really don’t know. But she wanted you back.”

Those words made Hada’s heart feel light for a moment.

“She was worried that you had somehow... damned the whole village.”

The lightness vanished, replaced with a cold deep pit.

“It took her some time to develop the magic. She could bring you back, but not completely. Which is why... you’re as you are now.” She gestured towards Hada’s chest and belly.

Hada nodded softly, clutching at her belly slightly. She was glad the magic didn’t work properly then...

“I don’t think she wants to see you.” Her friend spoke softly.

“I... I don’t want to be here.”

Her friend frowned, “But... This your home.”

“H-Home...” Hada shook her head, “M-My home... Is w-with... with...” She frowned and touched her mouth. His name. She couldn’t say his name. Why...?

Tears welled in her eyes as she gripped her belly, “C-Change me back. P-please.”

“I-”

“I will not.” Grandmother’s voice echoed from outside the room, before she stepped inside. Her face was harsh and cruel.

“G-Grand-”

“You will not call me that. I have disowned you.”

“...”

“You will not leave this house. You will stay here, till you die. This is your form now and that is your punishment.”

“I... I need to leave.”

“And go where, hm?”

“Chief, please.” Hada’s friend spoke softly, in an attempt to diffuse the situation, but the Old Woman paid no attention.

“That form you took...” She spoke heavily, each word laced with venom, “Was wrong. You risked damning our home for some momentary, *barbaric* pleasure. You... Disgust me.”

Hada said nothing.

“I have ensured you will never take that form or any other form again.”

“N-No. L-let me leave.”

“I shall not.”

“L-Let me leave!”

The Old Woman raised her hand and slapped Hada firmly, knocking her to the ground. She was old, but she was the strongest of the village people, “Don’t you dare talk back to me.”

“I-I...”

“Chief, please”-

“You. Leave.”

Hada’s friend hesitated before nodding and walking out of the room.

“As I said before. You will never leave this house. Any time you do, I will discipline you so that you understand the graveness of your sin.”

“P-Please... I... I loved him...” Hada felt tears of pain and sadness roll down her cheeks, “T-This... Our child... L-Let me go...”

The Old Woman’s face darkened.

“Never.”

\*

Hada screamed in pain.

“You’re alright. You’re alright.” Her friend spoke the words calmly. She had been repeating them for hours now.

“It’s coming out!” The medicine man announced carefully.

Hada screamed again. And then she gasped.

“And there...!”

Hada struggled to breathe. The echoes of pain were still there. Her legs. Her hips. Her entire lower body felt numb with pain. She could feel occasional spasms run through her body.

“It... It’s...”

Hada felt cool water against her lips as someone helped her drink. Sweat ran down her head in rivers.

“Please let her hold the child...”

“No. Kill it.” The Old Woman’s voice was cruel and unsympathetic.

Hada struggled to move, “N-no... P-Please...” her voice was a pathetic mumble, reaching no ears.

“It is innocent.”

“It was not meant to exist!”

Hada struggled to focus. She could barely see where anyone was. Her child... Where was the child...

“I will not listen to you. You are blinded by your hatred of her.”

“*HE* nearly damned us all!”

“How do you know that?”

“Because it was wrong.”

“What is wrong is the killing of a young one.”

“*Che.*” The Old Woman spat in irritation, “Then you will help HIM care for that... thing.”

Heavy stomps grew distant as Hada felt a small bundle get pushed into her arms.

“Sorry about that.” Her friend spoke softly.

Hada said nothing, letting her eyes adjust to the small thing in front of her. It was making strange sounds. Its skin was not smooth but covered in delicate fur. Its eyes were dark and deep.

“N-Not human...”

“...No, it isn't.”

Hada nodded softly before holding the child closer, “G-Good.”

\*

Hada hummed softly in the firelight, as she rocked the child in her hands. Perhaps this was one of the benefits of being human; using her hands. She wouldn't have been able to hold her child otherwise...

It had only been a short while since she had given birth. The child was developing quickly. It was already able to walk on its own, but she still liked holding it and it clearly liked to be held by her.

“I-I wish you could've met y-your father.”

The infant made a small gurgling noise.

“He took me in. J-Just being by his side was c-comfortable in a way I never felt before...”

Another gurgle. Hada just smiled.

The door clicked open. She turned quickly to see her Friend standing in the doorway, “Come with me. Quickly. And stay quiet.”

“What-?”

“I said, stay quickly! Come!!”

Hada nodded and moved closer, following her Friend out of the room, for the first time in weeks.

“Your Grandmother is sick.”

“...”

“It started a few days ago, but it's only been worsening. She is bedridden right now and half delirious.”

“...S-She wants my baby dead... D-Doesn't she?”

Her friend paused, before nodding, “Your child... is not normal. You are not normal. Her sickness is not letting her think clearly and neither is her anger.”

“...Does she want me dead as well?”

“...I suspect she's been sick for several months now if I'm honest. Her obsession with finding you and bringing you back... At first, I understood it, but her attitude was so... so oppressive. She can no longer think clearly...”

Hada said nothing. There was nothing to say; that Old Woman was no longer the grandmother who took care of her...

“But she is still the Chief of our people. And some of them still listen to her. And neither you, nor your child will live to see the next few mornings, if you stay in this village.”

“Mm.”

“I’ve arranged for a lull in the guards right now. We should have a short window to get you back over the stream and away from here.”

“W-Why?”

“Weren’t you listening? I said-”

“N-No... Why help me?”

Her Friend paused, “...Because I remember the one you used to be. And he was a good friend to me in my youth. And I wouldn’t want the last of his remnants to be burned to ashes.”

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Unlike that night, so long ago, the moon was out, and light shimmered off the fresh snow. It wasn’t great, but it was their only chance.

Hada stepped towards the running water before turning to her Friend, “Where do I go from here?”

“I don’t know. And honestly? I don’t care. Just get away from here. As far as your legs can carry you and then some more.”

“...Will you be alright?”

“Yes. Yes, I will. Now go. Leave and never look back. Remember; you have no home here anymore.”

Hada remained in place for a few seconds as she watched her friend rush back to the village silently and then was only the sound of water.

She cradled her child closer to her chest before turning away from the village and towards the woods and carefully walking towards them.

The darkness was consuming. She could feel her heart race, like a fire was burning in her chest. With every step she took, she carefully discarded an article of clothing, till all she felt was the cool air on her skin and the snow-dirt under her feet. She didn’t feel cold. No, this felt right. Unconfined by a loose prison...

She continued forward, as best she could, swallowing deeply. Nothing looked familiar here. She had no idea if she was going in the right direction or not, or if there even was a right direction to begin with. She knew nothing... All she had was hope.

*Crack!*

Hada froze at the sound before turning towards it. Several thoughts rushed through her head before she spoke, “W-Who?”

There was more silence. Then a soft grunt and she watched the animal make its way before her. It was tall and proud, beautiful warm fur and deep black eyes. It... He examined her carefully, moving his head from one side to the other.

Hada struggled to hold back her emotions, “Oh... Oh, it’s you. It’s *you*.”

The animal’s ears perked up at the sound of her voice before it grunted again, moving closer to her. She couldn’t understand him, but she knew what he was asking.

“Yes. Yes, it’s me. I’m back. I’m... I’m so sorry.”

The animal grunted again before nuzzling her cheek gently before looking down at the bundle in her hands.

“Oh. Oh, yes. It’s our child. They... Look.” She gestured lightly, placing the child on the ground, and motioning for the Animal to move closer.

The Animal and the Child studied each other carefully for several moments before the Child moved to its feet awkwardly and they began to circle each other before the Animal carefully sniffed at the Child’s head. The Child responded with a small shiver before going and standing alongside the Animal.

Hada nodded softly, “Thank you... Please take care of each other...”

The Animal grunted again.

“I... I can’t. I’m... I’ve been kept in this skin... I... I belong nowhere...”

Another grunt.

“I can’t... I can’t stay with you...”

Another grunt.

“I do. I do miss you. All of you. I cry everyday... I... I can’t even say your names anymore...”

The Animal lowered his head gently, touching his forehead to Hada’s.

“I... I...” She gripped her wrist awkwardly, “W-Would you take care of me, even as I am now? Until... Until I can find a way back?”

A soft grunt.

“T-Thank you... Thank you... Thank you.”

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*Legends speak of a cursed woods in the far north.*

*A strange sight once seen.*

*A woman walking amidst a herd.*

*Not as a shepherd but as one of their own.*

*A sight seen once.*

*And then they were gone. Forevermore.*

THE END.