

Mage's Call; an excerpt

Mara and Reese strolled through the halls of Xora's home, located in the middle of the deadly Irista Bog. While the Wiccan's nest was bizarre and intriguing, they'd grown bored and sought the garden Xora incessantly bragged about.

"What do you make of that Ishva's Bow and arrows story?" Reese asked.

Mara sighed, pondering the tale the witch imparted. During their adventures, Mara and Reese obtained the bow from Xora's sister. The weapon was made from several materials, most of them unknown. It also had odd markings and symbols with exotic colors. Reese had considered it ceremonial rather than functional.

But upon seeing it, Xora told them an intriguing story. Supposedly, the bow and arrows were magical, having been created for a warrior princess known as Ishva. But unlike other items imbued with magic, Ishva's Bow was complex to use. It required not only the presence of a magic user, but the archer had to be in particular state of mind as well.

Ultimately, aside from hunting game, the weapon was useless to the two adventurers.

"It wouldn't be the craziest thing I've heard," Mara said.

"I mean, do you think she spun that wild tale to convince us to leave it with her?"

"I don't really think she has to resort to petty storytelling to get what she wants..."

When they first met the Wiccan, Mara and Reese were fleeing from a bog beast known as a Grekin. The enormous monster meant to make a meal of them until Xora arrived and saved them. Using her magic, a portal from who knew where opened and a creature, even more formidable and hungry, snatched the Grekin, pulling it through the rip in their reality.

"That's a good point... I just think it's odd she went through so much trouble to explain the details about a weapon we can't even use. It was as though she were trying to convince us of something."

"Who knows what's going on in her head. For all we know, she's as crazy as a cave troll."

The two followed Xora's directions and found a cavern-like enclosure that immediately drew them in. They paused at the entrance and gawked.

"This has to be the most beautiful garden I've ever seen!" said an open mouthed, wide eyed Mara.

"It's amazing!" Reese replied.

Mara wanted nothing more than to explore but was reluctant, as though traipsing about with her soiled shoes would disturb its majesty. But at the same time, the moonlit obsidian brick path winding throughout the garden beckoned them forward.

Mara had foolishly expected a typical greenery with the usual flowers and plants. It never dawned on her that the witch's garden would be full of exotic foliage, likely found only in the swamps.

Glowing dark blues and purples were everywhere. Bizarrely shaped flowers dotted bushes and trees. Contrasting the darker colors were brilliant red, yellow, and green flowers whose petals were streaked with black veins. Parts of the garden were so thick with these plants, passage appeared impassable. There was a certain chaos to what should've been symmetric. Even so, it was amazing and pleasing to the eye.

The sheer size of the cavern was daunting. From the inside, it seemed as large as the entire nest. The blackened pathway diverged in many places, and after Reese and Mara regained their composure, they chose one and walked.

“What's that up ahead?” Mara pointed towards a pulsating glow several yards down the path.

“I don't know, but let's check it out!”

Before Mara could advise otherwise, Reese had taken off like a little boy playing tag. She shook her head, grinned, and ran after him. He stopped abruptly on the bank of a small pond. The glow was just on the other side and they still couldn't see what it was.

“This water looks so cool and inviting. I wish we could jump in.” Mara reached down to run a hand through the water, curious about its temperature. A ripple spread from her fingers outward and before she could take a breath, a dark green, vine-like tentacle the width of horse-haired rope erupted from the pond and wrapped around her wrist.

She barely had time for a half-hearted yelp before being dragged under the water and pulled towards...where?

The urge to scream was overwhelming but not enough to deter her instincts from clamping her mouth shut. Panic aside, Mara had never been a good swimmer; there was no way she could hold her breath for long.

Through the murk, she glanced up and gazed at Reese against the shimmering water, panicked and running here and there. Why hadn't he jumped in after her?

Her lungs ached and begged for air, and just as her instincts to keep her mouth closed failed, whatever held her captive pushed her up and free from the water.

Dangling from a wrist alone was excruciating, but better than drowning; for the moment at least. Another vine-thing snaked out and gripped an ankle, pulling it up almost level with her wrist. Now, she was almost horizontal. Blood and relief flooded through her wrist and arm as her weight balanced on her hand and foot.

She still couldn't see what held her prisoner, but the reason Reese hadn't come to her rescue was now painfully obvious. With a pitiful looking stick, he attempted to keep an enormous creature at bay.

It had eight wicked hook-like legs and a bulbous abdomen with a long segmented tail that ended in a stinger, moist with what could've only been poison. The midsection was broad, ending in a flat head with six eyes and jaws as wide as a hell hounds. Pincers with serrated edges and knife points sprouted from just under the mouth. It was dark brown with thick spiky hairs and saliva dripped in droves as it snarled at Reese. Mara had never heard of giant spiders and scorpions mating, but that was what this abomination resembled.

Despite her own desperate predicament, Mara gasped and screamed as a pincer almost grabbed Reese at the waist. He was just quick enough to dodge the grasp but it undoubtedly would've snapped him in half.

Suddenly, from the depths of the pond rose the monster that held her. Mara and Reese had been warned of meat eating plants in the bog, but she never imagined anything like this. Several more vines sprouted from the sides of a circle-shaped maw that could easily swallow her whole. Inside the mouth, small filament-like hairs swayed from side to side, as though performing a devilish dance, celebrating the meal to come.

Mara gaped, too stunned to do anything else as two of the creepers shot out towards Reese while the spider-thing turned its focus to her; the monsters were cooperating!

Reese was using the stick to bat away the vines but Mara was too distracted with her own demise to see if he succeeded. The spider approached, mouth agape, revealing blackened needle points.

She screamed.

But instead of taking a chunk out of her flesh, it raised the stinger; a preferable death if she had to choose. But the giant insect surprised her again. The tip of the stinger dripped a dark syrupy substance, but just underneath the opening was another. Several thick strands of webbing launched out of it so fast she barely followed them with her eyes.

As though they had minds of their own, the twisting fibers snapped her legs together and wrapped her from the ankles up as though she were merely a pesky fly. In a moment of insane hysteria, Mara couldn't help wondering what this thing ate on a regular basis. No doubt Xora fed it, but what?

Her arms were now bound to the sides of her body. She searched for Reese, prepared to tell him to run and leave her. He'd fought off the vines, and at least two lay at his feet, broken and leaking sap. Reese stared at her, opened mouth. He glanced at the pitiful club he somehow beat the creepers back with, then met Mara's eyes; she recognized defeat and understood.

She would've yelled, begged him to just go, but a glint caught her eye. Behind Reese, leaning against a tree like it was enjoying a picnic on a warm summer day, was Ishva's Bow and quiver.

How on Arath did that get here?

Reese hadn't taken it, and there was no way she'd have missed a five-foot bow and quiver strapped across his back. But who cared?! It may be a puny weapon against these creatures, but it could at least provide a distraction, even if it only bought a few precious moments to get free.

"Reese! Behind you! The bow!"

He turned, and for a moment did nothing; likely as baffled as she was by its presence. But he snapped out of it quickly, snatched up the weapon, grabbed an arrow, and trained it on the spider.

Reese was strong and had used the bow before, but now, fear etched grooves into his features. His entire body trembled, arms shaking so badly there was no way he'd hit an adult boga beast let alone this giant insect. In desperate haste, he let loose an arrow even a fledgling archer would've been ashamed of. He swore and nocked another arrow.

Mara sobbed and gazed at him with farewell eyes. Death was at her door, and she only hoped he would flee. Yet, he stood there, staring at her while tears marked his face like a storm strewn gully.

He wouldn't leave her.

The webbing continued wrapping her body up like a possessed spindle of yarn. Her limbs were strapped against her sides so tightly, she no longer even felt them.

The strands made their way up her neck and over her mouth. Mara's eyes pleaded with him, but through his pain, she glimpsed something more; conviction, courage, and anger shone through like a beacon in the blackest of blacks. With gritted teeth and squinting eyes, Reese pulled the bow string further.

Suddenly, three archaic symbols etched on the bow and arrow flared to life, a searing white nearly blinding to look upon.

The three sections of the bow came to life as well, each taking on an eerie color - gold streams in the upper and lower regions shone against turquoise like a sun gone supernova settling on the ocean. The riser reflected a mysterious dark wood, inlaid with an enigmatic black substance, and was counter to the top and bottom areas. Here, the bow seemed as an ephemeral shadow, there but not there.

Mara's eyes were wide with awe, but even more incredulous was that Reese didn't appear to notice it all. Suddenly, he emitted a battle cry that could've come from a hardened warrior, fighting for his life during the bloody Corsic War.

He released the arrow. It shot forth like a bolt of lightning, the runes etched on it blazing and leaving a trail of light a falling star couldn't compete with.

Mara's eyes followed the missile as it entered the creature's mouth. Several sharp teeth exploded, flying in every direction. The arrow continued its cataclysmic path, utterly destroying three eyes. Greenish goo covered the thing's head and dripped like foul lava. The arrow, showing no signs of slowing whatsoever, sheered off the top of the monster's skull and pierced the abdomen. The instant the projectile exited, the spider's lower half blew apart like a pricked party balloon.

Gore rained down and Mara gagged at the stench and feel of it soaking her skin and hair. A moment later, she dropped, leaving her stomach and heart behind. Mara panicked as she plummeted into the pond, her entire body still bound as tight as a bread roll.

She held her breath, and before worry over holding it for long could assail her, someone dragged her to the surface and quickly to the shore.

Reese's face hovered over hers, brows furrowed and eyes plagued with concern. "Are you ok?"

Mara nodded rapidly and tried to speak, but could only muster a mumble through the bandage-like web. He grabbed the discarded stick, trying to pry the webbing loose, but it was no use; the stuff was stronger than sap from a hedgewood tree.

He rose but stopped at the sound of clapping. Not ordinary clapping. This was a purposeful cross between flattery and sarcasm; one clap per heartbeat.

"Well done; both of you," Xora said, emerging from some unseen corner and bowing before them both. She whispered a cryptic phrase, waved a hand, and the webbing holding Mara prisoner fell away like silk, dissolving into the air before it hit the ground. Mara sat up and rubbed muscles that had been deprived of circulation.

"What the hell is going on, witch!" Reese said through clenched teeth.

His fists were balled and a scowl marked his face as he took a step towards Xora.

The Wiccan, showing no signs of fear whatsoever, folded her arms. "Watch your tone... warrior." She smiled and winked at him, but the gesture only infuriated him more as he took another step.

"Do you really think you can harm me? A better question would be, do you really think I'd let harm come to *you*? Don't be a fool, this was a necessary test. Now shut up and sit down next to your damsel in distress and I'll explain."

Reese, clearly still unhappy, hesitated but joined Mara and put his arm around her.

"Now that we're all civil; first, I do apologize. *Sincerely*," she added as Reese rolled his eyes. "It was the only way to test my theory, and trust me, by the time I'm finished, you'll thank me."

Mara was furious and still scared out of her mind, but it wouldn't do any good to let it show. And she had to admit that if the Wiccan meant them harm, she could've murdered them a dozen times over and fed their corpses to any number of her mutant creatures she'd created and imprisoned. Besides, she was curious as to why Xora used her magic to enable Reese to use it.

"Go on," said Mara. "Tell us why you orchestrated this...*test*. Tell us why your need to act as a mage for Reese and Ishva's Bow was more important than our lives."

"Act as a mage?" Xora's brows met together in confusion.

She was convincing, but it wasn't enough. "You said the bow and arrows needed an archer *and* a mage."

Xora's taunt features relaxed. "You still don't get it, do you. I admire you, Mara. You have initiative, courage, and a caring nature I've never seen before. But you're also a fool."

Mara stared, mouth agape and eyes wide as sunflowers. She couldn't muster a reply so remained silent.

"Think! You told me about the dagger; remember how you killed the drox?"

Mara's mouth slowly parted as the memory eased into her mind. Shortly after their journey began, Mara and Reese happened upon a Drox, a conniving vile creature working in the slave trade. The Drox race disguised themselves as charming entrepreneurs, gaining the trust of hapless travelers. Mara was one of those who fell into the trap, nearly paying the price of perpetual servitude.

The Drox drugged and subdued her, and during her most desperate moment, an astonishing thing happened. Mara somehow retrieved a dagger, hidden in a sheath near her ankle and skewered the Drox, right through the forehead; at the time, she'd been completely bound to a wooden post.

All her life there'd been hints of magical abilities, and yet they'd always alluded and teased her. Even the most powerful wizards were at a loss. That Mara had affinities towards the arcane arts was obvious, but anything more than that had yet to be discovered. But Mara had resigned herself long ago to a life without magic. Then, this.

"That's right!" Xora continued, "I didn't act as the mage for the bow, you stupid girl! *You* did!"

"Me? I was the mage..." The words were a whisper. Not so much a question as an unbelievable acknowledgment.

"And I was the archer..." Reese said, in an awed tone.

"Now do you see?" said Xora. "After we spoke of the dagger and your seemingly useless talent, I began to wonder; what if the bow responded to your magic, Mara? And what if Reese was in dire straights, desperate to protect you or himself?"

Mara nodded, understanding yet still perturbed. Was the witch so self-absorbed that the idea of almost getting them killed never crossed her mind? A glance to Reese revealed the same dilemma. On one hand, the elation from a successful hunt with an impressive weapon was clearly etched on his face. But an unmistakable air of disgust lay present as well.

Their angst must've been obvious to Xora since she threw up her hands and said, "You two are worse than a couple of timid rock rabbits! Can't you stop sulking long enough to see good fortune fall in your laps?!"

The Wiccan was growing more agitated. Mara didn't see a point in incensing her further since it was clear Xora was too caught up in her own concerns to be wary of theirs. She set up this elaborate scheme and sacrificed two creature's lives just to satisfy her curiosity. And, truth be told, that they now had a powerful magical weapon was very comforting.

Mara glanced at Reese; he shrugged and held up his hands as if to say, "What can you do?"

Suddenly, a broad smile split Reese's features and he said, "I can't wait to use it again!"

Xora clapped her hands once and laughed. "I'm not surprised. Users of the bow had reported feelings of euphoria, bordering on addiction. That said, you should not be so eager to

trigger the magic. It would mean grave danger lies ahead. Also, don't forget; Ishva's Bow is an ordinary weapon without Mara's influence."

Reese's smile died on his lips as he nodded.