

Sadora was about to suffocate. Her head pushed underwater, it was a matter of seconds. She gathered was energy she had left and rotated her bust, striking the brigand's jaw with her elbow. Sadora crawled in the mud, grabbed a heavy stone and broke the man's skull before he could fight back.

She breathed heavily under the rain washing dirt over her bruised body. Her pursuers didn't leave her any second of respite. Besides, she cut down the bolas entangling her legs and continued to run north. Elven territory was near.

How many of these dogs are still following me ? she thought. Sadora killed three the previous week. More were about to come, she knew it, she felt it. The trap was closing, she had not much time left to disappear.

What was a cool rain became a storm. Sadora struggled against the wind. The cold bit her naked flesh. She ran across an abandoned lumber camp and decided to rest in a small cabin. Luckily, she also found an old axe, and a half of a stale bread. Lacking better options, the vagrant wrapped herself in a torn bed sheet.

As soon as the weather allowed it though, she resume her progression toward the Sylfan forest. She was alone, for a time. Then, as the night settled, she noticed a faint light a couple of miles away. She approached, still on her guard. Carts were gathered in circle around a fire. Someone was making food, people were talking, women, and children. Sadora knew she couldn't show up without freaking them out, thus, she only called for their attention.

— Hey ! Travelers ?

She stood still, frost bitten and exhausted, hoping she would not have to kill again. Two men appeared, one with a quarterstaff, the other, an old sword.

— Who's there ? thundered the first guy.

— You look odd, woman. Odd and roguish ! You better go back from where you came.

— I need care, I'm wounded, Sadora mumbled.

— You look like shit, I give you tha'

— No no no, that's probably a trap !

— If I wanted to harm you, that would have been done already, she added.

— Eh ! Give us your weapon. That would be a start.

She complied in silence, knowing that she could knock them out in second with her bare hands. Voices resounded in the camp. People started to get agitated. Then, an old woman came, limping, leaning on the nearby cart. She grabbed the second man's arm.

— Grandma... he muttered.

— She needs us !

— Easy now, we don't know her !

— Oh stop it, silly ! Do you think you would have been enough to stop her anyway ?

Finally, they invited Sadora to enter the camp. As she thought, at the moment she stepped into the light, everyone gasped and jumped back. Mothers grabbed their children, looking at the men, the only two armed people here. Sadora knelt by the fire.

— I'm not gonna eat you, she said.

Children ran back their palling moms. The stranger was by far the most menacing human among them. The quarterstaff guy offered her a wineskin. She grabbed it and nodded before taking a few big swig. She wiped her chin clean, under the inspection of the old crone.

— Where she from ? she asked.

— From Gletsieg, Sadora replied. Pillagers attacked, I fled.

— It's ten days from here ! added a man.

— I was tracked.

— Was ?

— Not anymore.

This answer did not calm the travelers down. The vagrant chuckled. Once again, the old lady broke the silence :

— Come on, your wounds won't close on their own. Show me.

— That's alright, replied Sadora. I just needed to warm up.

— Ts ts ! I'm not letting you kick the bucket now you are in this camp. We have better things to do than burying strangers on the roadside. In the meantime, Mathilde, be a good girl and bring her some soup.

— Of, of course, stammered the young woman across the fire.

Sadora removed her cover, revealing her almost naked body. At that moment, many thoughts went through everyone's mind. Grandma noticed her numerous tattoos, covering her chest and belly as well as parts of her back. The dancing light hid the blushing cheeks of the maiden as she offered a bowl of stew to the stranger. The old crone sat on a stool and moved Sadora's arm up, revealing the cut on her flank.

— Tis not much for a baddie like you, but it could get infected.

She damped a clean cloth and began to remove blood and dirt. Sadora stayed silent, eating. She caught the men looking at her full perky breasts barely held in place by linen straps. Sadora thought that it has been weeks since she had sex. Though, she was not in the mood, and she did not intend to mess with these people's lives. They were breathing and together : something to cherish. The young maiden refilled the stranger's bowl with the same greasy mutton soup. Sadora ate it as if it were the best meal of her life.

— Running for days sure made you hungry ! chuckled a man.

The stranger nodded as a sign of approval.

— The attack, he continued. the came from the Ruins of Leos, right ?

— Yes.

— Knew it ! They know we're in deep shit, so they take advantage of it.

- Folk say that Mareno will not hold for long. If the Gray Ones from Dehest don't conquer it from the north, brigands will do it from the south.
- Can't count on our good king to protect us !
- Don't start again, Raoul, you know well that he's nothing more than a shepherd, like most of Mareno's people. He just happen to have a crown on his head. This country should not be independent, not with such fools in charge. The Princely Alliance should take over.
- They are fighting against Dehest every single day. For years now ! They have other things to do than handling pastures and sheep.

The conversation continued for a time, Sadora barely listening. One by one, women and child went to sleep. Men patrolled around the camp. At the end, only Sadora and Grandma were around the ambers.

- Tis never too late for redemption, you know ? she whispered.
 - What ?
 - What's done is done. What you'll do starting now, that's what counts.
- Sadora remained silent, staring at the smiling dean. The later walked away.

Then, she felt a presence. Mathilde was there, sheepish.

- Can I stay for a moment ? I can not sleep in such a place.
- The stranger sighed. The young maiden knelt beside her, hands joined on her thighs, head down. She was terrified, fragile. Nothing that will help her survive this world.
- What are you doing here, child ? Sadora finally asked.
 - Like you, I'm fleeing the attacks.
 - Not like me.
 - You said that...
 - Those hunting me has nothing to do with the petty bandits raiding Mareno.
 - You said they are not following you anymore.
- Sadora shook her head. She added wood in the fire.
- Find a city with thick walls, stay inside. That's the best someone like you can do, she added. You could become a maid, or...
- Mathilde sobbed. The stranger sighed. The young woman stayed a bit more before going back to sleep.

One of the child woke up Sadora, taping on her feet with a stick, hoping for some extraordinary outcome. His mother jumped on him and articulated a clumsy apology. The vagrant sat, gritting her teeth under the pain of her wounds. She helped the travelers to tidy up the camp. Then, one of the men gave her back her axe.

They were about to leave when two silhouettes broke the horizon on a nearby hill. Two horsemen. Sadora cursed and grabbed her weapon. The others stirred.

- Pillagers ?
- Assassins.
- We have to go, now !
- They will catch you.

One man took his quarterstaff, the other had a sword and an old shield. The intruders charged, screaming. Children were crying in their mothers' arms, hidden in the carts.

The sword guy bit the dust in seconds. Sadora dodge a spear strike, rolled away and threw her axe at her opponent. He fell from his saddle, the blade deep in his guts. The second killer, after knocking out the staff man, was already on her when she managed to recover her axe. She barely escaped his blade but took the horse full-force. She fell, stunned, hearing her enemy turning back for a last assault. She felt fury intoxicating her mind, enhancing her senses. The assassin charged. Everything happened in a blink of an eye. The woman jumped straight to the man's throat, knocking him off his steed. As soon as they hit the ground, she already had his neck stuck between her strong arms. More pressure, a swift move, and his spine cracked.

Only the bandits died. The travelers were only bruised. Their concern for Sadora became fear. They were about to leave when the tattooed woman handed them the abandoned horses' reins.

- Give them a new life, or sell them, I don't care.
- You could use a steed too.
- They would not follow me into the woods.
- The Sylfan woods ? The elven lands ? You'll die there, woman.
- Sooner or later, I will.
- I'll take the horses then, no need for them to suffer your foolishness.

Sadora made sure no one was following the caravan. Then, she searched the dead assassins, finding a dagger and an old cloak. Then, she crossed the rocky hill to the south, last obstacle before the Sylfan Cradle. She reached the first trees at noon and stopped, despite her desire to outrun any pursuers. Her senses were on alert. She was certain to be observed. Unable to go around, she cursed and entered the forbidden elven territory.

The air became heavier, warmer. Noises and movement came from all directions. Sadora struggled moving forward in this unwelcoming region. She had to jump down cliffs only to climb back later, using roots and rocks. She had to go around gigantic trunks and avoid thick bushes of strange vegetation. Unknown beasts were roaming all around. Some kind of badgers bristling with spikes, colorful birds with deafening screams, moss-covered boars and many more. After a few hours, she had to stop and recover. Some light pierced through the high foliage, drawing some bright stains on a grassy pile of rocks. Sadora sat there and checked on her wounds. At this moment, she noticed an immense colorless shape nearby. It was a long, empty tube of dry skin. A giant moult.

- Where the fuck am I ?

As her only answer, she felt a vibration in the ground. The earth moved, heaved. Some stones rolled away as roots were creaking. The hill was cracking open.

Sadora ran, without waiting for any explanation. A shiny anthracite body emerged, finished by a yellow eyed angular head. Looking back, Sadora gazed upon giant snake who started to crawl towards her. The hunt was on, she was the prey.

This headlong rush dragged on. Dodging the serpentine jaws at the last second, Sadora was loosing ground. Her breath was shorter and shorter. They competed in ingenuity, one to flee, the other to eat. The beast was smart and swift. Then, the human noticed a clearing nearby. She could not run longer and decided to fight the creature. She jumped in the light, lifted her weapon and waited for the terrible clash. A mystical breeze swirled around her. A surprising feeling in this moment. The beast finally showed up, slowly raising its head above the bushes.

— Come on, you disgusting lizard ! Show me what you got ! Sadora thundered.

— Vainbhaum ! What are you bringing me this time ?

The beast looked behind its prey, hesitating. A green glow appeared in his eyes. Sadora glanced behind her, discovering a small redhead elf, dressed with leaves. Her severe gaze betrayed her juvenile appearance.

Sadora understood she was in a garden, with a cottage at its center. Patches of plants were cultivated around the house, and also on the roof.

— Go, Vainbhaum, I'll take care of it from here, the redhead added with a sign of her hand.

The snake hissed, shook himself and disappeared between the trees. Sadora wiped her face, still completely tensed by so much adrenaline.

— What a nightmare, she sighed. This place is crawling wi...

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

Sadora's face darken. She readjusted her grip on her axe and evaluated the distance between her and the petite redhead. The later understood her intent. Her emerald eyes seemed to ignite.

— Don't even think about it.