

The voice in her mind was as powerful as a thunderstorm. Sadora felt the words pounding inside her skull relentlessly.

—Stalk your prey and kill ! No mercy for the weak, tear apart their fragile bodies ! You are the predator, drink the blood of elves and humans ! They are imperfect, ignorant. They are the enemy ! Time has come, kill. Kill !

The beast rushed through the woods, climbing rocks and avoiding huge trunks. The wolf pack couldn't keep up the pace. The werewolf was too fast, too agile. She only had a taste of what blood felt like. She wanted more, she had to, her entire will was directed towards this very goal. The redhead elf had shaken her hold on the human's body, causing her to flee. Far from this strange enemy, the beast was now on the hunt.

You just woke up, her powers are a threat to you, the voice said.

Sadora opened her eyes. She was in a dark tunnel. The clearing had disappeared, the trees, the elf, her prison of roots too. Terror settled within her. Suddenly a sinister voice echoed from the depths.

— The first transformation occurred.

— Who's there ? Sadora growled.

She put her hand on her belt, but she had no weapon.

— You know who I am. I am your master, I am the Huntress. You disappointed me, human. Leaving our clan so quickly, what a shame.

— This is the best thing I've done in a long time ! Where am I ?

— You wouldn't understand. What will interest you more is knowing that your body is under the control of the beast right now.

— I... The moon.

— Yes, it was inevitable.

— I'll find you !

— I have no doubt, you know where to look. I can not wait for your return. The pack is impatient too. You're very promising, don't ruin your destiny.

— I will kill you.

— You over estimate yourself now. I'm all you have left. In the meantime, enjoy this maze. Me ? I hate it. See you soon, mortal.

The elven archer jumped aside and landed against the leaning trunk of a large willow tree. A wound covered his chest. His brigandine had been cut like a piece of silk by the creature's formidable claws. When he glanced behind him, he saw that two Sylfans were already dead, their faces buried in the pool of bloody mud that spread across the forest floor. The monster was fast, powerful and sturdy. The elf had never seen such a thing. He stood up with difficulty and notched a new arrow. He noticed with horror that his bow was broken. He drew his saber

instead and charged. With a side step, he aimed at the flank of the monster, who dodged with terrible speed. Another ranger, a female Sylfan, twirled her long spear, pushing the monster back. From the heights of a massive rock, The third elf shot arrow after arrow. Unfortunately, the dark beast seemed to move as nimbly as the wind. The next second the female elf collapsed, her throat torn out by terrible fangs. It didn't take long for the archer to be thrown down and smashed against a jutting rock. His carcass fell next to the two others.

Resting on a high branch, the thrush observed the forest. A squirrel descended along the trunk at full speed until reaching the ground in search of its meal. A ray of sunlight pierced the foliage and colored in gold the fragrant humus of the Sylfan Cradle's forest. Following its course, the day star deposited its aura on the bare skin of a woman lying on a carpet of moss. Her body, covered in scars and strange tattoos, was stained with mud and dried blood.

She woke up with a startling jump. As if seized with panic, she began to run straight ahead. She stumbled upon a torn corpse. Sadora regained her senses, her face crushed in the grass. She knelt down to contemplate the macabre decor that surrounded her. Shredded elves littered the woods. Their torn limbs were scattered among the stones and bloodstained bushes. Seized by a violent spasm, she vomited and witnessed, horrified, the thick red mass she had just regurgitated.

Resting on a high branch, the thrush still observed the forest, until Sadora's terrifying howl, made it flee at full speed. The beast had killed, and she had seen nothing. She couldn't stop it. She hadn't even seen the moon rise. Pain began to tug at her abdomen, her shoulders, her skull. She saw several purplish marks wrapping around her side and stomach. Another went up her thigh. All of them felt like wounds. She lay there, lost in the twists and turns of her memories until she was assailed by a fragmented vision. She recognized the red-haired elf who had taken her prisoner. Then she saw a luminous figure in front of her, so close she could touch it. These few images did not help her. She suddenly thought that perhaps more elves were on their way. Behind a rock, she discovered a poor decapitated fellow. She gathered her clothes and a dagger.

She quickly arrived at the edge of the forest, and then understood that during her transformation, she had traveled a phenomenal distance. Beyond the wood stretched a wild plain still inside elven territory, but free from any civilized presence. Sadora then joined the river marking the border with the human Kingdom of Laaria with astonishing ease and without feeling the slightest fatigue. Since the Sylfan Cradle had no particular relationship, good or bad, with Laaria, there was no bridge, ferry, port or concrete means of crossing the Chalal. The river was a good fifty yards wide, with a steady current. Sadora didn't plan to swim to the other shore. Knowing that the downstream part of the river was marked by a deep wild ravine, the warrior decided to go the other way, following

the bank and scanning the area, thinking of a safe way to leave the elven lands before trouble catches up with her. She then discerned a column of smoke behind the hills on the northern bank. As she approached, she saw thatched roofs and the rough shape of a mill and silo in the distance.

She whistled and called for help, waving her arms, until finally, two figures appeared. A big guy waved back, and a few minutes later a boat was heading south. A blond strong lad stopped his boat at a good distance and scrutinized the stranger in elf attire. He rubbed his chin.

– Well, you're not a common view !

– I guess. Do you have any seat left ?

– Depends. What did you do in the pointy ears land ?

– Nothing really. The forest is not my thing. Too many critters, and not small ones.

– Bad time eh ? You're full of holes and stains !

– As I said, too many critters.

The man chuckled and snorted. Finally, he moved his boat between the rushes and signaled Sadora to come up. She jumped on board and they set off again at good speed.

– Well, smarty-pants, next time you will know that humans have no business in the land of the elves. Oh ! Don't move like that, you'll bring us down !

The peasant rowed like three men. They were quickly back in human territory. They hoisted the boat onto dry land before heading towards the village.

– Ever been around, wanderer ?

– No.

– Not gonna lie, there's not much around here. We are at Brickard. It's not very big and we make bricks. The guy who named the place must have been dumb...

– Why ?

– Because we say brickyard, not brickard ! You did not know ? Well now yes. Finally, this name is better, it's more uh...

– Unique ?

– There you go, unique ! Well, I still have work to do and it's not going to be done by itself. If you don't need me anymore...

– It will be fine, thank you.

– Oh by the way, the barn there is the "Blabbermouth" inn. If you're hungry or thirsty, this is the right place. Stay safe now !

The fellow slapped Sadora vigorously on the back before walking away, whistling. She looked at the isolated town stretching further north. The ovens and workshops were separated from the homes by the main road, leading to the square in front of the inn. A well stood there surrounded by a bunch of plump pigs inspecting peelings. Not intending to hit the road at the moment, the warrior headed towards the barn.

She feared he would find dirty planks placed on hay bales for tables and an old woman with a hooked nose behind the rickety counter, but that was far from the truth. Pushing open the door, she set foot in a welcoming tavern. It was indeed a

skillfully converted barn. The floor was covered with colorful terracotta tiles of different sizes but perfectly interwoven. The large tables were close to the walls, the smaller ones framed a central pit in which a carpet of embers crackled. Several pots and cauldrons hung from hooks, emitting an appetizing aroma. Further on, a staircase led to the floor occupied by half a dozen bunks. The counter ran along the back wall. Two guys were waiting in silence. Sadora had barely placed her hand on the tray when two women in their thirties emerged from a side door.

- I want to eat, and drink, the warrior said, sitting down on a stool.
- Today's menu is simple : cabbage soup with ham or baked beans.
- We also have cheese, a bit strong, and bread of course.
- I'll take the beans.
- As drinks, we have beer, cider and... Please Milady, Hilltop White from Mount-Vaultese !
- Yes, you heard correctly, we have two bottles left.
- A beer, and wine, just for the taste.
- On its way. Make yourself comfortable, I won't be long.

As the first woman walked away, the other counted on her fingers. Sadora realized that she had no coin left in her purse. Well, she had no purse left.

- We're down to a pistole and eighteen sous.

For a moment she imagined chatting the two women up and then leaving without paying, but she didn't want to make a fuss. She wasn't in the mood. Then, while feeling the inside of the vest, she felt a metallic object. The woman took down the silver leaf-shaped brooch set with emeralds and discreetly wiped the blood stain from it.

- Here. For you.

The barkeeper was not a fool. This treasure was worth more than the inn itself. She examined it carefully but when a noise reached her from the kitchen, she hid it in her blouse. Sadora walked away towards the fire and sat down heavily in an old, patchy armchair. Then, the second girl arrived with a mug of beer and a goblet of wine. She grabbed a ladle and stirred the contents of the biggest cauldron.

- She plans to stay abroad for a long time ? the innkeeper finally asked.

— No.

- And where is she going, if it's not indiscreet ?

— North, the sullen warrior said.

She downed the beer in one gulp and wiped the foam from her lips.

- We don't often have visitors in Brickard, so when we do, we're so curious !

— Two real chatterboxes, exclaimed the other as she approached.

— Well chosen name I see, Sadora replied.

- The name ? Ah yes, for the Inn ! It is, right ?

They served her a copious ration with a piece of cheese and bread as a bonus. The brooch did the trick, without a doubt. She ate leaning over her bowl. She also had to admit that the wine was excellent, at least it must have been without water to cut it. She didn't care, as long as it took away the taste of blood that lingered in

her mouth. A shiver then slid down the back of her neck. Was the moon going to act on her again ?

Her meal finished, she left the tavern without failing to greet the two women. If she had to come back to spend the night, she was hoping not to have to pay more. Sadora wandered through the village, towards the industries which were operating at full capacity. The efficiency of the workers surprised her. They sang saucy verses in unison, timing their gestures to the rhythm. The stranger wondered what her life would have been in this kind of place. If she hadn't been born in a outcasts' camp, what would have become of her. Certainly not an evil dog, she thought. Not long before, she was still known as the Breacher, one of the most feared raiders, known in Mareno, the Princely Alliance and the New Baronies. She had the respect of the Howlers, her clan. Then, one day, a strange woman arrived, the chiefs offered her power and everything changed. Looting became attacks and nights of celebration turned into rituals. It was during one of these gatherings that Sadora received her tattoos. What was supposed to be just an honorific symbol turned out to be something else entirely.

She then walked into a peripheral district. It was actually a single arc-shaped street, lined with pit houses with plant-covered roofs. A dog came out of a cabin to sniff the stranger. He took a few steps in her company then set off into the plain, as if attracted by something that only he felt. A few cats lying on a bench scrutinized with an exasperated air a pig slumped like a glutton that had reached, and even exceeded, its limit. The warrior realized that she had made a loop, finding herself not far from the inn. She had wandered for a long time, and now the sun had well started its descent. The night was still far away though, and she decided to sit down near the water. She had to think about the next step. What could she do ? How long could she wander like this ? She threw a stone in the middle of the duckweed, creating a few ripples which broke among the rushes.

Under the surface, the stone disturbed a few tadpoles which fled between the feet of the water plants, disrupting the habits of a catfish. It then moved to the south bank where it came face to face with a terrible visitor. A four-foot-wide triangular maw and two large, slitted eyes.

Sadora noticed movement in the water. Scanning the bank, she noticed a strange shape hidden in the vegetation. She stood up, alert, just as the slender silhouette of an elf appeared from behind a rock. Not just any elf, though. The witch who had captured her. Tiara approached the hidden form which came to life. The immense gray snake revealed itself. The druid climbed on its back and entered the water. They sped towards the human, Tiara's gaze fixed on Sadora. She held her breath and ran away from the bank. She crossed the bare expanse until reaching the first buildings of the village. No one suspected that a furious beast was approaching.

Panic struck the villagers and the animals. The children's cries mixed with the shouts of the adults. Tiara knelt up on Vainhbaum's head and inspected the pale faces.

— Where is the stranger ? she thundered. A woman arrived here today, where is she ?

No answer, of course. She moved forward slowly. Fear spread further into Brickard. The snake jostled a cabin, making the boards groaned and pottery shattered inside. Sadora came out of an alley and faced them.

— Did you think I was going to let you go ? exclaimed the elf.

— You could have.

— After what you did ?

Sadora didn't respond, causing the druid to laugh derisively.

— Ah ! You have no idea what happened ? Should I enlighten you ?

— No need, you're already tiring me.

— A dog like you has no place in the Cradle, or among men. You are a danger, a monster hidden in a woman's body. The girl was right about that. She wanted to kill you, I planned to examine you. It would be wise to follow me willingly, no one will accept you.

— The girl ?

She remembered. A tanned woman, dressed in light. She thought she was a dreamed. What happened next ? The beast shown itself, and attacked.

— Yes, Tiara said. The one you broke. She's not dead, as far as I know.

— I'm not responsible.

— I wouldn't bet on it... You know, legends about hybrids go back hundreds of years, maybe more.

— Your information is a bit dated, witch.

— It seems that creatures like you are the result of occult magic. You were not born like this, you were created, transformed. It involves a creator. Who is it ?

— Let go.

— Are there other dogs like you ?

— Go back to your shed, Sadora growled. I won't follow you anywhere.

— Accompanying me was not an offer. I'll drag you if necessary.

— Take your shot.

— Kill her, whispered a distant voice. Kill the witch. Don't let her hex you.

— Go away, thought Sadora.

— Your time is limited, I want this body, even if I have to break you.

Tiara raised her hands, humming. The snake shuddered and prepared for the attack. A rustling rose above the village. Suddenly, a cloud of crows descended on the square. Sadora jumped to the ground under the hooked claws of the birds which tried to tear her. A peck cut her neck, another hit her back. With her slow gestures, the druid commanded the noisy cloud while displaying a satisfied smile.

— You are weak, human, thundered the inner voice. I am strong ! Let me take her down !

- I don't need you, monster. It's all because of you !
- Prove you can handle it, mortal !

Gathering her strength, Sadora stood up and jumped through a window. A few seconds later she came out brandishing a torch and struck the possessed birds. One of them burst into flames, croaking in pain. Tiara jumped and cursed. With a gesture she made the crows flee. Vainhbaum charged at the same time, wiggling his forked tongue. Witnessing the creature's charge, Sadora threw the piece of wood at him, which ricocheted off the shiny scales. The warrior dodged the attack and brought down her blade without success. The colossal reptile hissed as it turned around. Almost getting caught in the monster's rings, Sadora rolled back and prepared to counterattack. She didn't see the powerful tail slap coming. The shock cracked her ribs as her feet left the ground. She hit the facade of a cabin and dropped her weapon. The harshest assault, however, came from within.

On the brink of unconsciousness, she felt her resistance give way before the rage of the beast. She freed herself, taking her body's control away from the woman. A mystical wave made her shiver. Claws grew from her fingers and her flesh became as rigid as wood. A considerable strength filled her arms and legs at the same time as an insatiable fire burst in her core. Sadora realized that she was still here, still conscious, even if it was impossible for her to act. She saw and felt the world around her, that was it. The beast took care of the rest. Her eyes turned yellow as a thick mane grew on her shoulders and neck. Her appearance was still partially human, her fury on the other hand was bestial.

The snake struck again. Sadora dodged with supernatural speed and climbed on top of the reptile. She brought her joined fists down like a sledgehammer on his opponent's head. The blades could not penetrate his gray armor, but the blows were powerful enough to stun him. The shock caused Vainhbaum to collapse, and he twisted to eject the mortal. The later was already on the ground and aimed at a different target. Tiara shuddered as she saw the hybrid charging towards her. Sadora raised her claws and struck without restraint. The elf thundered an order and a barrier of roots rose in front of the wolf. The snake rushed and tried to fall with all its weight on his enemy. Sadora protected herself with the strength of her arms alone, where a simple human would have ended up crushed. The confrontation intensified, the adversaries competing in bestiality, strength and speed. Tiara, standing back, understood that she was in greater danger than she expected. The warrior's transformation in broad daylight was not part of her plan. A cold sweat slipped down her back.

She had to get rid of the reptile if she wanted to kill the elf. With a punch Sadora deflected the snake's jaws about to snap her legs and gripped his mouth like a vice. She climbed onto an abandoned cart and leaped above the well. They crashed heavily into the stone and slate structure with a dull crack, the iron spike on top found its way between the scales. Vainhbaum hissed furiously, injured, blood flowing on his head. The wolf rolled nimbly, ready to strike, but he had already won. The large reptile straighten awkwardly, dazed. Despite Tiara's spell,

he backed away and returned to the river. The druid turned pale.

— You're pathetic without your toys, elf !

It wasn't Sadora's voice, the druid noticed. The beast is a separate entity, capable of replacing every aspect of its host. Was the mortal here ? Does she see what is happening? No matter, she thought, even if she can, she will not restrained the beast. I provoked her, the woman.

Fighting back with walls of roots and bramble whips was not enough. It only drained her strength and delayed her end. The wolf was too powerful, and the land here was poor. Tiara couldn't get enough energy to defend herself. She animated the wisteria which were climbing a hovel. The plants enveloped the beast, they went around and around, binding its hands together and squeezing its throat. This short respite allowed the elf to move a few steps away. Then, Sadora let out a thunderous howl as she freed herself from this frail prison. The elf deprived of resources saw her end coming

— A what ? exclaimed the patrolman.

— A wolf, he said ? The brick makers were talking lots of shit. We'll see on site. Come on guys, nerves !

— I understood that there was a big snake and an elf too.

— Are you kidding me ? Half the village wouldn't have run away screaming for a mutt, a woman and a viper ! Shut up and run faster.

— No, that's for sure, something serious must be happening.

The small troop had been alerted by panicked villagers. Nothing ever happened here, in this corner of the world. The front was far away and the elves never showed themselves. It suited them perfectly. They were used to drunkards fighting, not magical creatures. Ensuring that predators stayed at safe distance from the farms was easy. None of them were great fighters, some were more artisans than soldiers, but the real militiamen only came through on rare occasions. They would have counted on their presence that day.

— By all the fucking Gods ! What is that monster ?

— It looks like a woman, don't you think ?

—The other one is indeed an elf.

— She's causing havoc with her witch tricks !

— What should we do ? They fight each other.

— I don't care, they're both dangerous.

— Yeah, to arms guys !

The she-wolf grabbed the defeated elf by the neck. As she tightened her grip, an arrow struck her shoulder. She roared in pain. Her skin hadn't stopped the steel tip. She turned around just as a second projectile cut her thigh. She could have

avoided it. What was happening ? She suddenly felt overcome by fatigue. The beast's powers receded, regaining the depths of her mind, abandoning her to the soldiers assault. She felt she only had a couple of minutes left before returning to her human form.

— Flank her ! yelled the sergeant.

His dry throat made each of his orders a hoarse and irregular bark. He held his spear in one hand and with the other pressed on the wound that opened his hip. Gustav was on the ground, stunned but alive. The monster had thrown him against the ruins of the well. Franz had been punched in the face. He held his nose and spat blood into a puddle. Two other guys were trying their best to kill the wolf, but it had broken their spears. They struggled with their short swords, forcing them dangerously close to its claws. N one died. The beast wasn't so tough.

Sadora tried not to kill the men. They had nothing to do with it. She had to push them back in order to run away. The toughest ones were down already, but without her skin to protect her from sharp steel, even the scared boys were threats. Despite this, she knew she could do it. That's what she thought before a last arrow pierced her chest. Sadora let out a long scream which pulled Tiara back from unconsciousness. It was a cry for help, a cry of distress.