

Saria's Journey

Chapter 1

I

Holding his face, the killer crossed the woodland floor, and the huntress followed.

II

The warm water dripped onto Saria's face from the hanging leaves. The forest's trees provide enough shade to remain cool in. Enough coverage to remain hidden. The damp flooring below holds the shape of the footprints of her prey.

The days all meld together, some days longer than others. Some harder. One thing stayed the same, she was tired. Tired of searching, tired of running.

She isn't running now. Now she's watching. The hanging leaves parting just enough to see. He's coming and she knows it. No idea why or how, but she knows. He hasn't shown up here in almost a full moon. But he will.

III

Meldy prepared the hearth. Saria would be back soon with the food. Meldy would have just enough time to cook when she did. Everything else was done.

Just then a bird came like a meteor through the open way, vexed on some wool worm in the corner. Lacking in his ability to catch his prey -but more than proficient in his ability to cause a gust storm- the bird had undone almost everything she had worked the past hour for.

"No matter" Meldy thought, "no real harm in bringing food to me."

Meldy reached out trying to wrangle the bird. She's not that quick in regard to her hunting abilities, but this is more than an easy enough catch.

Or so she thought.

The bird managed to not only escape her grasps, but catch the wool worm, land in the opposite corner, and eat his earned kill. All before Meldy was able to get back up. She turned around just in time to see him escape from where he came from.

IV

The mountains parted just wide enough for the valley to serve as a walking path back home. Saria knew this path well. She had taken it more days than she had been alive it seems like. Her earliest memory was seeing her home from the pathway. Her mother's laugh echoing up along to the tree line where Saria had been.

She had been only moderately successful in her hunt this time, having to rely on her snares she keeps along the pathway back home. At the very least, they always seem to catch a meal. Fresh rabbit meat for dinner

Beneath her feet, the hard rock, craggy path echoes a story of a time long forgotten. Winding down the path, her home slowly comes into view. Her mother is standing outside the opening, looking flustered.

V

As the hearth fire glowed and finished cooking the night's meal, the cool breeze wafted the aroma of rabbit stew throughout the yurt. Her mother was humming a soothing tune. Saria had just finished cleaning up from the hunt. The filth concealed her soft caramel complexion. Small scrapes from the brush today had managed to graze her skin, but nothing more than a scratch.

"Food's ready!" Meldy called.

Just that moment Saria rounded the corner, sat down and received her bowl of stew.

"Thank you for catching the food again," Meldy said.

"No, thank you for cooking it," replied Saria. "It always tastes better when you cook than when I do it."

Saria knew that the time would be soon. There's no denying it. Saria had been home for almost two full months. Now is about the time Saria would get antsy or uncomfortable and go out on one of her explorations. She has always been curious and insightful. Meldy had taught her everything she could to help make sure Saria could not only stay safe but survive if she needed to. Gladly, Meldy wasn't the only one looking out for Saria. Jeb helped a lot too. His expertise happened to be out in the field and would benefit Saria far more than what Meldy could.

"So, when will you be heading out again?" she asked, deciding that it would be best to attack the subject head on rather than wait to find out.

"Hadn't given it much thought. Maybe when Jeb gets back from his trip to the market center," Saria thought a moment. "It really depends on how successful he was."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if he manages to bring back plenty of salted meat and spices, you won't need me for very long," Saria lamented, "But if he brings back a meager wagon, I'd feel bad about leaving without helping restock at least a little."

"Regardless, you're leaving," Meldy replied.

"Yeah, not sure what I'll see this time, but I have to see it."

"How long?"

Meldy hated asking these questions, but she couldn't help it. Her child was running off into the world. "I should be used to this by now," she thought. After all, Saria had been wandering and looking for new things ever since she could crawl. Going farther and farther with each new discovery it seemed. A couple of seconds eventually grew into minutes, then hours, and eventually days at a time. Now Saria had worked her curiosity up to weeks at a time gone from home. "At least she will come home. She always does," Meldy thought.

“No idea. Could be another day or two, could be another week or two,” Saria stated matter-of-factly.

VI

Jeb made his way through the marketplace, a veritable bazaar teeming with people. This was the major economic hub of the area. Families passed him and he only glimpsed their faces. Children ran and played in the crowd. Excitement filled their faces as they passed the food stalls. How could Jeb blame them? The aroma smelled better than anything he had been able to eat in the past three days.

“How much?” Jeb asked the man behind the stand.

“One coin apiece.”

“I’ll take four,” Jeb said as he hungrily eyed the freshly made buns.

No sooner had he paid when a child came up and hungrily stared at the buns. Jeb took the small parcel from the man and broke the pieces apart, giving two to the child. The kid’s face lit up with more excitement than before. Jeb smiled, stifling a small chuckle as he watched the child run straight to his friend and shared the bun.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said the man behind the stall. “Now they’re never going to go away and beg for more food from the other patrons.”

“Must be good for business then?” Jeb replied. “If even some of the customers bought extra bread for them, that’s more coins in your pocket.”

“So, you would think. But the reality is most people don’t want to buy something while a beggar is eyeing them the whole time.” The man said as he restocked his stall. “And when one shows up, there’s always two more behind them.”

Jeb chuckled, not bothering trying to stifle this one. “That’s life. Let the kids have their fun.”

“Fun for them, none for me. I just want better business.”

“Won’t be long before you get it, it seems.” Jeb said with a mouthful while walking away. “This is delicious.”

Chapter 2

I

Polluc began to pray. This time something would be different. This time everything would run smoothly. He knew it. It had to.

Maybe this time.

His prayers were in sync with his movements, pushing and pumping. He was putting his entire effort into making everything work this time.

Chapter 3

I

"I swear this used to only take me two days, maybe just less than," Jeb thought.

Time has left its mark on Jeb. Every step is just a little slower and every bump is just a little more painful. Moving at night may have been slower, but it was better than traveling during the heat of the day. The moisture in the air made every movement heavy enough, but the heat made everything much worse. It cooled off more than enough to travel comfortably at night.

"Just as soon as I round the mountain, I'll be able to see the valley," Jeb thought as he prepared the pig fat on the lantern. "They'll be able to see me as I come home."

II

She and Meldy were both outside when she saw it. The flame of Jeb's lantern coming from the middle of the mountain shined bright like a beacon.

"He'll be here by morning," Meldy said brightly. "Better go rest up, we all know helping him unload that wagon is going to be more than a few hours' worth of work."

Saria knew Jeb's path to the market well, having gone on more than a few trips with him and her father when he was alive. She knew he would be back just as dawn broke. That's his time now. The work to unload the wagon wouldn't take that long, though, Jeb was quick and efficient after all these years. Saria knew that her mother just wanted Saria to remain home as long as possible. But She had other reasons for waiting for Jeb to get back.

Jeb had this uncanny ability to know things. Nothing mystical, but he had a way of making you think it was. Even if he didn't know something, it wasn't long before he did. That's what Saria needed him for. His knowing.

And so, she left.

III

"Nobody knows nothing about your dad," Jeb said, "but there was this." Jeb began untying knots all about his wagon. "It seems as though someone found a woman the same way they found him. A couple others have gone missing and there's some debacle over an entire herd of stolen pigs. That's it, but I figured you would want to know about that poor lady."

Saria had no sooner started helping unload than she heard the familiar grunting. "Stolen pigs, you say?"

"Yep, stolen."

"And these?" Saria questioned as she uncovered three caged pigs, who squealed upon being discovered.

"All three perfectly legally bought before I had heard the story" Jeb replied swiftly.

"And after?" Saria continued.

"What about after? These are mine and we have food at a fair price. All the same, I'd prefer it if we discussed it a bit quieter."

“Fair enough. What about this woman?”

“She lived a few days north of here. Her family came to the market asking all types of questions. Looking for help finding her killer or trying to see if anyone knows anything. I can’t say I blame them either. I’d wanna know as much as possible if anything happened to one of you,” Jeb said sweetly.

You’d never guess it from looking at the man, but Jeb was much nicer than his grizzled demeanor let on. He was just cautious.

“What about the others that went missing?”

“That’s all anyone knows, not even family members are asking for them. It’s weirdly quiet. Just whispers around that people stopped showing up.”

“Anything else you can tell me?”

“Just stop by that bun stand on your way in. They were delicious.”

IV

As Saria made her way around the mountain pass, she listened. The crickets’ chirping was almost deafening. The constant trill emanating from the trees’ canopy was almost a warning cry for all intruders in the forest. But Saria used that as a security measure. Anytime anyone or anything got close, the crickets would fall silent, the air would grow heavy, and the darkness seemed more intense.

Saria would make it a habit to practice listening. She had tried to listen through the constant cricket song. The quick rustling of squirrels or rodents through the leaves would remind her that there’s nothing dangerous in the area, and so she walked on.

Saria walked for what seemed like forever with no one to keep her company but her thoughts. She would hum the familiar tune that her mother would. While this eased the boredom, it was only slightly.

As she walked, Saria constantly scanned the ground for good rocks. She was always in need of good, strong, reliable rocks that she could fashion into stone arrowheads for hunting. “Thirteen,” she counted. Thirteen new flat rocks she could use.

She bent down to pick up her latest find and brush of the dirt that had accumulated to the hard exterior. Saria flipped the stone over a few times in her fingers, inspecting it for any blemishes or cracks that could pose a threat to the integrity of the blade. This one, in particular, was long, and smooth. The surface of this rock held Saria’s eyes for a brief moment, then let them carelessly glide over the top.

Placing the stone in one of her pouches, Saria stood. For a moment the sunlight caught her eyes and froze her body. She scanned the horizon and followed her path towards the marketplace. She could make out faint fires across the forest floor, marking huts and vendor stalls getting ready for the day ahead.

V

Josep began setting up his signs. He had been selling his family's blankets and rugs at this market for years. Today was going to be another great day in the market. His sister, Fatima, **was** supposed to show up with a great new selection that his father and mother had managed to make this past week.

Other than himself and a potter in a few stalls away across the walkway, the rest of the road was ghostly. The occasional pang of a clay potlid falling from the top of the pile to break silence. The scene would change soon enough. The foot traffic through this part of the marketplace was perfect. From this point, Josep could easily greet newcomers and introduce them to his supply. He was also able to serve as a reminder of how cold the outside world was to people leaving the bazaar. It may not have been lucrative, but selling rugs **earned** enough to get by.

As the sun came up and lit the town, more and more movement could be seen. Josep watched as vendor after vendor opened up their doors and placed their merchandise in full view of any passerby. Sera, an herbal specialist who operates an apothecary next to Josep's stall, could be seen prattling to herself about her plans for the day. Josep took note of how in just a matter of a few moments, the gravely quiet street could transform into a bustling grove of excitement, even before a customer stepped foot into the market. It was fascinating every time **he'd** seen it.

Just then, the aroma of sweet honey filled Josep's nostrils. The smell **reminded** his stomach that breakfast **had** not yet happened and that it was empty. He looked around his stall area and looked for his bag. He reached inside and pulled out a fresh apple and started to eat.

"You're up early," **he** heard a familiar voice say.

"Always," he replied. "Gotta keep an eye out and see what's happening." Josep turned around and saw Saria walking toward him. She was always covered from neck to toe when he saw her. Various leathers and furs covered any distinctive features she may have had. Other than her hair that is. Her soft, warm tone of brown skin **complemented** the shade of clay-red her hair was. She had dark brown eyes, with little pools of amber at the bottom when the light hit them just right. He knew because he always searched for this light.

"I swear, you get more and more beautiful every time I see you!" He said with enthusiasm.

"You say that every time I come by," Saria responded, slightly annoyed but mostly flattered. She reached out and handed him a hot honey bun from the stall that Jeb recommended.

"Doesn't make it any less true every time I say it, though," Josep said while happily accepting the offer.

"So, any new developments?" Saria asked.

"Well, there was that woman that was murdered week before last. I'm sure you've heard about that?" Josep stated inquisitively.

"Yeah, Jeb told me they found her the same way we found my dad."

"Right," Josep said solemnly, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"It's fine," Saria cut him off, "what else?"

“Well, lately, and by lately, I mean since before they found ‘her’, loads of people have been turning up missing.”

The way he said “her” made Saria feel uneasy. There was something about it that made her stomach turn. It was as if he wasn’t sure about who they found.

Just then a thunderous course of banging and crashing echoed through the marketplace. Saria looked in the direction of the source, but her view was blocked. Every bystander in the market was frozen in time, staring at this spectacle, whatever it may be.

As the crowd started to disperse, Saria could see in the faces of people turning back to their business that they were already bored with the scene. Saria grabbed a man who was coming from the direction of the commotion. “What was all that about?” she asked him.

“Some stupid little gurl lost control of her car’ a’ rugs,” the man said groggily before turning away.

“Fatima,” Josep said. “She never has been too careful.”

“I’ll go see if I can help,” Saria said decidedly.

VI

As Jeb started cooking the pork, he felt tired. He decided to sit down and started slicing his potatoes. “Stew,” he said. “It’s good for my health.”

Time seemed to slip by faster and faster while his pile of potatoes grew only meagerly. Jeb felt the tiredness of the day seep in as his eyelids grew heavy.

Jeb slumped over into his deep sleep at the table, knife still in hand.

VII

Looking at Fatima, Saria couldn’t help but notice her features. Her tawny, amber toned skin was complemented by her lighter brown hair. The familial resemblance was very evident when looking at her and her brother together, but separately, they were completely different from each other. They had the same color hazelnut eyes and the same skin tone. His hair was much shorter and hers much longer. So long in fact that she kept it in a hair net that was waist high. Otherwise, her hair might’ve dragged on the ground. Fatima had a broad smile that seemed to show off every single one of her teeth.

“Thanks for your help,” Fatima said to Saria as she picked up some lettuce wedged into a rug.

“Happy to,” Saria replied brushing squished tomatoes from another.

The damage done by Fatima’s cart had spewed into two neighboring stalls. Saria and Fatima had to promise to pay for the damages to their various vegetables before the owners would let them go, as well as clean up the scene.

Chapter 4

I

Polluc began the day as he usually did. He was a man of routine. After eating his breakfast, he began setting up his stall. He had been helping the community here for as long as he could remember. His mother taught him well. He knew how to **treat every** disease or ailment that the forest afforded its victims. He had even been credited with the curing of a few unlucky fatal animal attack wounds. But this was something new.

This new disease was horrifying. Within a matter of days of catching it, people would die. There was no fighting against it. There were no signs of anything wrong until the person was coughing blood. And by then it was too late.

Polluc knew that it was only a matter of time. First his mother, now a vast majority of his patients. He would catch it soon too, if he didn't already have it, that is. But for now, there was no pain, no coughing, nothing to worry about. Now, he had to work.

II

Saria had spent the rest of the day asking as many people in the market as possible about any information regarding her father. It seemed as if almost everyone knew the same information. There were a few people who claimed to know someone that went missing, but could not give much more information beyond that.

Then, while interviewing one woman, something caught her interest. This woman mentioned her dear friend had "caught a curse."

"What kind of curse?" Saria asked.

"I don' know." Rowena said responded. "I know he had been feeling real weak like, so he went down the road to the healthy man."

"The healthy man?"

"Right. He fixes us up from time ta time when we needs it." She explained. "Kayle was just trying to get right so he would nah be hurtin' no more."

"Do you know where he got this curse at?"

"No clue. I Just know he went out one day and came back the next weaker than ever and tired."

"So, he went to the healthy man?" Saria questioned.

"Right, like I told ya." The woman said, rather annoyed it seemed that she had to repeat herself.

"Where is this healthy man at?"

"Oh, he's down the road a ways. Take a little walk away from the market to the North, when the road splits, take a right and his shop will be down that direction.

III

Polluc began washing the skin and dressing the sutures with moss. He had been doing it just like his mother used to show him. Once all the filth was removed and then reattachment was secure, the hard part could begin.

Just then a loud bang came in three repetitions at the door. "Not now!" Polluc thought as he quickly shifted his way to the makeshift stairs. He threw his clamps down and began tearing his operation garb off his chest.

"Give me a second!" Polluc hollered at the door, now rinsing the blood off his hand in the wash basin. Once he made it up the stairs and through the door, he noticed there was already a woman in the chair.

"I hoped you wouldn't mind," Saria announced as she stood up. "I've just been walking a long time and needed to sit down somewhere."

"Oh, not a problem," Polluc responded with a smile on his face. "What can I help you with? How are you feeling?"

"It's not me," Saria began. "I heard you've been helping people with a curse?"

"I do what I can." Polluc said softly. "But I don't know anything about a curse. However, there is this new disease that I can't fight."

"What do you mean?" Saria asked.

"It's killing people and I can't stop it." Polluc explained.

"How?"

"If I knew that, it wouldn't be happening." he remarked. "All I know is, people go out into the woods and if they come back, they begin coughing, unable to move, and pretty soon, they're dead."

"What do you mean 'if they come back'?" Saria emphasized. This was all new information to her and it felt as if she might finally get answers about her father.

"Like I said. These people are weak. Like a full-grown man who has a muscular build unable to squeeze my fingers weak. If they are as strong as him and still getting knocked down that low, there's a good chance a lot of them can't make it out of the woods no matter how hard they try," Polluc explained. "I'm sure that some of the forest's animals are preying upon some of the people who don't."

"That's terrible!" Saria exclaimed. She had never thought about some unknown predator able to kill without being seen or heard.

"Any other questions that I can help answer?" Polluc asked her.

"Yeah, I heard about a woman who was murdered recently." Saria began. "Please tell me you know something about that."

"Murdered?" Polluc inquired. "What makes you think she was murdered **considering you were** talking to me about a disease?"

"Because she was found with her heart missing." Saria said.

“Oh, her.” Polluc began solemnly.

“So, you do know what I’m talking about!” Saria exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Polluc began. “I was asked to see if there was anything I could do for her. But when she was found, it was too late.”

“Where was she found at?”

“Couldn’t say, the locals brought her to me. But like I said...” Polluc began to trail off quietly.

“I understand.” Saria started. “Do you happen to know of anyone else that was found like this?” She said feeling slightly guilty about being hopeful, even if she had her reasons.

“There’s been rumors, but nothing more. I wish I could help you more, but I must get back to work,” Polluc said rather suddenly.

“Oh, well, if you find anything else out, please keep it in mind.” Saria paused, then added, “I’ll do the same.”

Chapter 5

I

As Meldy mustered her strength, she took each step carefully. “Jeb?” she called out softly.

There was no reply.

“Jeb?” Meldy said with more vibrato. The scene before her made her feel weak again. Her white knuckles clinging to the wall for support. Her voice was beginning to give out on her and she was going to do her best to not let her legs follow suit.

“Jeb, please wakeup,” a soft tear fell to her cheeks. She knew the answer before it began to leave her lips.

“Have you passed?”

Meldy reached **out**, felt Jeb’s hand. It was cold and firm, still holding his knife from his dinner. Meldy peered into his bowl to find a plethora of flies in the soup mixture. Some flying away, inspired by the new movement caused by her appearance. Some of the flies still dunked into the soup, appearing to have drowned.

Meldy sat there and gathered her thoughts as best she could. The best she could do was to quietly cry. “No noise was necessary, after all,” she thought “who would hear her?”

II

As Saria walked down the dirt path, passing the all too familiar scene of trees surrounded by more trees, a new sight appeared around the corner. She came upon a large wagon. It seemed as though both of the front wheels had been **broken**, along with the supports holding the sides.

Saria continued to investigate and found that the reins holding whatever creature had been secured to the wagon had been cut instead of released, as was usual. This was odd, but after looking around and seeing no further signs of a struggle, Saria decided to continue her journey.

And so, she walked.