

I paused for breath, one hand on the bark of the tallest tree I had ever seen, and one hand clutching the stitch in my side. I suddenly wished I'd taken up some sort of exercise when I was back home. The trees around me dwarfed skyscrapers, but I barely noticed. I didn't know where I was or, based on the sword-wielding people that chased me into the forest, *when* I was. Survival mode kicked in and the train of thoughts that ran through my head on a loop was: "night coming, need shelter, build fire." I pushed myself forward, brushing aside giant ferns and occasionally stumbling on roots hidden by the thick carpet of pine needles. Goddamn nature, who put all this shit here?

Just as a pale moon appeared in the late afternoon sky I stumbled into a small clearing. One side backed up against a small ravine with a bubbling creek at the bottom. Clean water, check. A large log lay across the clearing, the remnant of an ancient tree downed by a lightning strike. I peered inside, desperately fighting back my fear of creepy crawlies. The log was as tall as me and rotting from the inside. I looked back at the sky and weighed up my options. A natural shelter was as good as any.

The rotting log was soft on the inside and slightly charred, but years of being an overly-cautious child told me to beware of splinters. The last thing I needed in the middle of this medieval nightmare was death via an infected finger wound. I took off my shirt and ripped it in half, wrapping each hand in the cloth. I took out my only remnant of home: a spatula. I was transported to another dimension or time period or something while at a barbecue and this was in my hands. Not the safety lighter, which would have been infinitely more helpful.

I gashed at the wood with the cooking utensil, and wondered vaguely if this was the sort of thing lumberjacks did. I dug out as much of the rotting wood as I could, creating a hollow in the log deep enough for me to lie down in. I ripped back a piece of rotten wood and out fell a scorpion. A completely masculine scream erupted from me. Apparently my roar of testosterone and not fear scared the scorpion because it skittered away.

I piled the bits of wood and sorted through them. Some pieces were usable as kindling. I mentally thanked the tree for providing me with both shelter and fire. Jesus, this nightmare was turning me into some kind of damn hippie tree hugger. I dug back through the years of bullying I called childhood and tried to remember something about how to build a fire. The process of un-repressing my memories took several minutes. There was something about flint and steel. I looked at my spatula. Steel, check.

I searched the clearing for a sharp rock, but came up empty-handed. I looked down at the ravine apprehensively. It wasn't very deep, I could probably get down there and back without dying. I looked up at the sky. The sun headed west far quicker than I liked. I clambered down

the ravine and collected only a couple of small scratches. The stones near the creek were all too round and large. Suddenly, I spotted one that was shattered into smaller, sharp pieces. Perfect. I did not think about what kind of creature could be strong enough to shatter a rock. Lucky for me, I would find out anyway. I made it halfway up the ravine when I lost my footing and fell back down. On the next ascent, I stabbed the spatula into the dirt as I climbed and used it for leverage. Just as the inventor of the spatula intended.

Back up at the clearing, I decided that the carpet of dried needles from the trees would probably be the easiest thing to burn. I made a small pile and spent the most frustrating 10 minutes of my life trying to light them by bashing my spatula against the rock. I almost gave up when a particularly ferocious strike of the spatula created sparks. The dry needles lit quickly. My triumphant cheers turned to yelps of fear almost immediately as the little spark spread along the carpet of needles at an alarming rate. I desperately stamped them out like a demented tap dancer.

Damn, this stuff was flammable. I needed to take precautions before I accidentally set the whole forest on fire. I carefully climbed back down the ravine to the creek bed and grabbed a few bigger stones. I'm proud to say I only fell down the ravine once because I mastered the technique of using my spatula as a climbing hook. I brushed an area of the clearing free from needles and arranged the stones in a circle to make a firepit.

I put a handful of needles in the centre of the circle as firelighters and made a teepee of kindling on top. I remembered the teepee shape from Scouts because it was the only part of the fire building I liked. It reminded me of making models. Yes, I was very uncool in my youth, but I got a great sense of humour and crippling self-doubt out of it, so it's not all bad. I walked around the area and gathered slightly larger pieces of wood. Time to light it and pray. Incredibly, the fire lit and stayed lit. I spent a few minutes hovering over it like a concerned mother hen. Eventually, it was crackling evenly and I fed it a few larger pieces of wood.

I looked at my little camp. Not bad for a guy that dropped out of Scouts at age 8. Who's "not cut out for the outdoors" now, Camp Ranger Doug?

Night fell while I built my camp. The moon became brighter and the sky went from light blue to deep purple. Stars appeared between the canopy. I could see the murky smear of the galaxy between the black silhouettes of trees. I allowed my tense body to relax slightly under the warm wash of the fire.

"Stargazing? How sweet. Almost seems a shame to kill you and ruin the scene."

I jumped, startled by the voice. It came from a tall, imperious woman standing just on the edge of the firelight. She wore leather armour and well-worn leather boots. More knives than I

had ever seen on one person in my life crisscrossed her body. Her hair was a lilac shade of white, almost pearlescent under the light of the moon, and woven into an intricate braid down her back.

“No, you’re not dreaming. However, you do have the great honour of being killed by the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen.” She drew a long, thin knife from one of her many compartments. “Now, tell me what weapons and supplies you have before I kill you and save us both from the embarrassment of forcing me to search your corpse.”

My mouth rebelled against me, refusing to utter a peep. I held up my spatula

She cocked an eyebrow at it.

I waved it vaguely

She narrowed her black eyes on me. “What kind of... weapon is this?”

“Spatula,” I croaked.

Her eyes flick from the spatula back to me. I tried to compose myself into a formidable figure. Judging by the look on her face, I achieved a slightly awkward figure.

“You don’t seem like a great magic user. Or a brave warrior,” she said, glancing down at my bare chest. I forgot I had ruined my shirt earlier.

“Well, I might be a little behind on my workout regime, but—”

“I don’t sense any great intelligence from you.”

“I managed to light a fire with a spatula, so I’d say that’s pretty—”

“And I’d be surprised if you even managed to survive the night.”

“Well, now you just sound like Camp Ranger Doug,” I said, barely keeping the hurt from my voice.

“So, I am going to kill you, take your shelter, and figure out how to use your little weapon,” she said, decisively. She raised the knife again. “Any last words?”

“What would it take for you not to kill me?” I pleaded.

She blew a thoughtful raspberry. “I don’t know... do you have any special skills? Anything useful that will make you an asset rather than a detriment to my survival?”

I raised the spatula and opened my mouth.

“Aside from that thing.”

“One moment, please,” I said and turned my back to her. What did I have that she could use, that she wouldn’t be able to get through tonight without? Being a chatty SOB wasn’t actually a survival skill. I only had one card to play.

I turned back around. She cleaned her nails with her knife.

"I bet a gal like you gets lonely out here in the wilderness," I said in my smoothest voice. I hoped the misstep of the unforgivably lame "gal" wouldn't cost me my life, but I couldn't take it back now.

She didn't even look up from her nails. "Nope," she said.

"To be honest with you; I don't have your skills as a warrior. You're right, I probably won't survive the night without you. But, there is one thing I can give you."

Her eyes flicked up to my face in amusement.

"My body."

A long silence followed. It took everything I had not to look away.

"Are you offering your services as a... gentleman of the night in exchange for your life?" she said slowly.

"I prefer the term "rent boy", but yes. Wait, do you have rent in this, uh, dimension? Never mind, the point is: I am yours for the ravishing."

"You're serious?"

"Deadly," I said. A smile danced across her mouth and disappeared. Again, I was suddenly very aware that I was shirtless.

"I must say, I'm not sure how to respond," she said. I could tell I threw her off guard. Her confident bravado wavered. "I have never come across a man willing to trade such a thing."

I kept her gaze and said nothing. Mainly because I was certain that if I opened my mouth nothing but a boyish squeak would come out, but she seemed to take it as virile swagger.

I could see her harden her resolve. "Alright, then. Let me have a look at you." She circled me like a tiger. I tried to keep my face in a mask of confidence bordering on indifference.

She stopped in front of me. She was exactly my height. Her black eyes looked directly into mine. I could feel her hot breath and smell the tantalizing scent of pine needles that came from her. Her eyes softened as they peered into mine.

"Alright," she whispered. "You can live. You seem like too much fun to kill just yet."

She stepped back and crouched on the other side of the fire. I stood there for a moment, trying to gather my wits. In her absence, I realized how fuzzy my brain became in such close proximity to her. Which is a polite way of saying I waited for the blood to rush back to my head.

"So," I said to lighten the mood. "Do you want your payment now or later?"

She opened her mouth to respond but froze suddenly. Her eyes grew round and searched the shadows just outside the firelight. I followed her gaze but saw nothing. Then, movement caught my eye over her shoulder. A form circled us slowly and drew closer with each step.

I met her gaze, suddenly very aware that I didn't know her name. My eyebrows danced across my forehead as I tried to signal to her. Her eyebrows knit together and her eyes widened in confused frustration. I swung my eyes wildly to the spot where the creature prowled, just behind her. She finally got the message and turned her head slowly over her shoulder. The creature was nearly close enough to see clearly. I could make out a large body, an even longer tail, and an oddly shaped head.

A low sound started. It was like the tuning of instruments before an orchestra begins, but every instrument was out of tune. My companion's eyes grew wide with fear. She launched herself across the fire to my side and turned to face the beast. The monster pounced a second after she moved and landed in front of the fire. Firelight flickered off the body of a lion with fur the colour of dirt. It had a scorpion's stinger twice the size of a man. The head was a grotesque human face with grey skin, each feature deformed and alien. The mouth and jaw were too big and kept permanently open by three rows of sharp teeth. Unable to shut its mouth, the thing drooled constantly. Its beady eyes rolled in its head as it let out a discordant roar of frustration.

I slowly lifted an arm, held out my spatula, and brandished it threateningly. It did not have any effect on the beast.

"What's that?" I whispered.

"A manticora," my companion hissed and pulled out several knives.

"And what's your name?"

"Mòr"

"My name's Tony. It's been lovely knowing you, Mòr, and I'm really looking forward to dying with you." I whispered and started backing away slowly.

Mòr grabbed my arm in a vice-like grip, handed me a large knife the size of my forearm, and released me. Before I could react, she leapt at the manticora. She threw three knives in the span of a few seconds. Each one struck the manticora with expert precision.

I looked down at the knife Mòr gave me. I wasn't much of a fighter, but I also wasn't that much of a coward. Mòr's knives hit the beast in the side, but it seemed like the hide was too thick for them to do more than anger the manticora. The animal tracked Mòr as she darted around the fire and drew a long sword from her back. With the animal facing Mòr, I attempted to do some damage. I sliced at the back heel of the animal, hoping to cripple it, but it moved too fast and I missed completely.

"Tony, now is the time to keep me from regretting not killing you!" Mòr yelled as she fought the ferocious head.

The scorpion tail dipped and bobbed, waiting for the moment to strike Mòr. I slashed at it but the knife ricocheted off the hard exoskeleton. Frustration and anger started to bubble up in me. I wasn't a warrior, I was useless! The tail of the manticora whipped backwards and knocked me over. I barely managed to react in time to avoid our fire. Fire!

I slid the knife into a belt loop and grabbed my flint. The manticora had Mòr backed up against the log shelter. She had a deep gash in her leg. She swung her sword at the beast, but it avoided her attack easily and crept closer. She threw a knife at it, which landed in the beast's man-like face. It turned away from her briefly and black blood dripped from the wound under its eye. It started to turn back to her with renewed ferocity. I yelled at it, catching its attention, and wrapped a piece of my ruined shirt around my hand.

It charged at me. I struck the rock with my spatula and ignited a small pile of needles. Just as the triple rows of teeth were a few inches from me, I grabbed the burning needles with my shirt-wrapped hand and threw them in the manticora's terrifying eyes. It reared and roared in pain, blinded. The scorpion tail swung wildly in my direction. I knocked it aside with my spatula. Mòr threw two large knives at it. She grunted from the force of the throw. They embedded themselves in its side with a sickening *thunk-thunk*. It swung its great head around to where the knives impacted and I saw an opening. I grabbed the knife from my belt and sliced at the manticora's neck.

Hot, sticky, black blood washed over me. I stumbled backwards and out of the way as the creature lurched and spasmed. It tried to release a roar but the already horrible sound came out gurgling and pathetic. The manticora collapsed as its lifeblood drained away. Mòr and I did not speak for several long minutes. We simply watched the monster die and caught our breaths.

I caught Mòr's eyes. "I rescind my offer to be a gentleman of the night. You can kill me now if you want to."

Mòr's laughter filled the camp.