

Deadeye

A bright sun blazes high in the sky, scorching everything beneath it. The searing dirt presses against Archer's torso and cheek as two sets of hands pin him down. No matter how much he tries to move, their grip is like iron. His skin slowly turns red from the heat and pressure. Elis isn't doing any better. Blood clings to his form and soaks his clothes, though a lot of it isn't his. A burly man holds him down with three other surviving cronies; his black eyes have rage and exhilaration in them. The outlaw leader's lips twist into a sickening grin, and Elis's gaze rolls over to his brother's helpless form. Green meets green as they lock eyes.

"Look away." He mouths.

The boss's gun presses harder against the back of Elis's head, and the two goons holding Archer down won't let him turn his head away.

"Don't worry bout' the boy. We'll take good care of em' fer ya," The man nearly laughs. "We wouldn't wanna damage goods now, would we? I betcha he'll fetch a good price.~" Elis grits his teeth and once the boss's hand twitches on the trigger, Archer squeezes his eyes shut.

BANG!

He thrashes more against the men as they grip his hair and force his eyes open. They notice. A gruff, bellowing laugh rings in his ears as he can do nothing but stare at the corpse of his older brother. Blood soaks Elis's dark hair along with his face; bits of brain matter and skull shrapnel float in the growing puddle. He can't see the rest of the wound since his brother is lying face down on the already red dirt. Nausea rolls in the depths of his stomach as fear strikes him silent. Trying to resist the urge to vomit, his mind tries to keep him from spiraling.

It's fine, it's fine, finefinefinefinefine- A gruff voice cuts his thoughts.

“Take a gander, *boy*. No one’s left ta help ya now. Unless ya really wanna join em’?” Archer shakes his head. A snicker escapes the man’s throat. “Smart kid. Tie em’ up and let’s go!” He barks in command.

“Ya got it, Butch!” One of the men replies. Despite Archer’s efforts, he’s bound by his wrists and ankles, they shove a gag in his mouth, and toss him on the back of a horse after looting what little things they think are valuable before riding off.

The sun begins to set by the time they reach a dingy wooden house in the middle of nowhere. Butch hauls Archer over his shoulder and haphazardly kicks the wooden door open.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ! Can ya come in like a normal fuckin’ person for once?!” A girl’s yell rings out from the small kitchen, yet Butch only laughs.

“C’mon, Sawyer, it’s just a bit of fun! Besides, look what I brought home.” He drops the green-eyed boy to the ground. “A nice meal ticket!”

Sawyer moves from the small corner kitchen to take a better look. She seems to be around the same age as him. The girl grabs his slightly burned face to inspect it. He tries to pull away, but her hold is tight.

“How much?”

“10,000 silver at least, easy. No scars, looks healthy, and could be bout thirteen or fourteen. Ya know they like em’ young.”

“Hmm, hook em’ up then. I’ll take care of em’ after dinner.”

The goons drag Archer away, kicking and screaming as best he can with a gag in his mouth.

Vultures flock and peck at the bodies of outlaws, ripping chunks off decomposing carcasses. One attempts to get inside the hole in the back of Elis's head. Suddenly, a hand darts up and grabs it by the neck, the bird squawks and thrashes before escaping. Elis's body sits up, and dried blood stains his face. His right eye is missing; all that's left is a gaping void. The surrounding flesh squirms and writhes as muscles mend themselves together. Elis's skull pulses, and he groans in pain as he forces himself to stand despite the familiar blur in his vision. Looking up at the sky, he sees oranges, yellows, and purples of sunset instead of the clear blue afternoon. Elis glances over to the four corpses strewn about the remains of their camp, and the wake of vultures are already picking off their remains. He also notices a leftover trail of horse tracks in the ground. His fists clench. Patting down the holsters on his waist, he swears under his breath.

“Shit, course’ those bastards took my guns too.”

Searching the bodies, he does find a couple of colts with a few rounds left inside.

I just need you to hold on a little longer, Archer.

Just a little longer... Archer thinks, glancing out of a crumbling hole in the top corner of the wall. It's getting dark. All he has to do is sit tight, and everything will be okay. His arms are still bound, hanging from a rusty hook they attached him on. He can hear the loud, roughhousing, and laughter from the other room.

“Come mornin’ we’ll all be rich! I say we go fer a round of drinks in celebration!” Butch laughs, and a few others join him.

It suddenly seems like he doesn't have much time left.

Wiggling his wrists, he tries to saw through the rope using the sharp tip of the hook, but the door opens before he gets halfway. Sawyer comes in with a bowl of soup in hand. He stops squirming.

“Dinner.” She says sternly, narrowing her eyes before placing the bowl in front of him.

“But-”

“Figure it out. Last thing we need is another mouth to feed.”

“...You wouldn't have to feed me if you'd let me go.”

She scoffs and turns to leave.

“Yer gonna be gone soon enough, so it ain't matter.”

“So, I guess it don't matter that you look round the same age as me, either, huh? What are you, twelve? Thirteen?”

Sawyer pauses at the door.

“Ain't none of what Butch does is my business.” her voice lowers, but she still doesn't turn to him. Her hand grips the doorknob tighter before leaving, and Archer takes this chance to keep sawing at his ropes. Finally, the rest of it gives, and he's free. Untying his ankles and scrambling to his feet, he looks back up to the hole in the wall. It's a stretch, but it's not like he has any other choice. Recklessly taking a running jump, Archer barely grabs onto the hole.

THUD!

He cringes as his body collides with the wall. His breath stops for a moment. Luckily, thanks to their racket, they probably didn't notice. Archer pulls himself midway through the hole when he hears the door creak open. It's Sawyer's voice.

"I brought ya a sp- What in the?!"

Shit!

He tries to push himself out of the small gap faster, but he already hears Butch's voice.

"Sawyer?"

Suddenly, there's a firm grip on his leg, and it yanks him out of the hole, slamming him down on wood. He can't breathe for a moment.

"Where'd ya think yer were goin'?" Butch towers over him and drags the boy into the living room. Six men crowd them as the outlaw leader drops him and cracks his knuckles.

"Looks like we got a runner. Yer able to patch em' up real nice if we rough him up a bit, right, Sawyer?"

She stares at the fear and panic in Archer's expression before looking away. "Yeah, just make sure we don't lose too much coin."

"I'll try not to. Depends on how much he squirms." He takes a step forward, and Archer tries to scoot back, only to back up into another man's legs. Rough hands grab his shoulders to keep him from moving.

There's a knock on the door.

Butch scowls and gestures his head for someone to take care of it. One of the taller men pulls his gun out of its holster and walks over to open it. No one's there. He raises an eyebrow

and steps outside. The man doesn't even get a chance to react before something yanks him to the side.

CRACK!

The gang watches as his body drops in the entryway. Something broke his neck, and the gun in his hand is gone.

“Arch? You there, bud?” A voice calls out. Archer's quick to answer.

“Eli-” he's cut off by a hefty hand covering his mouth.

Silence.

BANG!

A bullet crashes through a side window and goes straight through the side of a man's head. The hefty one drops.

“I gotcha.”

Chaos erupts, and Archer quickly drops and crawls for cover. From the corner of his eyes, he can see Sawyer do the same. Elis takes the body in the front and uses it as a shield once the remaining five open fire. The meat shield holds up surprisingly well until he can tip over a table and take cover. The others have to reload, so they take cover as well.

“Damnit! We'll fill ya with holes for breaking in here!” Butch yells angrily.

“You tried somethin' like that once, and it ain't stick, what makes you think it's gon' work this time?” Elis spots the shadow of a lanky one in their hiding spot.

“The fuck ya talkin’ bout?!” Another one shouts, just as the lanky man peeks his head out.

BANG!

Right between the eyes.

Elis comes out, guns ready, and faces the remaining four. The outlaws hesitate out of shock and fear at the sight of him. His clothes are damp and filthy from sweat, dried blood, and soil. There’s still some exposed muscle on his face, and where there was once a void, a pulsing, round mass of bloody organ takes its place. His remaining green eye seems to glow in the darkness.

“What? Ya don’t remember little ole’ me?” He gives them a wide, toothy grin and shoots two more. Butch and his last member get down quickly. “Come now, don’tcha think it’s rude to keep hell waitin’?”

More chaos ensues as Elis has to chase the last two down. Sawyer watches in horror from behind the kitchen table. She crawls over to a cabinet and grabs an emergency shotgun. Her hands shake. Archer spots her from across the room and tries to make his way over. Meanwhile, Elis catches the last lackey by the back of his shirt. He tries to shoot, but Elis just points his arm to the ceiling.

“What in the hell’s name are ya?!” he cowers as the other looks him straight in the eye.

“Why would a dead man need to know?” Elis presses the coward’s gun against his own head and makes him pull the trigger.

Elis drops the body.

“Looks like it’s just you and me left, partner.”

Butch rushes him from his hiding place before Elis shoots. Both of them end up disarming each other, so now they're tussling on the floor with fists instead. Butch gets Elis down by the neck. Sawyer steps out from behind the table and pumps the shotgun, making them both pause. She aims at Elis.

“Shoot em’-”

Right as Sawyer pulls the trigger, Elis manages to roll them both over with a swift knee to the nuts. There's a hole in the floor. Before she can aim again, Archer surges forward and tries to grab the gun. Now they're wrestling over it. A shot goes through the roof.

“SAWYER!”

“ARCHER!”

The two men scream. Elis tries to run over there, but Butch pulls him down and drags him back. The outlaw reaches for a stray gun and aims it at Archer. With a blur of anger, Elis grabs and twists his wrist, making him drop the gun. He then turns it on Butch and reflexively shoots. It goes right through his left eye. The sound deafens and makes both kids pause.

Sawyer stares with wide eyes and a racing pulse. Her expression doesn't change as she wrenches the shotgun from Archer's grip and kicks him to the ground. He lunges at her as he fires once more. He pushes it just in time.

BANG!

“FUCK!” The shot knocks Elis back, and his left arm goes flying, dropping his gun in the process. He grips the bleeding stump of his shoulder in agony. Archer takes this chance to snatch the gun away from her and goes to his brother's side. Sawyer can only watch as the stump starts squirming and repairing itself, while her brother goes cold on the ground.

“What are you?” she asks in a quieter voice.

Both brothers glance at each other before turning back to her.

“Unfortunately, I’m someone neither God nor the Devil want.”

She doesn’t respond as she sinks to her knees. Quietly, Archer helps Elis get up and walks him to the door. He pauses for a moment and glances back. Silent tears roll down her face.

He forces himself to look away, and they leave her there.