

*Somewhere in a forest*

Silence reigned across the forest, the trees swayed in a gentle breeze that flew through the dark night sky; the moon was full, casting off a pale, eerie light that illuminated a number of shadowy figures moving across the forest floor. None of them made a sound, dressed in dark clothes they were almost invisible in the night, moving from tree to tree with unearthly stealth.

A bird rustled the branches above as it took off in search of food. The figures froze, their faces looking upwards, scanning the treetops for the source of the movement. There was nothing to be seen, and so with a discreet hand movement and a whisper from the group's leader, they continued.

It was midnight before they stopped. Wood was quickly gathered for a fire and food prepared for cooking, blankets were laid out on the forest floor, and the children rested in theirs while they waited for their food. Once cooked, it was spooned into bowls carved from wood and shared out amongst the group, and everybody started eating.

Only hours later found them awake again. The sun was making an appearance over the horizon and yet it was too late to catch them packing and by the time shafts of it broke through the thick canopy above they were already on the move, running along the forest floor with ease.

Further back in the forest however, another group followed them. They had not slept. Their heavy boots cracked twigs and dry leaves, and they did not care for silence. Their leather armour and light weapons allowed them to move fast. These men were specially trained by the kingdom to hunt down the tribes of natives that roamed the land, and that the king so hated for some reason. They were expert trackers, picking up the slightest sign of their quarry and yet they were having trouble tracking these people, so adapt to the woods were they that not a trace was left for the trackers to follow.

Up ahead the tribe's leader put his ear to the ground, and his face turned to fear, their pursuers had once again gained on them. He shouted, no

longer caring for silence, speed was their only hope of survival. The tribe broke out into a run, however, they were hampered by the children and would inevitably be caught by their pursuers if they did not reach the safety of the mountains first.

They did not stop that night, the children were carried by the men, whom were already weary and could hardly bear the extra weight. They neither stopped to eat nor rest. The forest flew by them, the beautiful colours and formations going unnoticed to their eyes. The air grew colder as they steadily ran towards their destination.

Day came and yet no rest was taken. The trackers had gained once again and were now in sight of their quarry, their bows were strung, arrows fitted and fired. The tribe tried to increase their speed as arrows thudded into the ground next to and around them. Lungs burned for air, eyes watered, hearts pounded, but they could not keep up the pace. A father burdened by his daughter began to struggle.

Suddenly the girl screamed as she was hit by an arrow, she went limp against her father's back and slipped from his grasp to fall to the ground, dead. Despite the tribesman's yells of warning the father stopped and ran back to his child, he picked her up and slung her over his back. He turned and started to run again, but then he also fell as an arrow thudded into his neck.

Arrows flew through the air even as the stragglers fell to the swords of their enemy, the able bodied men kept up the pace, but their families fell around them, they were helpless to prevent the merciless slaughter that was taking place. Soon filled with rage, the remaining men, women and children turned to meet their pursuers and enemy.

They had stumbled into a clearing and the men and women now formed a circle around their children. Their bows were quickly strung and a small hail of arrows hit the first of the enemy as they charged into the clearing, but only a few of them fell, the tough leather armour that they wore was too strong for the tribes hunting bows.

The men brandished their sharpened sticks, hunting spears, it was their only weapon, and they yelled and shouted at their enemy, threats and pleas. Raw fury pumped through their bodies, fear deserted them and they charged the oncoming enemy, but there was nothing that their hunting spears could do, and they fell to bow and sword alike. Some hurled their spears like javelins and felled three of their enemy, not enough. Soon the adults were dead.

The children stood crying, cursing the evil men for hurting their

families, but not old enough to know that they were really dead. Fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters lay strewn around the clearing, dead; their blood stained the lush green grass.

The enemy looked at the children, this time a second thought was given noticeably as to whether they should kill, despite having orders to. Then the captain arrived, his stature was bigger and taller than that of his comrades. His muscles showed as he walked into the clearing, leisurely cleaning the blood off his sword. He stopped and looked up from the sword at his men, wondering why they delayed.

He shouted at them in a harsh language when he saw why, and the men drew their bows, and loosed their arrows into the children, they fell, utterly defenceless, but one stood in the middle, a blue orb surrounding her shaking body.

The men stood staring at her, fear and awe playing across their stony features, but the captain laughed, he reached forward, his face leering, with evil and cruelty in his eye. He shoved his arm through the glistening substance and seized the girl, slinging her over his shoulder. He shouted at his men who turned and followed him out of the clearing, leaving the dead tribesmen as well as their own dead, for the carrion to feed on.

However, another child was still alive, lying under his friends' dead bodies, he breathed deeply, trying to quell the nausea that was welling inside him. He rose, gently pushing the dead aside, tears welled in his eyes and he had to sit so as not to throw up. However, the nausea was thrust aside by the anger and hatred which suddenly burned in him, and he seized one of the spears and ran after the retreating enemy.

The Tribehunters as they were called; walked leisurely back the way they had come, passing the father and daughter and laughing.

The boy passed them, not minutes later, his knees went weak and his stomach lurched at the gruesome sight. He stumbled on as fast as he could and soon he could see the backs of the last Tribehunters, the boy slowed down then, and snuck along quietly, he came within range of one of the men and took aim.

The girl, crying on the captain's back, looked to where her tribe lay dead, but instead she was startled to see one of the Tribehunters lying on the ground, a spear quivering in his back and a boy running into the forest, she gasped and then smiled through her tears.

*Shyra*

This time the men stopped and slept when night fell, they fed the girl and themselves, talking, in their harsh language about the hunt, as far as the girl could work out from their gestures and laughter. The meal was finished and the hunters settled in for the night, wrapping themselves in furs to keep out the biting cold. A man shoved some furs at the girl and she covered herself in them, shivering from the cold.

One of the men stayed up however, to watch over the girl and keep the fire going. He sat near the fire, furs draped over his shoulders, he seemed nervous despite himself, he fidgeted, afraid.

The sounds of night echoed around him, creatures moving in the darkness, shadows of life or something more sinister, their burning yellow eyes glinted through the dark of night at him.

The man sat stone still, then he slowly and cautiously, without taking his eyes off the staring pairs of yellow dots, notched an arrow to his bow. He put his hand on his sword hilt.

A bird screeched above him and he jumped, looking up in fright to where there was nothing to see, he shook his head and cursed himself for cowardice.

Morning came upon the Tribehunters and they set off towards their destination without delay, which was a city called Shyra, the king of which was responsible for the Tribehunters. They travelled fast and some of the time, they forced the girl to run, she was soon tired and they laughed as she stumbled, trying desperately to keep up. They didn't eat for hours, not until the afternoon when they took a brief rest, chewed on some dried fruit, and sipped water.

The girl was kept under close observation in case she attempted to escape. When they set off again she was carried by the captain, riding on his back. Then night fell, but they did not stop, and instead kept on running in the dark, the girl fell asleep on the captain's shoulder, lost in the

rhythmic up and down of his stride.

When she awoke the men were still running, none of them showed signs of slowing. The captain drove them on with harsh shouts, and again they did not stop until mid afternoon. The Tribehunters continued like this for three days. The girl grew sore and very tired, her muscles hurt and her bones ached from having to run and being carried on the captain's rough leather armour.

The men did not feed her well and on the last day in the forest, they had to carry her the whole time because she was so weak. On that very day, the Tribehunters came out from the shade of the trees and continued running towards a low mountain. Over the next three days they ran almost to its base and then took up a road that circled around it.

The Tribehunters slept every second night, but they put up a guard and the girl had no chance to escape even if she had the strength. The captain carried her and fed her, she didn't get much but scraps of food and it was only just enough to keep her alive.

On the dawning of the fourth day Shyra city came into view, its high wall obscuring the city beyond it, almost as if it had something to hide from the world. That day was spent travelling towards the city, and by nightfall, they had reached it. The wall stood tall, leering down on the small company almost as if it was daring them to enter. The guards called down to the Tribehunters in their harsh language, torches lit up their bearded and dirty faces. The captain answered and the portcullis was raised enough so that the Tribehunters and their burden could slip into the city beyond.

The city was quiet, doors were locked and windows shuttered. The Tribehunters walked down the main cobbled street, towards the largest building in the city, which was a tower. On both sides curving wings came out from it, forming a half circle. This was the royal courtyard. A fountain stood in the middle, its bronze sculpture green from rust.

The silent group continued into the courtyard and towards the large wooden door set into the tower. The armoured guards that stood on either side of it were asleep, leaning on their spears. The Tribehunters' captain kicked the spear out from under one of the guards and laughed as he fell over onto the grimy cobbled courtyard. The other guard stood immediately to attention. The captain said something and the guard that was still standing took a bronze key from his pocket and opened the door; he then stood back and saluted. The captain snorted in disgust at the pathetic guards before waving his men through the door into the short hall that lay beyond. It was hung with portraits of old kings and there was a half decent carpet on

the otherwise dusty floor.

The Tribehunters followed their captain to a half circle room. It was lit by a hanging chandelier that dispersed some of the gloom, showing two doors going off to either side and one in the wall that cut the tower in half.

The rest of the Tribehunters left as the captain stepped forward and knocked on the door. Somebody called from the other side of the door and the captain pushed open the door and entered, shoving the girl in front of him. The half circle room beyond was featureless except for five tapestries that depicted the family motifs of other rulers; they were dusty and hadn't been cleaned for a long time. The tapestries were hung along the back wall; one was directly behind a large wooden chair, which was intricately engraved with scenes of battle, bloodshed and victory.

In the chair sat a man, cloaked and bent, he looked older than he was, grey creeping into his brown hair. He looked up slowly when the two entered, as though it was an effort he needn't bother with. His face seemed carved from stone, set from years of refusing emotion. It appeared that he carried the weight of a thousand worries; but his features portrayed nothing of his thoughts or feelings.

He spoke with consideration, his voice deep and powerful. The captain answered swiftly, and the man spoke again, this time quiet and menacing. He leant forward in his throne, his gaze of steel fixed on the captain who wavered in his presence. It made the girl scared to see this. Suddenly the man shouted something, the girl jumped in fright. The man spoke evenly again, as though he was suppressing his anger, and yet his tone was no less friendly. There was a pause and he said something dismissively, waving his hand. The captain bowed and left the room, leaving the girl alone with the man. He turned his blazing eyes to her, looking her up and down as though she was an unnecessary decoration.

The girl looked up at the man; she was wringing her hands, scared of what he might do. But he just looked at her, anger contorting his face. He said something in the harsh language and when the girl did not respond he said it louder. When she still didn't respond he got up from his chair, unable to contain his frustration and fury. He muttered curses under his breath as he walked to the girl and without hesitation; he slapped her across the cheek.

He had hit hard and the girl fell to the ground, she rubbed her cheek which stung frightfully. She felt tears coming and couldn't help brushing them away. At this, the man shouted at her, and now she started crying in fear and sorrow. The man grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to the

door which he kicked open and threw her out of, slamming it behind her.

The girl lay in the corridor all alone, in an unfamiliar place, vulnerable to any one. The cold stone floor beneath her offered no source of comfort and thoughts of the girl's family flitted through her mind; of their horrible and merciless murder when they had been utterly defenceless.

Thoughts of the other tribe member that had escaped then struggled into her drowsy and weakened mind, but always they were replaced with thoughts of the death and destruction that had taken place. She struggled to understand why, but could come up with no reasonable conclusion for this sort of cruelty and in the end resigned herself to laying on the cold stone floor in sorrow.

Presently a woman came along the left wing and stumbled upon the girl, she exclaimed as she saw how the girl had been treated and immediately bent down to look her over. The woman noticed the bruise across the girl's cheek. The woman picked up the girl and carried her down the right wing.

She opened up a door near the end of the wing and led the girl in. There was a neatly made bed and an old cupboard standing in the room but they were the only pieces of furniture there, which meant the room was as bare and as cold as the rest of the building.

The woman took off the girl's dirty clothes and gave her some warm bed clothes to put on, then she tucked her into bed, singing a rhyme that the girl did not understand, although it calmed her.

The woman stood back, smiled and then lent forward and kissed her on the forehead. She then got up and crossed to the door, taking a last look at the small child before silently closing the door behind her.