The Hunt

The rain fell steadily, wind threatening to blow the cold droplets onto the tiny campfire. Ruby coughed and groaned in pain, fumbling in her pack for a vial that kept escaping her clumsy fingers. Finally, she grasped it and pulled out the stopper, choking and spluttering on the bitter red liquid. Slowly, her vision cleared and the stiffness in her limbs dissipated. Sighing in some relief, she laid down beside her tiny fire.

The hunts had been getting harder. Maybe there were more vicious creatures in the world lately, maybe there were more newbie hunters to snap up the easy marks before the veterans could reach them. Not only that… she needed to prove herself, time and again. There was no overseer testing her or checking her skills and strength. No evidence other than the bounty she brought home. There was only the little voice of doubt in the back of her head. The only thing that silenced it was another kill, bigger than the last. Proof that she could face any threat, defeat any foe and, therefore, protect those she held dear. She had proved it a hundred times, but no matter what, the voice always came back.

She had been clumsy this time. So overconfident in dealing the killing blow that she hadn't avoided the morbol's last exhalations of vile fumes. Even as her axe sank into the beast for the final time, the poison had infected her, leaving her with barely the strength to crawl to the tumbledown wall and lean-to she had constructed earlier. Purged of the poison, she could now turn her attentions to her physical injuries. Broken ribs, clearly, given the pain that wracked her whenever she coughed. The left side of her face was throbbing, vision on that side blurring. She could taste blood, and see it on her arms and legs, though thankfully no deep wounds. The worst could be dealt with, with the basic healing spell she had learned as a child. Just as soon as she had rested for a few minutes…

You're not strong enough to protect her. Look at you. Battered and broken. So what if you killed one foe? There could be another right at your back and you're already too weak to deal with it. You're not strong enough to protect her and when you fail to protect her they will make you watch as they take her apart piece by piece.

Respite from the whispers in the Xaela's head rarely lasted long when she had been wounded, though it seemed especially vicious this time. A dark, mocking voice that burst into her mind with a shock of pain, like an invasion, flicking through her memories like a book and tugging on the strings of her insecurities.

Blearily, Ruby woke and rolled onto her side just in time to empty the contents of her stomach onto the ground beside her. Her head pounded, vision swimming as she tried to sit up and failed. A tiny thought broke into her mind as her chest tightened - the antidote wore off before the poison. Maybe it wasn't made for Au Ra, or the wrong dose… gasping for air as her muscles convulsed and seized, she plunged back into darkness.

You call yourself a Xaela warrior? You're pathetic. You left the Steppe and you lost it all. Even your name! 'Ruby', that's not a warrior's name. Your name was lost with all those who died without you there. Your name died with... him.

"Hello, hello? Can you hear me? What's your name?"

Ruby let out no more than a small groan as she felt herself lifted by large arms. It felt like her eyes were open, but she could see nothing. The gentle swaying motion of being carried, and then nothing once more.

Revision #4
Created 28 November 2022 23:43:31 by Ruby Bevelle
Updated 6 January 2023 11:09:06 by Ruby Bevelle