

This is going to make *no* sense without context, but here we go;

‘That’s us,’ she said, unhooking her bow and quiver from her horse’s saddle. ‘Ready to kill some harrowers?’

His smile was grim in the low light, his usually bright-orange hair looking closer to brown. ‘The question is, are they ready for us?’

She blew a humourless puff of air from her nose. ‘Let’s hope not.’ Belmont had just deposited an old rocking chair onto the pile, and she turned to him as he passed. ‘We can give you ten minutes,’ she said. ‘Start lighting in five. Understand?’

He gave her a sharp nod, then checked that the others had heard her.

She and Tyco jogged past the spire and up towards the northern end of the town, a mere hundred meters from the rest of the men. The soldier who’d called them – Sylva – pointed down the lane, which ran along the border of the forest as it stretched to the north-west. ‘Right there,’ she said.

‘We see them.’

There were three dark shapes, almost silhouettes in the late evening light, slowly making their way down the dirt track. One of them looked like the majority of harrowers – tall, twisted, and nightmarish, it stumbled forwards on uncoordinated legs, its head tilted to one side, its gut herniated and drooping from beneath the skin of its belly.

Aishara wasn’t so worried about that one. The other two, however, made her pause.

The one closest to them, perhaps forty strides away, approached almost like it was tiptoeing. Its back was straight and rigid, and its arms hung down low by its sides, but it raised its knees abnormally high each time it lifted a foot from the ground, before tentatively, almost gracefully, stepping forwards. It reminded Aishara of the way some exotic birds walked.

The third harrower – the one furthest away – was the shortest of the lot, even shorter than Tyco. That, in itself, was an oddity. But there was something else, too, in the way it was crouched over, like it was hiding something in its arms...

There wasn’t time to question it.

‘You stay here with us,’ Aishara said to Sylva. ‘Make sure we don’t get flanked.’

Sylva drew the mace at her hip from its loop, nodding.

Tyco pointed to the tiptoeing harrower. ‘That one first?’

Aishara gritted her teeth. ‘That one first.’ She took an arrow from her quiver, nocking it. Tyco did the same, though they both knew he was better with the blade than the bow.

‘Right through the eye, Captain,’ he muttered under his breath.

‘Invaluable advice, Private,’ she replied, pulling the bowstring back. ‘Don’t know what I’d do without you.’

She let the arrow fly.

It whizzed past the harrower’s skull, barely an inch off target.

Her bowstring hummed.

*Shit.*

The harrower had its leg raised, about to step forward again, when it froze. It turned its face towards Aishara slowly, as though only noticing her for the first time.

‘Tyco,’ she whispered, ‘You might want to-’

The harrower broke into a sprint.

She cursed, drawing another arrow as Tyco pulled back on his bowstring. The harrower was absurdly fast, its long, gangly limbs pumping through the air as it thundered towards them. Tyco let his arrow fly, but he'd aimed too low, and it sunk into the pallid flesh of the beast's shoulder.

'Fuck, fuck, fuck...' Aishara muttered, raising her own bow again. It was fifteen strides from them.

Ten.

Five.

The arrow sliced through a misshapen lump that might've been an ear.

Aishara barely had time to dive to the side before it reached them, and it swung a thin, warped limb towards her. It missed, barely, but she heard a scream as she rolled, and looked up to see that the beast had caught Sylva by the wrist. It pulled her up into the air, and Aishara heard a sickening *pop* as her shoulder dislocated.