

Hunted

by Bella Deacon

The wind whistled a sinister symphony and the thunder clapped far in the distance. Lia Rose Gaumond sat in her cold, wooden house, watching the orange flames of her slowly dying fire dance, twirling and spitting onto her tattered rug, her fingers coiled around a warm cup of hot chocolate.

It wasn't real hot chocolate – it was a lump of chocolate she had saved from around two years ago when her mother had bought her it as a special treat for her thirteenth birthday and some water she had warmed the best she could over the cackling fire.

She didn't drink it. Instead, she stared out of her window of at the dark horizon. She was dreading tomorrow. On the fifteenth birthday of every child, they were taken into the hall where their village leaders lived. There, they would be questioned and examined until the leaders made a decision. This decision was whether they lived or died.

After the war which marked the collapse of most civilisation, most people had searched alone for food, shelter and any essentials. Eventually, they had grouped together and created tribes and villages. In Lia's village, the village leaders were intent on surviving.

Without the old technology humans had once had, this had become incredibly difficult. To help them survive, once every child reached the age of fifteen, they would be tested. If the leaders thought they had skills which would help the village, they would live. If not, they would be killed. Only the leaders knew how they were killed.

Lia's friend, Amber, was certain to live. She was a gorgeous girl with blonde hair and sapphire eyes and was, surprisingly due to her delicate looks, an incredibly skilled hunter.

Lia, on the other hand, wasn't skilled or what most people considered pretty. She had stubborn ginger hair and a gentle sprinkle of freckles across her flawed face, along with irritating spots. She had barely any hope.

The storm had begun to die and the frosty sun peeked onto the freezing world, persuading Lia to leave and visit Amber. She wandered through the still streets until she reached Amber's house. It was a brick building which was likely once a flat, tall and proud. Amber came out before Lia even reached the door.

"Lia... I was worried I wouldn't see you before tomorrow" she stared at Lia, as if already planning her funeral.

"Amber, I'm worried. I have nothing to show them" replied Lia, shaking her head.

"I know. Lia, we're leaving".

Lia was surprised that Amber was disobeying the leaders like this and believed she shouldn't put Amber in this danger- leaving the village was forbidden and the punishment was death. Despite her worry, she found herself following Amber out into the forest which surrounded the village.

Her mother would've quite happily done this, but her mother had been killed by the leaders for disobeying the village rules soon after Lia's fourteenth birthday. Lia had never known her father, so she had been alone for the last years.

Amber and Lia descended further into the shadowy forest's depths, finding themselves beside a fast, crashing river. To Lia's horror, Amber laid a thin log across the river and begun crossing it, laughing when it nearly threw her off.

"Come on, Lia" she shouted once she was across and waiting on the bank.

Lia had never liked risks- they had led to the death of her beloved mother- but saw no other way. If she waited here, the guards would capture and kill her for sure. Stretching her arms out in an attempt to balance herself, she set her right foot on the log. She began crossing, and, surprisingly, her fear left her. The log barely even moved!

She smiled at Amber, who grinned back at her. Then, she heard footsteps in the forest behind her and watched as Amber's smile turned into a terrified stare. Lia turned to see a group of guards approaching quickly behind them. Lia screamed. The log moved. She fell, shrieking, into the icy river. The last thing she saw was Amber reaching in to save her, missing as she drifted away, and turning to run. Then, the world went black.

When Lia woke up, she was alone in a small wooden hut. She could hear voices outside and stood up to go and examine her surroundings. When she approached the thin sheet which had been used as a door, she pulled it back to see a village of wooden huts, just like the one she was in, with playing children dashing through the streets and adults sitting and chatting happily. There were ruins all around the village, leading her to believe they were in the grounds of what remained of Raby Castle. As she stepped out, a young woman walked towards her. The woman was small, with black hair down to her shoulders and a warm, welcoming smile. She was holding a basket of food and handed it to Lia, saying "We found you in the river, drowning. Our fishing party found you. You are safe. This is for you." She paused before going on "We found another girl. She was chased by armed men. We fought them and saved her. She says she knows you. Do you know her?" Lia turned to where the woman was pointing, to see Amber emerging from another hut. "Yes! She's with me. She's my friend" confirmed Lia.

Lia ran to hug Amber, relieved that she was safe. The woman smiled and said "You seem happy. That's good. You are both perfect." "What do you mean?" asked Amber. "Our festival is now. Go and change. I gave you clothes."

Amber and Lia both went into their own huts to find two long, white dresses and a smashed mirror. Lia changed, and brushed her hair. These people seemed nice, she wanted to make a good first impression. She left the hut, to see a man standing with the woman. "Here are the sacrifices."