

Chapter 27 Hunt

Kate led the others through the dark cavern, Logan cracking another glow stick near the stairs. It didn't take them long to get back to the suspension bridge and into the hall beyond. Some of the smoke remained but the air wasn't as heavy with it as it had been before. She looked at the bodies, the carnage they had brought into the hall still very much there. And yet it was all so very quiet, now that the adrenaline was gone out of her body, the sounds and scents of battle no longer present.

The people they had moved out of the pile seemed almost serene. To her it looked like they were sleeping.

Kate jolted when a metal hand touched her shoulder.

Logan looked at her from behind his visor. "We should move."

She nodded, gripping her weapon as she walked towards the other exit in the large stone hall. She could smell the blood. The slow decay of death. It would get worse in the coming days and weeks. A part of her wanted to get every corpse out of there, but she knew rationally that it wasn't feasible. They were dead.

Killed by the monsters that live in this cave. She turned off her headlamp, the others behind her following suit without a word. Darkness returned to the entrance before her. She heard the slight gust of wind flowing through the cavern, heard the breathing of her allies, heard the drips of water falling down onto the damp stone floor. She saw the shadows dance on the walls before her, flickering torchlight illuminating the hall they had fought in.

"Stay close. And stay quiet," she said without looking back, walking into the darkness.

Kate heard every single one of her steps reverberate in the tight corridor, annoyed that she could hear it all but wasn't skilled enough to change it. Grey was the most quiet by far, Logan the loudest with his slightly dented knight armor. They couldn't see of course but with Kate's hearing, she still considered it the safest option compared to them using their headlamps. She moved slowly, one hand on the wall and checking the floor with each step to make sure she didn't fall into a random hole in the ground.

The corridor seemed natural for the most part, sections of stone occasionally blocking the way, the floor uneven. The general trend seemed to go downwards but Kate couldn't be sure. She found it difficult at first to orient herself in the dark but it became easier with time. After a few minutes, she started hearing the sound of running water. Fast but not roaring like a broad river. The others caught the sound a few minutes later, the trio clambering through the corridor with Kate hearing every grunt and breath. She didn't dare tune any of it out, in case they were ambushed somehow.

Kate stopped when she saw pale blue light from ahead. Moving her head, she could see that something was in the way. She checked with her hand and found what she assumed to be sticks and dried leaves. She took one of her small flashlights and turned it on with the top pushed against her arm. Slowly she moved the tool in an effort not to produce excess light.

Sticks and a dried bush? To hide this entrance? She turned the light off and listened. Half a minute later she pushed against the barricade and found it moving easily, the sticks simply propped up to hold the dried woodwork in place. Going through, she immediately noted the sound of water becoming louder, the echo of her own steps changing as well. The blue light came from a strange

ivy growing in vein like patterns across some of the cavern walls to the left. It produced just enough light for Kate to see her own hammer.

On the right she could see more of the plant, though farther away, some of it barely visible to her even when she squinted. The water rushed by below, at least ten or twenty meters.

"I can't hear anything around us," she whispered to the others.

"It seems like a larger cave," Logan said. "It'll be dangerous to move further without any light."

"Do you think that plant is magical?" she asked.

"Don't touch it," Grey said. "It might be a monster."

"That or it's just poisonous," Kate said, following the vein like growth with her eyes. It almost seemed like the plant was moving.

"What do you think? That hall was probably where the creatures came from," Logan said, his voice slightly muffled by the helmet.

"Probably. This seems like a hidden entrance," Grey said.

"Or a hidden exit," Kate murmured. She crouched down and shushed the others when she saw flickering light in the distance. A torch, then two. Still quite a way's off. They waited and watched for a while.

They're coming towards us.

A few minutes passed as they prepared themselves. Kate started to make out some of the noises when she focused on tuning out the sound of rushing water. Familiar guttural voices.

"What should we do?" Grey asked in a whisper.

"Ambush," Kate answered, slowly moving ahead as she used the dim blue light to find cover behind outcrops of rock. The others followed suit, their movements soon stopping as they all got into position.

She looked over the jagged stone, now seeing a group of orcs and goblins. Two of the small creatures carried torches, leading the others to a suspension bridge much smaller than the one out in front of the hall. Kate could see six orcs and five goblins, three of the small creatures pulling a large carcass she couldn't identify in the poor lighting. They used rope and wooden boards to drag the kill.

The group stopped in front of the small bridge, the crack in the stone only a few meters wide, the water below not visible. It was obvious that the goblins wouldn't be able to drag the carcass to the other side. An argument ensued.

Kate didn't speak their language but the aggressive sounds were obvious enough. One orc even drew his sword when the goblins squeaked their complaints. Then another one drew his blade, however not looking towards the goblins. He instead looked around the cavern, the light unable to illuminate the expansive area. He uttered a word. The others went quiet, the goblins letting go of the ropes.

Did they see us? She hadn't heard anything, and the orc only glanced their way for a split second. She couldn't even make out the details on his face, they were still quite a way's off.

There are too many. If they know we're here it might be problematic. She watched the group, trying

not to make a noise. *We could still just go back and cut the bridge.*

A sound rolled through the cavern, a growl, slow and almost clicking. Primal. Kate froze. She felt small, weak. Meant to die. She instinctively activated Mindless Ferocity, the breath she held going out. She remained tense, watching the orcs draw their blades, a few of them at least. Some remained unmoving.

One of the orcs took a few steps back and grabbed a torch wielding goblin, shoving the creature forward.

The goblin stumbled, looking back as it held the torch. It yelped when something came out of the dark and yanked it away. A series of cracks resounded, followed by something wet hitting the ground. The torch flickered when splatters of blood hit the fires.

Kate opened her eyes wide when she saw the creature step into the light of the dropped torch. She couldn't hear its steps against the roaring stream below. The monster was bipedal and crouching, its back bent forward as the hint of a tail swayed behind. Two massive arms ended in clawed hands, one holding the crushed remains of the goblin.

Its skin was near black, perhaps even covered in scales. Two horns jutted out of its large and elongated skull, sharp and bent forward like those of a bull. Near black eyes watched the group of orcs and goblins as blood dripped down from its maw, the two or three meters large monster stepping down onto the torch with a clawed foot, sizzling fire mixing with the breaking of wood before the cavern returned to darkness.

Shit.

Kate had seen enough, her body still tense from the sound alone. She moved as silently as she could, finding the others thanks to her hearing. Their heartbeats were racing, both of them holding their breaths. "We have to get out of here," she whispered, hearing shouts, then fast steps. Flesh tearing. A pained moan. Silence.

Fight.

No.

Run.

She held her hammer, grinding her teeth before she bit her tongue. The pain made her focus. *Run.*

She shook Logan. "Snap out of it," she said in a hissing tone, louder now. The shouts were getting closer, flickering light moving over the gap. Kate squeezed Grey's shoulder, not getting a reaction. *Fuck.*

Something hit the water below. Metal struck something, another crack, flesh being torn. Bones ground down. The cavern went silent, only the stream below remaining. The light was gone.

Kate stood frozen, waiting, listening. She heard her heart beat in her chest. She felt hot in her jacket, felt the sweat run down her back. The bridge swayed, the wood creaking. Something landed. Something heavy. Closer, on their side of the gap. *Did it hear us?*

Dripping. A different sound than the monotone water from above. It's coming closer.

She took a deep breath and found her headlamp. Kate could see it now, the silhouette of the massive monster stalking closer, its near black skin and eyes reflecting nearly none of the pale blue light. She glanced back and saw the tight tunnel just a few meters away. *Run.*

Kate put her hammer behind her pack and flicked on her headlamp, grabbing both Logan and Grey's arms before she started running with all the strength she could muster. She heard the growl and felt the heat in her mind, her magic the only thing that kept her going. She held on and dragged the others, a crack resounding but she held on. Logan slammed to the ground when she reached the entrance. She grabbed Grey and threw him inside, grabbing Logan before she shoved him through.

She could hear the creature now, fast steps as she activated her charge. Metal scraped against stone as she shoved Logan into the tunnel, herself right behind. They hit something in the way, falling in a tumble. Her head hit something, ringing resounding in her ears as she forced herself up. She tasted blood. Her headlamp was swaying. She walked forward. Kate looked down and grabbed onto the shoulder piece of Logan's armor, pulling the heavy man and his armor closer with one arm.

She fell on her ass, Logan in front of her and closer to the exit. Kate stabilized her lamp, the light shining into the cavern beyond where she could see the hint of a tail sliding past the tight entrance. Straining her hearing, she tried to make out where the beast was as she forced herself up, continuing to pull Logan. A moment later she stumbled over Grey, nearly falling. The creature was gone.

What the fuck was that.

She moved past Grey, seeing that he had started to crawl. His arms were shaking, blood on his nails. Kate grabbed him too, slowly dragging the two men through the corridor. She felt that a part of her wanted to go out there and find the monster. Just to see. To see if she could hunt it, kill it. A trap might work, or if she managed to sneak up on it. She managed to ignore those thoughts. It had wiped out an entire group of orcs in mere moments.

The sound of flowing water grew more distant, her strained breathing resounding in between the scraping of metal and fabric against the stone ground. She stopped, shining her light into Grey's face. "Snap out of it," she said, her own magic still active. She slapped his face, turning her head towards the corridor to see if something was after them.

Grey opened his mouth and closed it again. "I..." he gulped and closed his eyes, a shaking hand moving up to his face, then to the headlamp where he flicked it on. The man slowly moved his arm out of the backpack's sling, moving it forward.

Kate turned to Logan, raising him up to see the scratches on his visor. She propped him up against the wall, his legs in an awkward angle inside the tight corridor. She banged her fist against his helmet a few times. "Are you... alive?"

He shook, the armor rattling before he coughed, turning to the side. "What..."

"I asked... if you're... alive?" she said.

"Kate," Grey said in a slightly shaking voice, holding his hand out towards her.

"That's coffee," she said, seeing the black powder in his palm. The smell hit her in the next moment. She swayed slightly, her back hitting the stone wall as she deactivated Mindless Ferocity. She could taste the blood in her mouth now, her shaking arms and legs. Her shoulders hurt. She looked down into the corridor, her headlamp shining into the darkness. Eyes wide, she could feel her heart beat picking up.

Calm yourself, she thought and looked towards Grey. "It's fine," she said, gently pushing away his hand.

"What was that..." Grey murmured. "I c... couldn't move."

Logan shook his head a few times before he took in a deep breath. “Oh god. That was fucking terrifying,” he murmured.

“Similar to my skill maybe... just far more powerful,” Kate said. “We shouldn’t stay here. In this cave.”

“Right. Can I get a minute?” Logan asked.

“No,” Kate said and grabbed the large armored man below his shoulders, raising him up as if he was a mere child. “We leave. Now.” She offered Grey a hand and pulled him up. “Logan takes the lead,” she said and put her headlamp onto his helmet. He had lost his along the way. Kate pulled her hammer out from between her pack and jacket, taking out a flashlight at the same time. “Move.”

Logan took a step, then another. His sword was gone too. Grey still held his, with both hands now, still slightly shaking.

At least it took out the orcs, Kate thought as she followed the others, focused on her hearing in case something followed them or waited on the other side.

They moved in silence, coming out into the hall a few minutes later. It looked the same, no clawed monstrosities waiting for them.

“I’ll scout ahead. Wait here,” Grey said, his body slightly changing.

Kate found it more difficult to focus on him, as if the torchlight from the walls failed to grasp his form. He was rushing away before she could object. “You still feel like shit?”

Logan looked over. “I lost my sword somewhere. You don’t lose your fucking weapon.”

“There should be a few more in the armory,” Kate said, looking around before she found one of the orc swords. They waited close to the corridor for now, Grey returning a few minutes later.

“It seems clear,” he said.

Kate nodded and grabbed the sword, handing it to Logan before they made their way towards the exit. She could tell their steps were strained. Hesitant. Kate took in a deep breath when they stepped into the large cavern. She didn’t know what to expect, but found nothing out of the ordinary. Cautiously, they went over the suspension bridge and reached the other side.

“Cut it,” Logan said, looking at Grey.

“Wait,” Kate said. “It’ll hit the other side.” She opened her pack and got out the rope, quickly fastening it to the outermost plank of the bridge. “Now go.”

Grey unsheathed his blade, striking twice in quick succession, the metal biting deep into the wooden poles, separating everything that held the bridge in place.

Kate felt the weight of the entire thing now, straining as she slowly let it down. All the way until the bridge came to rest on the other side. “Let’s go,” she whispered, their lamps shining the way as they walked back to the exit of the cavern, soon finding the glow stick. She felt herself relax a little as they ascended the steps, out and towards the forest.

They turned off their lights before reaching the last part of the cave. The sky was red when it came into view. Kate could hear small critters rushing over the forest floor, more of them than she expected. She saw a deer run up and towards the mountains. The familiar smells of earth and conifers replaced the blood and sweat of the cavern. But there was more. She smelled fire, but

couldn't see it.

"Shouldn't the sun be down already?" Logan asked.

"This is bad," she heard herself say. "We have to get back to the castle." Her voice was shaking. *This shouldn't happen here. There are too many rivers. It's been raining too.*

"What is it?" Grey asked.

Kate looked to the sky again. "It smells like half the fucking valley is on fire."

"I can't see any smoke," Logan said. He grabbed his pack and got out a small radio, turning it on before he moved through the frequencies.

She heard a loud sound from above. The same she had heard last night. She could see the red dots moving through the sky. Two of them. Right before a series of fiery streaks were released. A voice could be heard through the static of the radio.

"... surviving inhabitants are advised to seek shelter, if possible inside of an air-raid bunker. I repeat, air strikes will occur at 2100 tonight. No nuclear grade weapons will be used against the monster populations inside of the Maar Valley and Falstadt. Inform other survivors and vacate the area as fast as you can. May god be with you."