

The Hunt

“Come on!” Ventas yelled, heaving on the thick rope. “We can’t stop here!”

“You gotta be firmer when you talk to him.” Harper advised, standing on a rock. Looking back at her companions, Harper watched Ventas pull on the long length of rope that was around Casa’s neck. The targen was a massive tortoise with stout legs like barrels with claws. Casa had a pair of long, broad horns jutting out the sides of his head like a buffalo. His thick, scaly hide was dark green and firmed up into the targen’s hard shell. The wooden structure and all the gear tied to his back would have slowed down four war horses, but the load didn’t hinder the gargantuan tortoise.

“He keeps tugging toward the water.” Ventas hopelessly pulled on the rope, his heels sliding in the dirt. Casa was standing by the river, sticking his snout into the water and gulping down big mouthfuls of water. Annoyed with Ventas, Casa heaved his large neck and pulled Ventas off his feet, landing face first in the mud. Harper laughed, adjusted the grip on her bow and looked in the nearby trees.

“This is as good a place as any.” Harper said. “We made pretty good time today, so Casa is tired. It’s starting to get dark. Stake him down. If he’s comfortable, he’s more likely to stay in one place.”

“I don’t see why we’re still heading north.” Ventas mumbled, wiping his face clean. He rummaged through the saddle bags until he found a big curve of iron and the sledgehammer they used to try and keep Casa in one place.

“The fires have been following a pattern,” Harper said, holding up her map. “Slowly progressing north along the edge of the Maudig River. Every village we’ve found along the way is in ashes. Whatever is doing this? It’s going north.”

“And we’re sure it’s not just accidents?” Ventas said, swinging the massive hammer into the brace to tie down Casa for the night.

“Everyone is saying the same thing. It’s the same thing we saw.”

“The black cloud streaked with orange?”

“A burning snake slithering through clouds of white,” Harper confirmed, quoting from one of the villagers she spoke to last. “The Inferno has been this way.”

“And you think we’re catching up? Casa is fun and all, but we could have bought two horses for the same price.”

“What he lacks in speed, Casa makes up for in time spent not setting up and breaking down camp. Besides, this isn’t a race. The Inferno lives somewhere, so we find it’s home and attack it there rather than exhaust a dozen horses chasing it down. The last town we went through as recovering from an attack yesterday, so we’re not far.”

“And—not that I don’t enjoy this fun romp away from the remains of our village—but what are we going to do when we find it? Kill it with arrows? Stab it to death? I don’t think anything we’re packing is going to be strong enough to kill a snake made of smoke.”

“I...have something.”

“What? You never said anything before.” Ventas took the cooking gear off of Casa’s back. “Did you talk to that wizard in the last village?”

“First of all, he was a scholar, not a wizard.”

“Long, white beard and a robe.” Ventas said, miming the shape of the old man’s facial hair. “He’s a wizard or a quack.”

“Secondly? We have no idea how to kill this thing otherwise, so I’m willing to try anything. And he urged me to use it, so it’s not like I had to pay for it.”

“Alright, what is it then?” Ventas asked.

“One arrow,” Harper pulled the arrow out of her quiver, green feathers sticking out of the side. She turned the arrow so that the sunlight shined off the metal tip. “Silvered and—if the scholar is right—poisoned for our enemy.”

“He couldn’t afford to give us a few more?”

“They needed the silver to rebuild more than I did,” Harper said. “Besides, I have the sneaking suspicion I’m only going to have one shot.”

Patting Casa’s thick skin, Harper stepped up on the targen’s broad forehead and into their small hut. The interior curved up with Casa’s shell and the targen rocked the duo to sleep each night with his steady breathing. Ventas’s side had a hammock spread out over a few supply bags, while Harper’s side had a bed that fit Casa’s domed back and a trunk for her personal belongings. The targen hut was only meant for one, but Casa never showed any signs of trouble sleeping with both humans on his back.

Harper knelt down to put her bow and arrows in the trunk beside her bed. Running her hands along the curve of the bow, she relaxed the muscles in her hand. She’d had a death grip on her weapon all day, her gaze shifting from the ground to the sky every ten steps or so for fear of the smoke descending on them. The Inferno had only destroyed towns and villages so far, but Harper doubted that a two humans and a targen would be a risky target for the monster.

“Why did you take that bow?” Ventas asked, crouching to get into the shack.

“What?” Harper asked, locking the bow away for the night.

“We had...ten seconds to grab something from your house. You could have taken food, money, or even medicine. But you thought to grab that bow. I know you too well to know it

was an accident or just luck. You took it with intent. Why?”

Harper sat on her bed, flexing her bow hand to try and relax her sore fingers. “I felt in my gut that I could only take one thing. And I had to decide what I wanted, not just in that moment, but maybe for the rest of my life. We’d spend the money trying to rebuild the town. Food would run out and I wouldn’t know what to do with the medicine. But that bow? It felt like hope...hope for a future, hope to keep this from happening to someone else. It was hope that we would get revenge for what that thing did. I knew that someone had to stop the Inferno. I took the bow because it felt like action rather than waiting around.”

“The Inferno...it burned everything.” Ventas shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It was so fast. It slammed into the houses like a boulder, but our spears and arrows passed through it like nothing was there. I saw it pick up a horse in its smoky coils and drop it as a pile of bones and rendered flesh. Why did it attack us? I don’t understand.”

“No telling if it was a planned attack or just rotten luck.” Harper exhaled and relaxed all the muscles in her hand, already longing for the bow in her grip again. “No one I’ve talked to has seen anything like it, but they all have different stories: a wizard’s spell gone wrong, an ancient evil from before the time of man...a curse from the Goddess. All we know is that thing is still out there. And I’m going to kill it.”

“How do you know it can be killed?”

“Everything dies.” Harper said. She rubbed her bare hands together even though she wasn’t cold.

“Right,” Ventas said. “If only killing the ash cloud was as simple as that.”

Harper nodded. She sniffed, cleared her head of negative thoughts and opened the sacks under Ventas’s hammock where they kept their meager food stores. “Looks like oatmeal

again.”

“Can we at least get a rabbit or something?” Ventas asked. “Flavor the swill with something other than honey or—gods forbid—lemons, again. You brought that bow, I’d like to use it for more than just the Inferno.”

“Fine,” Harper laughed, “but if I’m out hunting? You’re gathering evergreen branches for Casa’s dinner. And if he’s this thirsty? He’s gonna be very hungry.”

“All the comforts of home with the hassle of a war horse. And we don’t even get to ride it during the day.”

Harper smiled unlocked the trunk and grabbed a handful of arrows. The bow in her grip again was a familiar comfort that she was begin to rely on too much, but she knew she could do with the target practice. When she exited the hut, Casa was resting with his chin the river. One reptilian eye opened slowly and looked at her as she approached. Harper put a hand on one of Casa’s horns and let out a breath. “At least you aren’t complaining too much.”

Casa shut his enormous eye and rumbled so deep that Harper’s body shook. The sky was clear overhead, but Harper felt safe for now.