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## Chapter Three The Hunted

Jon was unhappy, dirty, hungry, irritated, tired, and overall not having a nice day. It seemed that each passing day was fraught with harder hunting for the food, which had been eaten the week before, and longer hikes, more strenuous hikes. Apparently Kate had misidentified some symbols on the map and the wound up trekking uphill through the humid jungle. Jon had ripped off his sleeves and cut slits in his cargo pants for ventilation, the heat beating down more and more as the sun rose to high noon. Sweat rolled down his neck and tickled his back as it fell down his shirt, making twigs and dirt of traveling stick to him.

Contrary to Jon's feelings, Kate was whistling happily, obviously all those exercises that Jon had forgone during their prolonged boat rides had helped during the escapade. The only solace he could take was Grease appeared just as, if not more, unhappy as he was. His dark clothing seemed to be cooking him on the inside, his greasy hair was splayed across his forehead, and his eyes had a look of exhaustion.

Nothing in the jungle changed, expect for the fifty degree incline, the ever present eyes still haunted the night and the greenery he'd come to expect was just as disappointingly boring. Jon imagined that an "adventure" would be a lot more exciting, other than a boring hike and a lot of trees, negating the exploding helicopter.

Water and food were becoming increasingly more vacant as they got closer to their objective, fruit and small animals occasionally crossed their paths but nothing big enough to fill their bellies; Jon could almost hear his stomach cry. Dehydration seemed to become more of a prominent factor, as Jon found himself becoming dizzy and bleeding from the lip as his canteen dried up. The dizziness seemed more prevalent when they stopped, making him want more of the torturous hiking.

"Are we almost their?" Grease whined to Kate in a timely way when they stopped "i'm getting tired."

Kate looked up the incline then pulled out her map "Uhhhh... It should be on the opposite side of this hill, looks like we'll be eating something other than berries tonight," she answered approvingly, looking back with an amused smile at her two weary companions as they panted.

"Ok... Ok, I think I'm ready let's go," Jon reported as he stood up, unstable on the incline with his heavy backpack. Through sheer determination he started up again, his calves twitching with fatigue.

As they rounded the hill, the relief of walking on flat ground made him groan, and then his eyes caught the sight through the opening in the trees. What appeared to be a rice paddy made its entrance to their vision as they walked through the trees, the small hills and dips that made-up the growing areas were being used by workers with rakes and other farming tools. The workers were of the same origin as the thing Jon saw the other night, they were a range of earthly colors, dark red through deep green, they were scaled with lizard-like skin and had the shape of a human with the head of a dragon, also tails made an appearance; they were all generally muscled. Their shapes projected elegance, the way their scales tightened and relaxed as their muscles moved.

They all looked up simultaneously, their crowned ridges on their heads glancing off the noon day sun. All of their eyes were deep blue, even at a distance Jon could tell. Although astounded, he almost expected this, going over the scenario over and over in his head on his long hike to take his mind of the pain. A smaller one, looking to be a child, ran off toward what looked like a few rows of cobblestone houses with palm tree leaves for roofs.

Kate started walking and Jon and Grease followed warily, their eyes connecting with every Drakox in the field. Jon looked forward to see a group of them, three adults, and one short scuttling one, his eyes gray, giving an air of old wisdom. He held the hand of the small child and a cane, to which he appeared to lean on heavily. Kate waved and Jon followed less than eager, Grease didn't wave at all.

Jon started taking notice of their clothes, the workers wore gray, worn, button-up shirts, and earthly colored trousers, while the "Guard" of the old Drakox wore what looked like ceremonial cloths with colors ranging from red to orange; none wore shoes, the padding on their feet- or claws- was sufficient enough. Even the old one wore the flashy getup, with the absence of the headdress, which place was taken by a thin wispy goatee that ended dangling at his stomach.

As they neared the group, the guards backed off, allowing the old one and child to approach without their presence. The old one started chortling and speed up on his walking stick, his tiny escort just smiled and held his hand of the old one to stop him from falling. To Jon's surprise Kate and the old one embraced in what was a friendly hug, Kate kneeling down. "I never thought you'd come back my dear!" the old one said in a craggily voice.

"Uhhh... Kate do you know... Sir may I ask your name?" Jon asked to Kate and the old one, he laughed and replied "I'm the village elder, you may call me Mingle! Now may I ask your name?" Jon held his hand out and said "Jon Griffin, nice to meet you," His frail, clawed hand wrapped around his, the scaly grip was unexpectedly strong. He seemed like every nice old man; very eccentric, if scaly.

As they shook Kate answered Jon's unfinished question "Sorry, I kept one secret so you could meet Mingle yourself, I met him before I met you, I was with Reed on a previous venture and we hid in his village, we learned a lot here, I'm sure Mingle will keep you here long enough to learn just as much," She gave Mingle a small smile and he grinned, Jon just looked back and forth quizzically.

Grease snorted disapprovingly and was disgruntled when no one looked at him. "If I may ask," he said with a smart tone, "how far away is Miltibar?"

"That I will save another time," he answered and nodded to the small one, who jumped and grabbed the map that stuck out of Kate pocket

"Hey!" Jon and Grease protested.

Kate wagged a finger at Mingle and said "I knew you were going to do that! Looks like you too are going to learn whether you like it or not!" She and Mingle laughed while Grease frowned and Jon gave a small smile, continuing his education seemed just the thing for a bit of fun.

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"What in the hell were you thinking! Putting it on a boat was a good idea! You should have sent troops, not two men! Especially in those waters, with all of Katan's patrols! For all we know, a battleship blew it straight out of the water!" Burke yelled at the officer who stood at attention as sweat rolled down his forehead. "Why I ask you! How can you be so stupid as to forget we had a plan! A plan! Not some "guess" that Katan would never suspect that we'd use a recreation boat! Now some group of individuals has our egg, two of our own ops are dead, and we lost a chopper!"

"But sir!" the officer defended, his arms shaking "You are in no position to talk!" Mr. Burke then pushed a button on his desk for his secretary's intercom "Mrs. Roslen, please send in the clean-up crew, I just made a mess," releasing the button he set his stare on the officer, who started to break down. Burke drove him to the ground with his glare. The officer's eyes fell into fear and he started groveling "Please! Please sir! I was just acting under orders, orders sir!"

“Oh! I knew who’s orders it was! But it was you who implemented and designed it and that merits consequences.” he his became quiet in the end, as he had cradled his gun within his desk like a security blanket. The officer stood up straight, looking around frantically for any chance of escape, like a mouse trapped in a maze. That made Burke smile. He slowly pulled the gun out, clicking the ratchet of the revolver into place as he loaded a round. The officer froze as he had the split second to notice.

Burke pulled the trigger, fire erupting out of the barrel like a volcano. The officer’s head whipped back as the bullet impacted with his forehead, tearing into it voraciously. The bullet exploded out of his head like a rocket, sending blood and bits of skull fragments spraying onto the wall. The officer crashed into the wall, sliding down his as his body began to lose control and died, a streak of blood following him down.

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Jon and his friends sat down under the roof of the town hall, Mingle and a few others had called a feast for their visit and he was all to welcome to that idea. The jungle turns unsettling cold at night and the warm fire that filled the room was appreciative, along with talk and drink. This would have been a nice getaway location for Jon if not for it being so remote. A few of Mingle’s honor guard dined with them, they weren’t wearing any ceremonial clothing and Kate seemed to have found a old friend within the group and was making small talk while nursing a mug of an alcohol called *Terip*. Grease just kept his face down and drank as much as possible, Jon himself was just in a zone of contentment.

He leaned in his chair and smiled, propping it back with his feet. Dinner had already been served and the dessert had been whittled down to just a few of those cream filled berries, to contrast, the *Terip* never seemed to run out, barrels and barrels seemed to go in and out of the hall; Jon had almost forgot his three drink limit.

As he sat he let his mind wander, allowing him to relax for the first time in more than a week, trying to gather all his thoughts into one place. It was almost like he had been living in an action movie the way he had been acting, he had no clue how he had learned to shoot like that, not that he wasn’t a good shot, but that skill was almost unbelievable. It all seemed to settle on that “awareness” or widening of thought, it felt like a simple pressure on the top of his head that made him one with his surroundings. It made him feel that he could shoot behind his shoulder and hit anything at all. Then there was that unsettling green flash... he wondered what it all meant.

He just brushed it off as a fluke, or he just smelled some exhaust he shouldn’t have while working below deck.

Now he knew of what Mingle said about learning new things, he hoped it wasn’t some spook story of their culture or a ritual that will have him sticking his hands into a pile of biting ants. Maybe it would actually be something useful.

The fire crackled and gave a sharp snap as a piece of charcoal shot off from the fire, landing on Jon’s lap, he quickly brushed it away and tried dry scrubbing the black off his jeans. He licked his thumb and pressed harder, but the heat from the piece of charcoal still lingered and his finger sizzled. He quickly put his thumb in his mouth, only to have his tongue get burnt by it.

This comical sequence was watched on by Mingle, Kate, and a black scaled Drakox with broad shoulders. The black one guffawed deeply and Mingle sort of giggled and coughed at the same time. Jon just scowled them, and then started to think of some question to change the topic.

“So, what is it we are going to learn? No offense Mingle, but we don’t have a lot of time and there are some people trying to well... to put I frankly, trying to kill us,” Jon filled Mingle in; the little Drakox started stroking his thin wispy beard.

“Well,” he started off simply “People were trying to kill Kate and the late Reed, but that didn’t stop them from learning, no it did not,” he ended punctually.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what did you learn Kate?” Jon asked her, but surprisingly she blushed. Mingle looked up, as if to ask if he should tell him, but she waved him off and answered; with the large black scaled Drakox looking on.

“To... dance,” she said exasperatedly. Silence followed, shock blatant on both Grease and Jon’s faces. Grease then shorted and started laughing, everyone in the hall just looked at him in disgust and a clawed hand came out of nowhere and slapped him on the head, which in turn gave Kate a reason to laugh.

“Yeah, it was my decision and I’m proud of it,” she said triumphantly with her head held high.

“I respect that, people like different things... if they are a bit unorthodox,” Jon reassured her, but still he was no less surprised “So do I get to choose?”

“Of course! Why wouldn’t you? Learning something you won’t use doesn’t help you at all now does it?” Mingle coughed “Now I believe the question is, what do you want to do?”

“Well... now that I think about it I don’t know, hey Kate why did you choose to dance?” Jon pondered and questioned, thinking of stuff he might need in his near future.

“Me?” she looked at him, eyebrow raised, “Well, it was new and different, and I had friends who used to do it, but I never had the courage to learn,”

“You? No courage? Now I find that hard to believe,” Jon chuckled, thinking about what she said, “Well, I guess I’ve always wanted to learn how fight, if you can provide that?”

“I think I can arrange that,” Mingle answered “Lakao, are weapons master and hunt leader, will teach you, he has extensive knowledge of many forms of martial arts,”

Lakao, the large black scaled one, walked forward and stuck out a hand. Jon accepted it gratefully, both of them smiled; Lakoa’s teeth were brilliantly white.

“Ill be honored to teach you Jon, I have really missed Mr. Reed and I would gladly like to hear of him before his death,” he said in a gruff gravelly voice.

“Lakao, I would happily tell you of him, he was a great man and a great role model.”

Jon woke up in the early morning; the cold of the night still lingered and froze his uncovered feet. Mingle had assigned three of their vacant huts for their stay, thatched covered and generally cozy, he felt at home. It was empty except for a feathered bed on a wooden frame, a carved chair, and a small end table where he kept his bag and guns.

He started the day by cleaning his guns. He grabbed his kit, oil, a thin wispy cloth and started going to work on his rifle before moving onto his sub-machine gun. Grease covered his palms as he coated the insides of his gun, getting every little speck and giving them a piercing black shine that made them graceful as well as stealthy polish.

With that little task out of the way, he noticed a basket of fruit on his end table, a variety of colors graced the food, making him think of a tropical beach. He saw a note, signed *Lakoa*.

*Eat up because we start your learning today, meet me at the north end of the village to the right of the town hall.*

He grinned at the prospect, Jon always liked a challenge. Looking around once more to see if he forgot any thing, he found a pile of fresh cloths, much like the ones the workers were wearing in the rice paddy. He shrugged off his torn, wrinkled ones, and pulled the new set on. To him they fit nicely and comfortably, the soft material the button up shirt was made of was complimented by the tough brown

trousers that held large pockets on the back and front. If not the most attractive, they were the most practical, perfect for the Drakox lifestyle.

Jon then decided to throw some of the fruit in his bag and slung it over his shoulder, other things like his knife weighted it down. Opening the door, he was hit by the crisp, clean, morning air he was used to. He stood on the front step of his humble hut and stretched his back, joints popping like fireworks.

His abode was located on the east side of the village with a paddy flanking it to the right and more jungle to the left. Fog and mist hung just below the canopy and became thicker near the paddies because to water. Smoke billowed off the blacksmith's cottage in great flumes, meaning he was obliviously making some tools. Jon hoped he'd still be here for one of them, it must be a great honor to be a part of it.

Putting most of those thoughts behind him, he jumped off his steps and started on the loose cobblestone path back to the town square, pebbles crunching under his boots. Ferns and other such plants bordered the path tastefully, showing how the locals used the jungle in an articulate way.

Jon saw some workers in a nearby paddy and waved friendly, but strangely only two waved back, the others carried a cold poise and kept to themselves. Pondering this, Jon found himself no longer in the outskirts but in the village, a mix of primitive and modern technology was elaborately combined to give the town a primal but familiar look to Jon. Lampposts and crude stone statues stood on corners with vines and hedgerows growing around buildings like living walls.

As he passed the blacksmith he saw a large and extremely bulky Drakox and, surprisingly, Grease looking bored, but his eyes intent when the hammer struck a bit of metal. The inside of the shop was dark grey stone and wooden beams, the large furnace holding four other pieces of metal, with the left most one in an intricate shape of a tree. As the hammer hit the white hot metal, sparks sprung off it in a shower of fire. The blacksmith's scales were a dark red, possibly a factor of the soot that accumulated on Grease's face as well.

The two didn't notice Jon staring, so he continued on. He passed the town hall, a large cylinder-like building with tribal runes and patterns carved into the beams with red paint filling in the lines. It was rather beautiful looking, the same primal elegance everything else in the village carried.

He himself was beaming; a stupid smirk on his face when he saw Laoka standing in front of a square house, with his arms crossed and foot tapping. Jon waved and he did too, the two clasped each other forearm in strong grasp; they had become friends after their talks the night before, Jon telling of his adventure and Laoka of what he knew of Reed..

"I'm guessing this is what you call fashionably late?" Laoka asked a quirk in his smile.

"Yeah, it's all the rage for procrastinators," he answered quickly, making Laoka laugh heartily.

"I'm not going to enjoy beating the living crap out of you repeatedly, but hopefully you will," He informed Jon, whose smile slightly dropped.

"What?" the word unsurely passed his lips, but the weapons master just opened the door, ushering him in.

The place was just as he'd expected, thin, yet strong, wood covered the floor to absorb impact; its gleam made light bounce off it. The roof was angled upwards and flattened out with windows, to allow light in the house without fire. Racks of melee weapons (spears, halberds, a sword or two) lined the walls, with a large painting of a dragon in full flight, fire leaping from its mouth behind it.

"Welcome to my gym, this is where I train all the hunters and warriors to use their weapon of choice. I personally choose just to use my feet and hands, though. More natural that way," Laoka smiled, as if remembering sometime when he beat the living snot out of someone.

"I'm guessing you have some experience with fighting with knives, as Kate tells me, but none of that matters here. Here you learn the finer arts, too bad you humans don't have claws though..."

"So..." Jon said rubbing his hands together "What first?" Immediately a large wooden stick, perfectly polished, was thrown at him. He caught it deftly and blocked just as Laoka threw an attack at him.

Laoka shot to the lower right and Jon blocked it, his hands sliding skillfully across it to hit the floor. Jon let out a laugh and said “Man this is ea-” as Lakoa’s stick whacked him brutally across the face. Falling to the floor he laughed painfully; he was having fun, but it hurt like a bitch.

“So Jon, it seems you’re skill extends just from modern weaponry, come ill show you a few blocks; oh and remember: pay attention,”

“Ha, damn, well ok let’s do this,” Jon said getting up and clapping his hands.

Laoka walked across the gym and pulled out a few straw mats in the corner, lining them up in a rectangle in the middle of the room. Jon of course was smiling like an idiot with a discolored bruise on his face.

“Stand here,” he said, pointing to the opposite square from the one he was standing on.

“Now, hold the pole, or stick whichever one you want to call it, with your right hand high and left low... see how it’s easier to maneuver and block,”

“Yeah, now wha-,” he was again interrupted by another assault from Laoka, his stick a flurry. This time Jon more easily blocked them, *well* most of them, a red welt appearing on his ankle.

“Now try to attack!”

So Jon and Laoka traded off, casualties remained on Jon’s side though. Near the end, when Laoka thought he was good enough with the polearm (being a swift learner Jon was), he decided to show him a few quick hand-to-hand moves. Sadly, Jon was less of a fighter without a weapon and was laid out flat every time, but he did learn how to block an incoming punch.

They fought each other for hours, Jon hunger for training overcoming the pain and soreness of his muscles. Every swing was strong, no matter how much it hurt, and every block was stable. Lakoa continually beat him into submission, mostly with his hands, but Jon landed a few blows himself. By the end, Jon, bleeding and grinning, finally fell to the ground with Lakoa’s polearm at his throat.

“I’ll give you this, you learn quick, but all good things come to an end and I think it’s about time for dinner,” Lakoa’s scaly lips were stuck in a smirk, mirroring Jon’s own as he laid on the ground, chest heaving with exhaustion, “You should go to the feast, and remember, same time tomorrow,”

When he exited the gym, pleasantries and goodbyes done, he noticed it was already getting darker. The sun already had sunk behind the mountains to the south-east. He checked his half cracked watch to see the time, only to find he had spent at least twelve hours in that place, just noticing he was covered in sweat. Strangely, he felt that same widening awareness that happened before. Now this was just getting out of hand for him; it started dissipating as his adrenaline went down. Maybe it was a benefit? Maybe it was gods? Whatever it was, Jon had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Villagers were just going home from whatever work they did, most of them being farmers. A few looked on appraisingly, seeing that he was obviously working very hard and smiling too, but a large amount just snorted with distaste. Jon started to get a feeling he wasn’t as welcome as he thought. He wondered if Kate and Grease had the same treatment.

Jon headed to the town hall where dinner was being prepared for the entirety of the village; it appeared by the large number of hunters coming home before their week ended must mean a lot of food was coming their way. The comforting smell of barbeque and fire made its way to his nose, a very rich intoxicating smell that made him salivate.

As he walked toward the smell, the streets quieted, lights fell dark, doors shut, and a bell started dinging, a low sound that seemed to reverberate through him. He looked down the street and saw a creeping fog coming toward him, tendrils reaching across the ground like a gaseous monster. His heart started beating and his eyes widened. He felt the instinct to run and hide, but something else compelled him toward, stupidity or curiosity he was going into the fog.

The fog’s arms reached his feet and curled up his leg, and then the larger wall of it hit him, drowning out his view of the houses, which were only ten feet away. Causally, he strolled down the street, keeping in a straight line. His ears pricked up when he heard a few guttural clicks and growls, his hand went immediately to his pistol which he slowly pulled it out of its holster. He stopped walking and checked his clip, fully loaded he pulled it up to eye level and continued walking, albeit more wary.

The clicks and growls increased in frequency as he marched; pivoting in the direction of the sound each time. The patter of heavy, yet fast, foot prints on cobblestone to his left surprised him, but when he turned nothing was there. Finding that he was lost in a sea of fog and creeping animals were not very comforting, especially now that he knew they were faster than him. He passed a metal lamppost and noticed a pool of red a yard away. Going on one knee, he saw that it was too thin to be blood. His fingers touched it cautiously and he put them in mouth.

Bizarrely, it was sticky like soda, it left behind a powdery dry red when he wiped his hands. Then, what felt like a large drop of rain, hit his head, splashing down his neck. He felt the back of his head and came back with the same substance. So he looked up the lamppost.

A lizard like creature was perched on it like a bird, black scales having the look of medieval armor. Red saliva dripped from its mouth, the crocodilian head had teeth sticking out this way and that. Long arms were held at the ready, muscles rippling across them and three foot long claws stretched down. They were a mottled forest green like camouflage. Its tail was thick near the legs but thinned gradually into a whip-like weapon. Wide round eyes looked down hungrily at Jon, pure black pupils blinking when his prey irises flashed green.

Jon pulled his gun at the ready just as the monster leapt from its perch, long slashing claws spread out like deadly fans. He fired three rounds into its skull, blood and flesh scattered on a nearby wall. With the awareness with him he rolled out of the way to avoid the corpse's still lethal claws. Sadly, one of the scalpels sharp weapons caught his left shoulder and opened it open like a hot knife of butter.

"Dammit!" He yelled painfully, holding his right hand to the wound as blood poured out. He kicked the corpse in the stomach, which gave a belch when it released the gases accumulated in its belly. Despite that, he shot it in the heart, or where he thought the heart was, for good measure. As a trophy, he pulled his knife out of its sheath and cut a finger off, claw and all. Putting the bloody tool in his empty holster, with the sharp end pointing down, he started at a trot for safety.

He heard a variety of different noise following him, more surprised chirps and barks seemed to originate from the corpses area. That put a kick in his step, upping him to running instead of trotting. Following the signs he found in the fog, he tried to find the town hall, where everyone was supposed to be eating, including Laoka. Pattering followed him, across rooftops, in deep ditches, and behind him on the street, making him let go of his bleeding shirt and fire wildly in different directions, hoping for the best.

His breathing started becoming heavy and his head dizzy, beginning to stagger as he ran. He tried applying more pressure become the blood just ran through his fingers down his arm. The blood was like a trail to those things.

The clatter of cups and laughter alerted Jon that he was going the right way; he just didn't know he could make it with the fog on all sides. Creatures be damned, Jon wasn't going to die tonight. A screech rang through the night, followed by chattering chirps of triumph; it came closer with every second.

A light from the hall illuminated the fog, making it glow white. Jon booked it to the large doors, opening them with his right arm while his left hung uselessly at his side. He pulled himself in and flopped on the floor, yelling.

"Kate! Grease! Shoot!" he hollered just as one of the creatures popped in the door way, poised with its claws ready. The bullets ripped it apart viscusly, opening up its chest and skull in red spurts of violence.

“Jon!” Kate screamed “Get a bandage!”

“Oh Boy! Laoka! What the bloody hell was that thing!”

“Stop yelling and get me something to drink! This hurts!”