

Chapter 08 – The Mists

The Mists had not been able to catch her during the sprint she made from the Grove towards the Village. In the best of times, the run was only a few minutes. In this case, she couldn't understand the passage of time. That part of her mind had been locked off, resources directed to the danger at hand. It was her reflex, her instinct, to run towards the problem. Of course, in this case, she did not know what that would entail.

She expected to be lost in memory. One did not forget their experiences with the Mist, and her mind was forced back to her childhood and the dangers she faced then. She expected to see those scenes replayed in her mind, dreams, and memories brought to life in cruel detail. If it had happened, she would have frozen, and she would have been stuck in the past. Even now, there was a terror she couldn't quite explain. It was all-encompassing, a cold hand on the back of her neck, a shiver in her spine, shaking hands, building nausea, burning in her throat, and through all of it, her feet carried her forward. Part of Ljotr was determined to get to the village, to help those in trouble – but another part was mortified of what might happen to her if she stopped sprinting.

As she approached the village, her eyes surveyed the scene. The Mist crawled across the dirt paths between homes. It covered the small gardens and crawled across the lower boards of livestock fences. The light of homes was dimming, flickering fires seeming to wane in the fireplaces. She saw the Mists crawling up walls, tendrils ever reaching higher and higher, seeking entrance in shuttered windows. Each of her strides here was heavy, like pulling her feet from the mud of a stream bed. As the strength required to force each pull grew greater, her speed dwindled. She was struggling to keep up her sprint and finally looked down.

The Mist had coiled around her legs. Tendrils wrapped and tangled about her. She raised her leg in a stride, and the fog-like substance pulled at her. It stretched like webbing, splintering into frosty shards before reforming underfoot and beginning again. It had built up along the edges of her boots, each shattering strand building on what had come before. She couldn't stop, though. Her ears perked up, twitching at a noise every hunter dreaded.

There was nothing but sudden, unexpected silence.

She couldn't remember when the sound of the bell stopped, how long she had been without noises. No animals dared make a noise. A predator was upon them – something big, something beyond them. Hiding was the only option. And they all agreed. She was the only thing out here making a sound; each struggle and grunt to pull her legs free of the Mist as she pushed into the village was all that she heard for a moment. Whatever it was hadn't made a move on her, though. She listened intently to her surroundings as she moved, heading ever closer to the town center and the bell.

The noise would have drawn the creature, whatever it was, right? She thought to herself, eyes perched and watching for any sort of movement. Then her eyes fell on it – the reason the bell was rung and why it was stopped. The village hall sat at the center of town, a long space with a slightly domed roof – the entire structure made of solid woods. It was one long room inside, a place for the community to meet, a place of safety in case of attack. The thick doors were shut tight, barred from inside. Likely

many of the villagers were within. What few were not were probably all hidden away in the safety of their homes.

She thought for a second, a single fleeting second, that the danger was not as great as she had thought. It was just the Mist, and she could make it to the village hall. But she was not that lucky, and this was not going to be the case. She spotted the silhouette of a creature atop the Hall a moment later. It was a massive beast, as tall as two or three men in the village. Its stomach was extended and bloated, near to bursting. Its arms were long, with thick layers of fat hanging from each, and its legs were wide enough to have rolls themselves. Otherwise, at first, at least, it looked nearly human.

But then she saw its head. Its jaw unhinged, opening wide and dripping with bile and viscera as it gripped its previous prey. Her heart sank. She realized she hadn't gotten there in time. The watchmen had been pulled from the bell tower atop the village hall. The creature held what was left of him, barely more than his legs and a bit of torso remaining. The beast pushed the body into its maw with a grotesque crunch, taking most of what was left in a single bite. She felt sick for a moment. She had been around dead animals and the brutality of those before. This act was not the same, though.

The creature didn't wait before seeking another meal. With a bellowing growl that shook the air around it and echoed through the forest, it lurched forward on the roof of the village hall. Its maw opened again and gripped onto the thick wooden logs that connected to create the top of the building. Thick hempen ropes snapped, and the log was crushed under the power of its bite. She could see the light of the fires within the hall flickering, brightening its face. It was pale, and despite its obese form, its face seemed emaciated. She heard the growl again as it leaned back for another strike. But in a moment of clarity, she realized that it was not just a growl. It was a word.

"More," It howled into the night sky as it prepared to dig into the roof once more.

She could hear people in the hall, faintly – but she was sure they were there. She had to act, or they die. The thing was too big for them. Even if all the townsfolk with weapons were there, could they possibly bring it down? Not that she could do any better – but at least she could lead it away. Her body acted on instinct.

Her long fingers wrapped around her bow, two drawing back a long bodkin arrow as the bow creaked. Her eyes followed the shaft of her ammunition, and her entire body twisted to face the creature. "Hey, ugly!" Her sharp voice carried on the wind, the first time she had yelled in a long time. It hurt her throat, and her natural raspy tone became almost a shriek, but it got the creature's attention. That horrific visage turned to face her, and her fingers slipped from the bowstring. Her bolt flew accurate and fast across the night sky and landed in the creature's chest, sinking near to the fletching.

She certainly had its attention. That massive body turned on a heel to face her, one hand reaching to the arrow and ripping it out of its flesh with a spray of blackened bile following behind. It leaped from the building.

Ljotr was fast, though. She ripped an arrow from her quiver and slid it onto the string, sending it racing towards the creature as it hit the ground. The arrow sank into the beast's calf as it hit the ground. It let out a cry and crumbled onto one knee for a moment, and she took the opportunity to run.

It was on its feet again in only a moment, though. Its strides were impossibly swift, and its height made them incredibly long. It would catch the forester in no time in a straight race. She turned back to check its distance, each thundering pace matching near four of her strides. She grimaced and turned towards a nearby shop in the village. Despite the Mist slowing her down, she kept a good pace and quickly made it to the storefront. She leaped up and dived through an open window. The Mist had held tight enough that her landing was not exactly graceful, however, and she smashed into the floor, sending a few of her arrows skittering across the shop floor. She didn't have time to retrieve them, though.

As soon as she was back on her feet in the shop, the creature slammed into the wall, that massive maw biting down on thatch roof and tearing it from the shop. It had frightened eyes bulging and reddened as if it had been bawling only moments before. She didn't understand it, but the smell of death on its breath and the sight of cloth and meat in its maw made what little empathy its fear may have played on her disappear.

Her bow twanged again as she loosed a bodkin up into its open mouth. It caught in the top of the palate as the beast howled and stepped back. She swiftly pulled another arrow from her quiver and let it fly up and out of the hole in the shop roof. Her shot was true, and the bolt found purchase in one of the creature's bulging eyes with a sickening pop. The howl became louder, laced with anger and hatred. It put its hands together in one giant fist and raised them.

She cursed under her breath and darted back into the shop as it brought down a powerful smash of flesh against the weak wooden structure. She heard snapping beams and the breaking of untold items as it lashed out, swinging its arms down over and over, enormous strides following her as if it was sure it hadn't hit her yet. She lowered a shoulder and rammed through the back door of the shop, dashing into the open air of the village, the monster not far behind her, each swing of its arms tearing a swath through the building. She made a break towards the nearest structure; every step weighed down by the constant grip of the Mist underfoot again.

The creature spotted her, though, and was focused on her. Unfortunately, it was more intelligent than she expected. It reached into the shop and grabbed a pile of debris, twisting and hurling it through the air towards her. She let out a startled gasp and dove to one side, rolling across the ground and ending up on her back. With not a lot in the way of options, she took another arrow and launched it at the monster. It caught the arrow in its forearm before it began to bound towards her.

She tried to roll to her side to stand, only to find she couldn't. The Mist had gripped her leg, tangling itself around her like stubborn vines. She swiftly moved to get the other leg up and her arms away from the ground, reaching down to pull her leg free of the mists with one hand. She wouldn't have the time though, and there was no way she could scramble away in time. The creature's stride brought it over to her, and its massive hand swung low to try to scoop her up.

Just as it reached her, she pulled herself free of the Mist's grasp, but the only way to avoid being snatched up was to fall to the ground. So, she did. As she expected, the foggy tendrils wrapped her up nearly instantly. They snaked across her form and pulled her hard against the ground. She felt the cold vapors twisting through her sleeves and trouser legs. It touched her bare skin and tightened like ropes, wisps becoming like ice and the fear and realization of what was happening began to set in.

The crackling of ice filled her ears as the Mist swarmed and swirled across her. It pushed its way past clenched teeth and into her throat. She tried to jerk away, but as she did, there was a tightening around her throat like a noose snapped shut. She couldn't even gasp, and she instinctively tore at the ground. What sounds she could hear were faint, distant, only more destruction as the creature prepared to finish her off if the Mist didn't do so first. She didn't want to die or to become whatever it was her mother had become. In terror, she felt tears welling up in her eyes. She hoped that the others had time to escape, that she had made a difference. At least then, all of this might have been worth it.

As she resigned herself, Ljotr felt that powerful hit she expected – or at least the forester thought she had. Something hard hit her side and rolled her up and out of the Mists. With a coughing gasp, she rolled free of the grip, her eyes snapping open and looking back to what hit her. It had been a shield that hit her. A simple wooden shield strapped to Argidr's arm, now held between the two and the towering beast. Her eyes snapped over the monster, and despite a spear sunk into its gut, it showed no sign of slowing.

"Run, Ljotr!" Argi ordered.

"Not without you," She barked back at Argidr's order as she struggled to her feet, tearing at the strands of Mist that still sought to grip her.

There was little time to think, though, as the monster lashed out at Argi, that terrible maw opening and snapping down at his arm. It latched onto his shield, and those powerful jaws sank into the iron and wood. It crumpled like cloth, and the carpenter let out a pained yell.

All she could see from her angle was the shield crumpled, his arm and the wood and steel barrier in the beast's mouth, and dripping of blood from around the teeth that had clenched onto him.

"Run, damn it!"

"No!" She didn't know why she yelled it. The shriek was like that of a banshee, full of fear and pain. She was not losing another person close to her to the Mist or any creatures that came with it. She wasn't going to let it take and take and not stand and fight. She lost her entire life before this village. She wasn't losing another life. She wasn't letting the person she loved die here, not like this. She dropped to her knee and picked up her bow. "I won't let you take him or anyone else!" She lashed out at the creature, a hand reaching back for another arrow. She found one lonely shaft in her quiver and put it to the string. "You took my mother, drove my father to madness. You won't take the one good thing I have left." She hissed at the creature, jerking the bowstring back in one swift motion as her aim took to its face. Then, as she loosed the arrow, she felt something.

Radiant energy leaped from her fingers, casting a shower of sparks back from the bow as the string jumped out of her grip. The arrow shaft burst into bright yellow flames, engulfing the entire bolt as it soared through the air, leaving a blazing trail of fire in its wake. The fires were bright enough to light the village street where they stood, each spark bursting into a small flash as it struck Mist, spreading like its kind was want to do across fresh fuel. The arrow struck the creature in the bridge of its nose, warranting a bellowing cry as the flaming weapon into thick bone.

The bellow caused the beast to release Argi, who fell to the ground with a groan. His arm was twisted and mangled, but still on his body – the sight of his wound and the fact that he still was in grave

danger only fueled her anger, and as she turned towards the creature again, she saw her arrow burning brighter and hotter than before. Bright yellow had moved to stark white, and after a moment, a beam of white flame erupted from the back of the monster's head, streaking into the sky and for a split second nearly turning night today.

With a long mournful gasp, the giant tumbled backward, crumbling into the ruins of the shop it had moments ago destroyed. It was unmoving, except the sinking, lifeless form, as all that remained of its life force slipped beyond the aether in a long, low breath. As it did, relief washed over her for a moment, followed by fear for Argi's safety and a worry of what other beasts could be you in the wilds, just waiting for the Mist to roll in again. The village was no longer safe – not just for them, but for all the villagers. All led back to the same thought for her.

They had to find Ronen.

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