

THE QUARRY

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Primal – Chapter 1

The desperate wail of the alarm slammed Kaye out of sleep. Her heart rate shot up, pounding in her ears and her eyes snapped open to darkness. Her hand immediately went for the sword resting alongside her before her brain had even caught up. It was catching up now.

The siren. Locke had connected the alarm to the trip wires outside.

That means they're here.

Light sprawled out from under the door and she heard movement in the other rooms. The creak of metal supports as people jumped out of bunks, bare feet drumming down the hallway.

‘What's going on?’ called her sister Serena on the bunk below.

‘I'll find out.’

Kaye vaulted over the bunk railing and landed crouched on the carpet, sword in

one hand. As she slid on combat boots and a leather jacket she heard the rattle of riot gear being taken down from the weapons room. Shotgun cartridges were being poured into trench coat pockets and she noted the familiar *shink* of a katana blade being checked and slid back into its scabbard.

‘Something’s up. I’ll grab our gear,’ she said and headed out into the fluorescent-lit hallway.

She spotted Jaik walking out of the weapons room, sliding home the magazine of his pistol. He looked straight up at Kaye with ice-green eyes, calm as a glacier. There was a similar sword to the one in Kaye’s hand on his back and a bow case slung over one shoulder. Kaye dodged a few people as they ran between them, heading for the front of the warehouse, then Jaik threw the case with her compound bow in it and she snatched it out of the air. Next came a quiver with a few dozen razor-tipped arrows in it.

‘What’s the deal?’ Kaye shouted over the still-raging alarm. Jaik had circles of fatigue under his eyes and smelt like gun oil. She knew he hadn’t slept.

‘The trip wires have gone out the front but no one’s turned on the floodlights yet. We’re blind.’

Serena came out of the room, still in pink pyjama shorts that had a picture of a kitten on them yawning ‘sleepy time!’ Below the shorts her pale skin was mottled with bruises. Jaik handed her a shotgun that looked oversized in her fifteen-year-old hands.

‘What about the rear night watch?’ Kaye asked.

‘They only had one radio working tonight and we can’t get through on it. We need to inform them and get those lights on.’ He quickly looked the two girls over. ‘The three of us is enough. Let’s move.’

Kaye nodded and in unison they ran down the hallway in the opposite direction to the human traffic flow.

Kaye burst out onto the metal catwalk that ran the perimeter of the warehouse. The sound of their boots clanging on the steel jarred the stillness of the night. It must have been 4am and the dark seemed solid and tangible before them, like black glass. They stood at the rear of the building, looking out at the concrete courtyard they had once used for strength and endurance training. Somewhere out there were the truck

tyres, empty barrels, ropes and rusted kettle bells they had throw around on sweltering, heat-shimmer days. Now Kaye's night-vision was bleached out from the fluorescent lights inside and her pupils only saw flat black with a few silver speckles dancing in her peripheries.

The sirens cut off suddenly and everything went silent. A cold wind raised its hackles and nipped at the back of their necks.

‘Can you see anyone?’ Serena's voice sounded like a whisper after the alarm.

There weren't any other voices, although the night watch should have been making their rounds along the fence line, torches zig-zagging before their feet.

Kaye opened her mouth to call out to their friends below but Jaik raised his hand.

He spoke quietly, ‘Just listen.’

Kaye's breathing was too loud in her ears. She took a deep breath and slowed her heart beat. She let her senses slide out in tendrils to grasp the shape of the world. A breeze slid over her flushed face and swept black the fringe from her eyes. The ends of her hair swayed across her jaw line and as the buzzing slowly disappeared she began to hear something else. Something that told her they were already too late.

A gentle sucking noise rolled towards them, something like marrow being drawn out from bones. Then Kaye heard the crunching of ragged teeth on finger joints and a low moan of primal satisfaction.

‘Holy shit.’

A scent crept its way into their throats, heavy and putrid.

‘How many are there?’

Kaye looked over the railing, narrowing her eyes into the dark and willing them to separate the shadows into real shapes. She smelt open wounds and the copper tang of blood. Then the moon slipped out from behind its cover.

There were a dozen creatures, humanoid but deformed with twisted limbs that spasmed as they moved. Their skin was transformed with pustules and disease-riddled flesh that hung from their bones. Kaye could smell their festering sores and unwashed clothes. Fresh vomit still clinging to their shirts. The hunched forms swung heavy limbs as they stumbled through the remains of the night watch, tripping over limp ankles as though they were tree roots. The night watch boys and girls were like

marble statues, their eyes wide and gleaming in the meagre moonlight. Their pale child fingers still clutching toy blades.

To the left was the small free-standing space of the control room. The glass was broken and nothing moved inside. They hadn't had time to turn on the lights, Kaye thought. The creatures must have crept in somewhere, suddenly materialising from the night to dig yellow teeth into turned backs. Kaye's shoulders tensed involuntarily. She remembered that it had been Lara's first watch tonight. The girl had been nervous over dinner, digging aimlessly into a can of tuna. Kaye had sat with her while they listened to the TrueLight radio broadcast at 7pm and told her how boring the rear night watch was. 'Nothing ever happens, the hardest part is not falling asleep,' she had given Lara a light punch on the arm. 'Come on, we'll have breakfast waiting for you when you get back.'

Kaye's hand seemed frozen to the railing and now she prised it free, working blood into the fingertips. Disgust welled within her as she watched the creatures flop like leeches from body to body, taking careless bites from exposed throats and shoulders. A familiar heat was rising, warming her limbs and making her toes tingle. Slowly, she nocked an arrow and lifted the bow at arm's length. The skull of a creature came up in the circle of her sight. But the moon disappeared again and the scene went black as if curtains had been drawn on the final act.

'Goddammit!' Kaye hissed.

'We need the floodlights. We need to see what we're dealing with. That's the priority now.' Jaik was aiming down his sights too. Back in darkness, they could only hear the occasional rip of skin from muscle or the pop of a socket joint being dislocated. But they knew the control room was only twenty metres away. And it had access to the gate, electric fence, siren and lights.

'I'll go,' said Jaik.

The thought of anyone going down there made Kaye's insides churn but she knew who was most likely to make it to that room.

'No you won't.' She straddled the railing and looked over the edge. About four metres. Far, but not impossible.

'What are you doing?' Jaik said as loud as he dared. Safe on the catwalk, they were yet to be noticed by the creatures below.

‘I’ll be there and back before you know it.’ Kaye had always been the quietest in stealth tests and Jaik reluctantly knew it. Kaye lowered herself down from the railing as far as she could. ‘Cover me’ she said, then let go.

There was a solid *thump* as Kaye hit the ground. She landed on something springy and uneven and her ankle gave way beneath her. She stifled a cry and fell to one side, jarring her shoulder. She lay still and hoped she hadn’t been heard. She held her breath. The nearest sucking sound went on uninterrupted.

‘Kaye!’ Jaik hissed from above. She could just see the outline of Serena and Jaik’s heads looking down, silhouetted by the stars. Kaye gave a wave, not sure if they could even see it.

The smell was stronger down here. Like being locked in one of those old abattoirs they had toured in school. The scent held a dampness to it, a liquid quality that seemed desperate to drown you.

Kaye gave her ankle an experimental circle. It twinged but moved freely. Probably just soft tissue damage, she thought. No breaks. Kaye’s hands searched out around her, fingertips running over the concrete and feeling between the cracks. They found the still-warm, sticky stump of a leg. Her hand jerked away and bile rose in her throat. That’s what she had landed on. Kaye rose slowly, hoping her arrows wouldn’t jostle together. The control room wasn’t far, a five second walk any other day, but Kaye forced each movement to be smooth and quiet. Her leg muscles ached from the constant, controlled pace. Halfway there and she could see the glimmer of broken glass in front. She kept her eyes on the courtyard, scanning for any hint of movement towards her. Barely four metres away she could make out the dark shape of a creature crouched over a body. The gravity of where she was washed over her and she longed for the safety of the catwalk. Every centimetre closer she expected a creature to suddenly sniff the air, turn and fix its pale eyes on her before howling and causing a stampede towards her. But they didn’t.

Kaye’s hand met the rough concrete wall of the control room, slid over it and found the door handle. She used it to steady herself before squeezing through the open space, and suddenly she was inside. She breathed out her tension. The smell was claustrophobic here, reminding her of science classes except without the sterility of white gloves and scalpels. The light switch was on the dashboard near the windows,

she only had to step over the black lumps on the ground to get to it. In the dark her mind gave those body bag masses gaping clown mouths and hollow eyes that followed her. Kaye's boots squelched into the wet carpet as she stepped between the shapes. Her hands roved over the walls, found the dashboard and slid over chunks of broken glass. Finally, her fingertips found the switch – just as a hand shot out and gripped her leg.

Kay screamed, she couldn't help it, and thrashed her leg as though spiders were swarming up it.

‘Kaye, where are you? What's going on?’ Jaik shouted and Serena was screaming her name. Ravenous things were beginning to move outside. The concept of the floodlights cut through Kaye's panic and she flicked the switch. White seared into the room and through squinted eyes Kaye saw the bodies strewn across the carpet. Half of one was moving, swiping at her feet. It was a boy from the night watch except now his mouth frothed and his eyes were completely white. He had been torn across the waist and his entrails dragged horridly behind him. Kaye jerked her leg away and kicked out, heel cracking against his jaw bone. Then the sword was in her hand and she swiped it down and through the meat of his neck. He flopped motionless to the ground like the others.

There were gunshots cracking repeatedly and guttural screams just outside the window. The creatures were lumbering towards the control room and now Kaye could see them fully illuminated. Weeping boils, sagging skin, festering gashes and everywhere the same colourless eyes trained on her. Kaye side kicked the door closed and slid the bolt home just before a fist smashed through the window. Kaye backed up, dropped the sword and brought the bow up. She let an arrow fly and it cut clean through the glass and into a creature's forehead. Then there were eight arms cramming through the windows, swinging wildly like tentacles. An arrow shot through a sunken cheek bone. Another went through an eye socket. Kaye kept clear of the blood, pushing far back into the room. Bullets were raining down from Jaik and Serena on the catwalk. The bodies were piling up on the other side of the window but some rose again, riddled with arrows and bullet holes. Beside her, the door was thumping. Kaye eyed the bolt that held it there, straining against the wood. Her hand went for another arrow and she could feel there were only a few left.

‘I’m almost out!’ Panic made her voice break. Kaye sent one of my last razor tips through a jaw bone and followed it with one to the jugular. Her back was at the wall. There was a crash and wood chips exploded from the door as the bolt gave way and a creature barged through it. Its eyes locked on Kaye and it lurched forwards. She grasped the last arrow, placed it in the rest, but her fingers fumbled at the string and it fell away. Kaye saw the blood-tinged teeth of the creature, too close. Gangrenous arms stretched wide to embrace her. She dived under its outstretched arm, rolled and picked up the sword, then spun and cut through its torso. Before the body parts had even hit the ground she was sprinting through that door, dodging left as shots exploded overhead. There was a stampede behind her and bullets flew searing past her ears. She couldn’t look back. The ladder to the catwalk was a few strides away. But there was the bow in her left hand, the sword in her right, and no time to slow down. Kaye threw the sword up to the catwalk and simultaneously leapt for the ladder. Her shins smashed against the rungs and she started to haul herself up. Hands were snagging at her boots. There was a death grip on her right ankle. Kaye’s fingers were straining to hold on as they tried to drag her back down into a tangle of desperate limbs and teeth. Then Jaik and Serena had an arm each and pulled her up onto the catwalk, far away from the hot rancid breaths and clawing fingernails.

Kaye put her back against the cool wall and breathed great shuddering breaths. Serena was hugging her, smelling like clean sheets and sleep, and Kaye loved it. Kaye rolled her head to the other side where Jaik was still kneeling, looking furious.

‘That,’ he said, barley controlling himself, ‘was fucking stupid.’

Kaye waved a vague and exhausted hand, ‘Floodlights on.’

‘You’re an idiot!’ He snarled.

Serena had her arms wrapped tight around Kaye, who gave her a few pats. When Serena looked up through the chunks of her black fringe Kaye felt sick.

‘Sorry Serena, I thought it would be fine.’ She gave her a proper hug back.

Jaik got to his feet, leaned over the railing and shot each of the creatures down. One shot, one kill, and the steel was back in his eyes. He picked up Kaye’s sword and handed it to her. ‘You’re not supposed to throw around a sword like this.’ Then he walked away and went down the ladder. As Serena and Kaye sat there, sweat turning to ice on their necks, he double-checked each kill and put a bullet into every one of

their dead friends so they wouldn't have to die twice. The shots rang out, one by one as their breaths plumed out white in front of them and dissipated into the grey air.

'How did they even get in here?' Serena asked. 'The night watch is always quiet, everyone knows that.'

The rear courtyard had the best protection with high fences, good views and a gate that could only be operated from the control room. Only long-time members had a key to that room. Normally the team had so much warning from the trip wires that they could easily pick off parasitic strays from afar. Kaye had been doing it for weeks.

'I don't know. It doesn't make sense.'

Jaik came clanging up the ladder, 'I was told there was a small breach out front. There wasn't meant to be anything back here.' They looked across the silent courtyard, blood was now spidering across the concrete and filling up the cracks. 'They were really taken by surprise.' The sky was lightening, spreading hesitant fingers over the horizon and leaving the night behind.

'We should talk to Locke about it,' said Serena. 'He can figure out if there was a breach or something.'

Kaye pushed herself up, sore and stiff, and quickly circled her blade to flick the gore from it. She wiped it down and put it away. Jaik opened the door to the warehouse and Serena walked through. Before Kaye followed she looked back and saw their old training grounds, now awash with blood.