

## Chapter 38 Changing winds

Kate stood in the cold shower, scrubbing away the blood and sweat still sticking to her from the brutal fights in Grenndorf.

She turned off the water and grabbed the fresh towel she had prepared. *How long until we have to actually start washing. I guess we can just keep looting fresh clothes and towels in the foreseeable future*, she thought with a slight smile. *It would be nice to have some light in these rooms*. The small bathroom window didn't provide much. A small flashlight solved the problem for now.

Kate illuminated her pile of clothes, then put the torch away. It was quiet, even with her enhanced hearing. The voices from below were somewhat muffled, though she could still hear them well enough if she focused. Grey's hastened words as he described the skills and evolution options from his new support Class, the fast scribbling of Jon's handwriting as he documented everything that they had learned and seen.

She smiled to herself, despite everything. It felt grounding, she found. To stand in the dark and cold bathroom, no electricity in the home, no connection on her phone. There were dangerous beasts lurking in the wild now, but they were safe, at least in this moment, hidden behind a monument of old walls built for conflicts long past. And they had already proven that they were far from defenseless. She was tired from the day of fighting, but she was ready, for whatever the night would bring.

With hammer in hand and clothed in a fresh set of sturdy gear, she excused herself from the group downstairs, heading to bed with an offer to take whatever guard shift was needed. She knew they wouldn't want to wake her, but she knew just as well that they would, if she was needed.

Setting down her hammer next to one of the bedrolls, she climbed in with her boots on. Any thought on the hygiene or her comfort of sleeping in all the clothes irrelevant in the face of potential monster attacks during the night. She would be up and ready to fight, in mere moments. Her eyes took in the sleeping form of Logan. His breath was no longer ragged, his chest rising and falling in a slow pattern.

Kate listened to the river rushing past below the castle. Her body felt heavy, remnants of the battles she had fought, new magic flowing through her veins. She cuddled the blanket closer.

She woke to the sound of chirping birds. Distant. The sound of rushing water reminded her of where she was. As did the cold room, wind whistling through the few cracks within the walls. She found she had pushed away the blanket at some point. Kate sat up slowly and looked around the room. Grey and Ethan were still asleep, recovering from their intense trip to Grenndorf.

Kate yawned, rolling her shoulders before she got up. *Seems like a certain Paladin is well enough to walk around*, she thought with a smile. Hammer in hand, Kate opened the door and quietly closed it behind herself. She heard people talking, shuffling steps, mechanical clicking sounds, something cutting into flesh.

The last noise made her walk faster, Kate clicking with her tongue to get an idea of the armory

below. The perceived sight of someone standing above a table, blade in hand and cutting into a large wing made her calm down again.

*No monsters, she thought. Just Allison.*

The woman twitched when she saw Kate standing at the bottom of the stairs. Her shocked expression turned to scorn as her eyes narrowed. "Don't sneak up on me, you creep."

Kate smirked and stretched. It felt a little weird to walk around in the same clothes that she had slept in, but she knew the feeling would fade quickly. "Hushed Presence. Your movements become softer, all of your actions producing less sound in turn," Kate read, deliberately leaving out the last bit.

"Yes, and you know you have that skill. So announce yourself," Allison said before she refocused on the mangled yellow wing piece sat on the table before her. The hunting knife in her hand was covered in dark blood.

*Already forgot about me,* Kate thought as she watched the woman work. She looked a little like a butcher, moving the large monster wing before she placed deliberate cuts as if she had done so a thousand times before. She even wore an apron, granted one with floral designs plastered all over.

A few pieces of furniture had already been moved into the ground floor of the armory. Kate glanced to the open hatch of the storage cellar before she took a step outside.

Ash was still falling from the sky. Much less than on the day before. Still, a gray sheet covered the stone and dirt yard of the castle, the old towers and wall ramparts capped as if by snow. She touched her arms, seeing her breath in front of her.

The sky was gray, winds moving through the yard. "It's cold," she whispered. The trees peaked out beyond the walls, golden red autumn colors, despite the layer of ash clinging to the leaves. Kate felt warm herself, but the visible breath suggested something else. There was no heater nearby, the oven behind her cool just like the rest of the stone structure but she couldn't help but think it was too cold.

She went back inside and looked down into the cellar. "Coming down," she warned, a smile creeping up to her face before she simply jumped down the near three meter drop. Kate hardly felt the impact when she landed, her hammer still in hand as she looked at the stashed away loot they had gotten from Grenndorf.

The cellar was dimly lit with a small lantern standing on the large table at the center, a candle sitting inside.

Bert angled a flashlight at the rifle in Logan's hands, the old man glancing at Kate, grunting, and returning his attention to the other man.

"You're back up," Kate said. One of the long scoped rifles sat on the table, two pistols, a few magazines and ammo boxes, as well as several cans of pepper spray.

An open gun cleaning kit sat next to Logan, the man pulling back something on the smaller rifle in his hands, a click resounding before he removed the magazine. He set it down and pulled back another bit, angled the rifle and checked something, before he set it down again on the table.

"You were busy, while I was out," he said.

Kate didn't miss the conflicted look on his face. "Police station in Grenndorf," she said. "I'm glad you're better."

“Those burns. I shouldn’t have survived them,” he said. A fact. They both knew it.

Kate shrugged. “The rules seem to have changed. I’m still here too,” she said. “What do you think? Did we get the right stuff?”

Logan sighed, not meeting her eyes. He turned to the table and pointed at the rifle he’d just held. “Styr AUG five point five six, thirty round magazines. A solid rifle, all six are in good shape. Three thousand rounds,” he said and pointed at the pistols. “Glock seventeen, nine millimeter, seventeen rounds per magazine. Over five thousand rounds and eight pistols.”

He pointed at the scoped rifle. “SSG sixty nine. Seven point six two, five rounds per magazine. Two hundred rounds and two rifles.” He paused, remaining silent for a few seconds.

“A damn fucking arsenal of war,” Bert said before he pointed his light at Kate. “Young lass, do you have any idea how many laws you broke by taking all of this chunk here?”

Kate smiled. “Better in our hands, than the undead.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Logan said as he started to put away the rifles. “I will instruct you, and everyone else. Until then, all of this stays here.”

“I’m quite happy with my hammer, I’ll be honest,” Kate said. She didn’t want to even touch a gun but she understood the benefit they could bring. With monsters lurking in the forests, they didn’t really have a choice.

“The crossbows and our other weapons are the better options anyways. A single gunshot could be heard more than a kilometer away. I don’t want to find out how many creatures are hiding in that range,” Logan said.

“Not that anything we’ve seen could stand a chance against what we have here,” Bert said.

“We don’t know that. Kate survives sword strikes and heals from the monsters she kills. We know our hammers and swords can kill orcs and goblins, so I assume the guns will do short work of them, but we simply won’t know until it comes to that,” Logan said. “It’s good there was no attack last night,” he added. “But we should instruct everyone as fast as possible.”

“What time is it?” Kate asked.

Bert took a clock out of his pocket. “Eight thirty.”

“Suppose we can start right now. What is everyone doing?” Kate asked.

“Cooking, moving around furniture, Allison is processing materials,” Logan said. “You brought back the heart of a Wyvern?”

“Grey said it could be important,” Kate said. “I guess from a folklore or fantasy perspective, it makes some sense. Dragon hearts and all.”

“What are you going to do, eat it?” Logan asked, shaking his head slightly as he looked at her.

Kate shrugged. “Hey, I just carved it out and brought it back. For all I care, it can go into the bins.”

“Ridiculous,” Logan murmured to himself, less accusatory and more just confused it seemed.

“You feel up for this?” she asked the man.

He looked at her and smiled ever so slightly. “No. But I don’t think I have a choice.”

“Suppose you’re right. Let me know if you want to talk about it. Whenever,” Kate said.

Logan gave her a light nod before she stepped under the trap door and activated Reaper Jump. She rushed up and came out just beyond the top, catching herself with her one free hand and jumping out with a single pull.

Allison twitched again. “Again. We get it, you’re the fast, silent hunter who can jump high and is super strong. Well done.”

“I forgot, sorry,” Kate said, a grin on her face. *I AM the fast silent hunter who can jump really high and is super strong.*

“I can see your grin, you know,” Allison said, already back to her bloody work.

“Sure,” Kate said, stepping outside again as she looked for Wyverns. She stopped and closed her eyes, listening to the surrounding forests for a minute. When she was satisfied, she went over to Bert’s house, finding the Veyer family packing various crates with games, books, clothes, sheets, and other utensils. “I guess we’re moving.”

“Kate, you’re awake. How do you feel?” Melusine asked.

“Good,” she said and walked over to the gas cooker standing on the kitchen shelf. Filling the small cup with water, she turned on the heat and grabbed a mug.

“I’m glad to hear that. Then you can move the couch and armchair after you’ve had your coffee. With Logan, or alone, if you can,” the healer said, a sweet smile on her face.

Kate raised a brow at her and crossed her arms. “Sure thing, boss.”

“The TV and fridge will be useless, though if we get a generator at some point, the latter will be invaluable,” Jon murmured, barely audible.

Kate glanced down at Celeste, the girl staring up at her with both hands in her pockets. “Do you need something?” Kate asked.

The girl shrugged.

“Are you bored?” Kate asked, preparing the french press with ground coffee beans.

Celeste seemed to consider for a moment, looking at the french press before she glanced back to Kate. “I’m bored.”

“Want to hold the hammer?” Kate asked, looking at the steel tool.

The girl’s eyes lit up, her hands moving out of her pockets as if compelled by a greater will.

Kate placed the weapon in her open arms and smiled when the girl stumbled, trying to catch the weight. She caught the handle and made sure Celeste didn’t hit her head.

The girl giggled. “It’s so heavy! How can you lift it with one hand?”

“I’m grown up. You’ll be able to do the same one day,” Kate said, the smell of brewing coffee spreading through the living room.

“If you eat your vegetables,” Eloise said from the side, having heard the conversation. She smiled, then glanced at Kate, blushing slightly before she looked away and returning to her tasks.

“That’s right, if you eat your vegetables,” Kate said and booped the girl on her nose, raising the

hammer out of her hands before she set it down against the counter. Her attention shifted to the coffee, watching the steaming black liquid in the glass container. Another sixty seconds passed before she felt the brew was ready. She pushed down the filter, watching it hit the surface before it caught the bits and pieces of coarse coffee.

Filling her mug, she turned back around and sighed, closing her eyes as she tuned out most of the noise from the others, breathing in the smell. *No tv, no internet, no restaurants, or cinema, but I still have you.*

Kate finished drinking her coffee and started moving the furniture as instructed by Melusine. She didn't need Logan's help, easily dragging the large sofa and armchair outside before placing them in the armory. Allison's workshop was moved to the old barracks, Kate moving out a few of the beds so the woman had space. All of the monster bits were kept in an ice cream crate previously used to supply tourists with some reprieve from the summer heat. Of course there was no cooling without power, but Allison apparently didn't plan to keep anything there for long.

Kate kept her eyes out for Wyverns and her ears for anything that would approach the castle, finding her battle axe before she got to work on the beds removed from the barracks. They needed firewood for the oven after all, and by now, she wasn't the only one who had commented on the cold.

Grey and Ethan woke at ten, the two joining Jon and Bert in cleaning out and testing the oven. There was some wood left, in addition to what Kate was producing from the beds with her battle ax. She knew they needed a lot more if the temperature remained the same in the autumn months, and of course for the coming winter.

Eloise and Melusine were building a fireplace in the dirt section of the yard. Rather rudimentary, with various old bits and pieces of stone and metal. There was certainly enough lying around.

The smoke would be visible from a long way off, but they considered it a necessary evil. Heating and warm food was essential after all, and at least for now, another plume or two would not make much of a difference in the Maar Valley.

Jon called them together soon after, Eloise already preparing for lunch. She had found a large pot that fit onto the makeshift fireplace.

"It's been a week," the man started. His graying hair had lost the well-kept look from when Kate had first seen him. His eyes were focused, glancing at each of them in turn. "You've all been through a lot, and I'm afraid we're not done either."

"We're somewhat safe here for now, but the broader situation remains unclear. We don't know if the military is coming to help, we don't know how the larger cities are doing, and we don't know much about the monsters out there. For now, I believe it's important that we prepare for anything. We need to gather as much supplies as we can. We need to reinforce this castle, and make it safer, for us and any others who might have survived out there. Kate, Grey, Ethan, and Logan, how are you feeling today? How do you feel in general, in regards to the magic you now have, and in regards to going out there, facing unknown dangers."

"We have to do what is necessary," Logan said. "I will do my part."

“As will I,” Kate said, giving the armored man a look.

“We’re g... growing fast,” Grey spoke up. “If we keep fighting...”

“We’ll have a better chance of survival,” Ethan said. “And getting sick fucking spells.”

Kate grinned slightly, more so at the look on Allison’s face. A full face eye roll.

“Classes can be leveled without fighting as well,” Jon said. “If it gets too much...”

None of the four spoke up.

“Then your next target will be Kahrsdorf. We need generators, small or large, fuel of any kind, food, though our stocks are enough for a few months already,” Jon said and glanced at Eloise.

“Three months, and three more if we start to ration after that,” Eloise said, her arms crossed.

Jon glanced to Melusine.

“Medical supplies are not a priority anymore. Not anything that can be found in the surrounding villages and small towns,” the woman said.

“You know what to look for then. We have a lot covered already. Don’t be reckless, and don’t risk your lives for mere supplies,” Jon said before he looked at the man in medieval armor. “Logan.”

Logan sighed before he reached into a bag below his chair. He took out a rifle. “Kate, Grey, and Ethan brought guns and ammunition back from the Grenndorf police station. As much as I dislike the idea of arming everyone here with these tools, it may very well be the difference between life and death.”

He stood up, pointing the rifle towards the ground. “First and foremost. These are not toys. These are tools made to kill. You must treat them with the necessary respect. Before you so much as touch these weapons, you have to understand how they work. The following rules, you’ll have to know by heart. And I don’t want you to just recite them, I want you to ingrain them.

“First. Every gun is treated as if it is loaded with live ammunition. At all times. Second. You never aim a gun at something you do not intend to shoot. Third...”

Kate listened to the man as he went on to explain various rules, then started to talk about the various parts of the rifle, how to load it, how to check the chamber, and how to release the safety. She was glad they had someone who understood the tools they had gotten, but while he was absorbed in his explanations, she resented the fact that he had to hold a rifle in his hands, had to fight and kill monsters.

Her blood stirred. People massacred in Keilberg. Falstadt devastated. Orcs and undead roaming the valley. Her valley. She would hunt them down. One by one. Until they paid for what they had done, for what they continued to do.