

## Chapter 45 Wait

Kate cleared out half the snow around the truck and trailer before she started to feel her movements grow more strained, her breaths more ragged. She felt the cold winds start to push on her and wondered how far she would already be with her spells active. Her headlamp illuminated the immediate surroundings. The visibility was horrible but slightly better than on their trip back the day prior.

She breathed in and shuddered, snow falling from her covered jacket and head with the movement. She knew she could go on but decided not to. She couldn't exhaust herself fully, not if there could always be monsters attacking in the dense blizzard. She was very aware of the lower impact the walls would have with snow reaching to her shoulders already. It would still be an obstacle to most creatures they had seen so far but a less imposing one.

*Might also hide the castle, I suppose.*

Grey stood a few meters away, face covered with balaclava, winter hat, and skiing glasses, one hand holding the sheath of his katana and the other one resting on the handle. His headlamp moved her way when she stopped.

Kate wanted to say something. He looked capable. Compared to the scared and skittery teen she had met in the forest a week past. "I'll switch with Logan," she said as she walked past, then stopped right behind him. "The sword suits you. I guess the tutorials paid off."

He didn't reply and she couldn't hear his heartbeat or step in the storm to gauge a reaction.

They reached the door, finding Ethan waiting right beside the slightly ajar entrance.

"They return. Hasn't been long," he said.

"It has if you're the one shoveling," Allison said when they entered. She was sitting on the couch with several blankets covering her. "Shoveling sucks," she added, her teeth chattering as she cuddled the blankets closer. "And you don't close the fucking door. The stove does nothing."

"It's warmer in here already," Kate said.

Celeste popped out from the pile of blankets. "Can I shovel too?"

Kate smiled at the thought of Celeste trying to move snow with the large shovel.

"We have several brutes for that," Melusine said in a sweet tone, the woman standing next to Eloise as the girl prepared the promised mana broth.

"Can I get that bottle now?" Allison said.

"First the food, for those working," Melusine said.

"You're all immune to the cold! I don't have a Class!"

"I don't have one either," Celeste pointed out.

"Get warm in the blankets," Jon said, looking up from his book.

Logan walked over. "I'll get a round in before we eat. How's the cold, Grey?"

"I'm fine," Grey said.

Kate could tell his voice sounded a little different but she couldn't quite tell in what way. *Embarrassed? Proud?* She knew that people could react to a compliment in a lot of different ways, no matter the intention. As much as it had irritated her to see him adjust so easily to everything that was happening around them, she supposed they couldn't exactly change the state of things.

*He may as well gain some self confidence from his sword wielding abilities and magic.*

She smiled, seeing him leave with Logan. *I wonder what his dad is like. If he's still out there. He only mentioned his mom.*

"You're making the floor wet," Allison said.

Kate looked down. "The snow isn't really melting."

Allison shuddered.

"Chuck some more wood in there," she said.

"Close the door," Allison said.

"Can't hear if monsters are attacking if the door is closed," Kate said and walked over, throwing in some wood herself.

"Thanks," Allison grumbled.

She heard Bert snoring from above. *I wonder what kind of Class he would get.*

She soon started smelling the broth that Eloise was cooking up. Not just as a measure to imbue them with magical food. No. She could tell the girl cared. She sat down next to Allison and stretched.

Logan and Grey soon returned, joining the others in eating a bowl of vegetable soup.

Kate savored every spoonful, the door now closed as they ate. She looked at the section of her status showing food items and found the vegetable soup as soon as she was done eating.

***Equipment:***

***Torso:*** -

***Legs:*** -

***Trinket:*** -

***Food: Common Vegetable Soup +10 stamina regeneration. Duration 6 hours***

*Same bonus as the cheese sandwich we had yesterday. But lasting three times as long.*

"We still don't know what the plus ten really means," Grey murmured.

"Ten more stamina," Ethan said and smiled. "Ten more than before, which is good."

Kate didn't disagree.

"How often can you cook like that for everyone?" Logan asked.

Eloise sat resting on a chair. Her cheeks were flushed, sweat on her brow. "I can feel the headache."

"Which means she's close to spent," Melusine added. "I tested around a bit while Logan was recovering from his burns. Around three to five hours after the headaches start, I no longer feel any mental exhaustion. But when I use magic again after that time period, it feels strained and aching. The power is there but I can tell I'm pushing it. This feeling faded again the next day."

"You confirmed it then? Repercussions for using too much mana, too quickly," Grey said.

"Yes. To an extent," Melusine said.

"So just once per day. And more if it's really important," Eloise said, giving her mother an insecure look.

"That would be best, I think," Melusine said and smiled. "Your skills will grow and you'll require less mana to use your magic. So take your time."

The girl smiled. "I will."

"Now all we need is a crafter," Grey said.

Kate glanced over to Allison.

"Yes. Yes. I'm working on it," she said, drinking from a cup of hot coffee.

"Thanks for the meal," Kate said and stood up. "I'll get back to shoveling," she added and rolled her shoulders.

"Done at seven," Melusine reminded.

"Yes, ma'am," Kate said and gave Ethan a look, then winked.

He grinned and raised his cup in toast.

*The hierarchy of woman.*

She went outside with Grey, finding the truck and trailer near cleared already. Finishing the job, she informed the others and continued with a path towards the armory. She tuned out the storm and winds, focused fully on the task of shoveling as the others started to unload and store away what they had taken from the farm.

Kate rested when she started to feel winded once again but this time, she felt ready to work again much faster. A few more cycles of shoveling coupled with what the others experienced from unloading the trailer suggested a recovery time nearly double of what they had before. The impact was lesser for those with a higher Endurance stat, likely because they had a higher total stamina number and recovery already.

Kate was done clearing paths to the barracks, both watchtowers, and even one to Bert's home. With the continuous snowfall, she knew she would probably have to do the same work again the next day but she didn't exactly mind. The paths allowed Allison to set up in the barracks with one of the generators, herself decked out in winter clothes and a hot water bottle she went back to get reheated, the spell far less costly to Eloise than enhancing a meal with magic.

"Here we go," Melusine mused when she had finished hanging up a set of fairy lights in the armory. Luckily, they were battery powered.

Soft electronic music played from a bluetooth speaker as Kate rested on the sofa. She looked at the alarm clock sitting on a nearby chest of drawers and frowned. It was seven. Which meant they were no longer supposed to work.

*Necessary, she thought. And annoying.*

And still, she found that the time limit imposed by their resident healer made it easier for her to let go and sit back. She sighed.

*I hope there's no monster attack tonight.* The music and lights made her almost forget everything that had happened. Everything that was still going on out there.

The others had finished unloading the trailer, the armory cellar busy as they categorized and stored everything away.

Jon had been right. They really had gained a foothold here.

*Now to hold it and reinforce it. Then go out there and find survivors. Fight and kill the monsters still around.* Kate felt her blood stir when she thought of the battles yet to come.

“Who takes first shift?” Logan asked when his head popped out from the cellar hatch.

“We will stay in here,” Kate said. “But I’m fine to sit here and listen.”

And so she sat and listened.

She still tuned out the ongoing storm and river, the music turned off by now as the fire cracked in their massive wood stove. It had already gotten warm and as the hours went by, Kate refueled the flames with wood from their supply. It wouldn’t last much more than a week but she supposed she could get wood once the storm settled a little. She hoped it wouldn’t continue in the same manner, pushing aside that fear for now. She couldn’t change the weather after all.

Jon soon took over and she went up into the armory to catch some sleep herself.

Hammer by her side, Kate drifted off into sleep. For once it was warm and she wasn’t entirely spent, injured, and exhausted.

*One day at a time,* she thought, slowing her breathing as she focused on the warm fairy lights on the walls, pushing away the images of undead, orcs, and the burnt down Falstadt.

Kate woke with a start, taking in a sharp breath when she blinked her eyes and turned onto her back. She heard Melusine and Eloise talking below, heard the harsh winds outside, and she heard someone tinker with something made of metal. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. “What time is it?”

Logan sat nearby with one of the rifles, some bits missing from the weapon. “Almost noon. Thought we’d let you sleep.”

Kate looked around. She saw Bert and Ethan still asleep as well. “What about you?”

Logan pushed a metal tube into the weapon and turned it. Something clicked. He glanced at her.

She found the look in his eyes guarded.

He shook his head. “Couldn’t sleep.”

She looked at him and nodded.

They were quiet for a long moment.

“Weather still fucked?” she asked finally.

“Yes. We cleared the paths again. Thought about covering the paths but that might cause problems too,” he said.

“Right. I’ll get some coffee and fresh air. Do you need anything?” Kate asked.

“Thanks. I’m alright,” Logan said.

Kate went downstairs and caught Eloise leaving with Jon standing at the door. She heard the girl crying.

Melusine sighed and sat back against the table. She looked up when Kate joined them.

“What’s that about?”

“Her boyfriend,” Celeste said, the girl standing behind the couch. She rocked up and down the soft furniture before she jumped and rolled onto the other side, giggling to herself. “Boyfriend boyfriend boyfriend.” She rolled onto her side and made plopping sounds with her mouth.

“She shouldn’t go out there alone,” Kate said.

Jon had a crossbow in his hand and looked out from the open door. “Grey went with her. Besides, she’s just going over to Allison.” He closed the door again and sighed. “We haven’t seen a monster since this storm started.”

Melusine motioned to the coffee and sandwiches.

Kate obliged. “What’s that about a boyfriend?”

Melusine sighed. “One of those dating app thingies. She had been writing with a boy for a few weeks.”

“Didn’t tell us about it until today,” Jon said.

“Because you would react exactly like this,” Melusine said. “Let her experience things.”

“She’s my daughter,” he said.

“Our daughter,” Melusine said. “And she’s an adult.”

“She never dated?” Kate asked, pouring herself a cup of coffee. It was steaming.

“Just a few one time things. I don’t think she was particularly interested before,” Melusine said, giving Jon a look.

“No need to blame me,” he said and sighed. “I’ll go talk to her.”

“I think talking to her father is the last thing she wants to do right now,” Melusine said.

“Did anything happen other than her telling you about it?” Kate asked.

“She’s been worried. With the internet not working,” Melusine said.

“Right,” Kate said and sipped from her coffee. She supposed now that they had some of the basics covered, other concerns would become relevant again. *Dating apps*. She blinked her eyes, glad that the girl had chosen to talk to Allison instead of her.

“Slept well?” Melusine asked.

“I did actually,” Kate said and glanced at Jon. “Any plans for today?”

He looked her way and sighed. “Wait out the storm.”

“Wait out the storm,” Kate said.

She certainly empathized with his sentiment. There was so much to be done. So much they could work on but going out into a blizzard was suicide, even without monsters out there. When it had felt nice to be inside and warm the prior evening, now she already felt stuck.

Kate smiled to herself. *Dating apps and warmth. I suppose our priorities really do change quickly.*

“I’ll check the radios,” she said.

“I did that five minutes ago,” Jon murmured.

She heard him but didn’t care. She just wanted to feel like she was doing something.

She liked doing. She didn’t like waiting.

The day passed slowly. Games and music. Jon and Celeste even started singing in the late afternoon. Eloise returned with Allison after a while and started cooking.

And Kate tried to be in the moment. She tried to appreciate the safety that they had, tried to recognize the comfort. But today, she found it difficult. The longer she stayed put, the more she thought of Falstadt, the dead, those still out there, those without heat, without guns, or magic. At least when she had worked as a firefighter, they more or less knew what was going on. Emergency lines and alarms, cars and helicopters to get to places fast.

Now, she didn’t even know if anyone out there was still alive.

And her magic didn’t help. At first it had felt strange to have it. Overwhelming and unwanted. The more she had fought with it, the more she had started to accept it but now it felt like a weight. Knowing that she could make a difference with her newfound powers, and being stuck inside because of a storm.

At one point she found herself pacing, trying a few breathing exercises, and finally she joined a card game to distract herself. It did somewhat work but this night, she didn’t sleep as well as the last, waking up several times.

When she last woke up, she no longer heard the strong winds that had surrounded their castle for the past few days.

**‘ding’ *Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 14***

The noise and subsequent message in the corner of her vision reminded her of the state of things. She groaned and turned to the side but she knew that trying to sleep again was futile.

So instead, she got up, grabbed her hammer, and went downstairs. She found the crackling sounds of fire. And Grey sitting on a chair facing the armory entrance.

He glanced her way for a moment, then quickly back to the door.

“Anything show up?” Kate asked.

He shook his head.

She checked the coffee can but what remained was cold.

“The winds have changed,” he said.

Kate grabbed one of the sandwiches, then put it back. She wasn’t hungry. “They’re not as loud.”

“The storm moved past,” he said. “Westwards.”

“You can tell the direction in which the storm moved?”

He opened and closed his mouth, then gulped. “I... I mean. I’m not sure.”

She smiled and walked over to the couch, sitting down with her hammer in hand.

They were silent for some time, the crackling fire the only noise in the room. Kate heard muffled snoring from above and through the wooden door. And she heard the Willow river.

*No birds*, she thought, wondering if they had fled the storm. Or if they died within.

“D... do you think I’m n... normal?” Grey asked.

Kate glanced his way and saw his eyes focused on the ground. She felt tired. “What do you mean by that? Why wouldn’t you be?”

“The p... the people who... died. In Keilberg,” he said and gulped. “In Keilberg, Grenndorf, Falstadt. I saw all that. But I was so happy when I got the status screen.”

Kate listened and thought about it for some time. She wondered if he had cared about others before all this happened. She wondered if he cared about them. But in the end, she thought his question wasn’t really about all that. Not about the status screen or even empathy.

She had felt lonely before. This felt like that.

“Does it bother you?” she asked. “Feeling like you’re not normal?”

He didn’t answer for some time.

“It does,” he finally said.

“What about it bothers you?” She laid onto her side.

“I w... was always awkward,” he said and glanced her way as if to check how she reacted. “I didn’t have many friends. And people were... mean. I t... I thought that now... with all of this m... magic, the numbers and system,” he said and sobbed. He took in a few rasping breaths before he spoke. “I thought it would be different.”

Kate sighed and stood up. She walked over and hugged the sitting man. “It’s alright. Let it out.”

She let go when he had calmed somewhat. “Better?”

He nodded.

“For starters, I don’t think you’re abnormal,” she said. “I don’t know what happened in your past but I’ve felt lonely before. Lonely, weird, abnormal. I think we all look for connection and it hurts when you try to find it and fail or when other people hurt you.” Kate took a step back and held out her fist. “We fought together, you know,” she said and smiled. “That means you’re not just my friend but a fellow fighter.”

Grey glanced up at her.

“What you feel won’t just go away. It hasn’t gone away with the system and it hasn’t gone away with everyone here relying on you, trusting you, and I’m sure it won’t just go away even with us getting to know you. But it will grow weaker. With time. And with your efforts. So what do you want to do?”

“W... what if I... what if I just want to run away?” he asked.

Kate smiled. “I get that. It makes a lot of sense. You don’t have to worry about anyone. You won’t feel uncomfortable anymore. You can just go out there and kill monsters, level up, find better equipment. You’d be unstoppable in no time, I’m sure.”

He gulped.

“So why not?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said and moved his fist close to his mouth. “A p... part of me wants to go and another part wants to stay.”

“Now that. That is what I suggest you think about. And until you have an answer, why not give it a shot, fellow fighter,” she said and smiled, nodding towards her fist.

He grinned and tapped it with his, eyes going to the door as his grin vanished. “Something is coming.”

Kate heard it then as well. Faint growls. Muffled and distant but she couldn’t tell how far due to the door. “Go wake the others. And prepare to fight.” She gave him a smile and found him smiling back.