

Chapter 5 Cooperation

Kate had her eyes closed. Tears still flowed as she occasionally twitched. Her jaw felt weird from the pressure she had put onto the wood.

"Is she gonna make it?" a male voice asked in a whispering tone.

"I made it worse, but the piece is out. And the bleeding already stopped. She'll make it. But we should give her some space," Melusine said quietly. "I'll go make her some coffee. Eloise, just try to be quiet while you're here."

"Coffee?" the man asked as he followed her out.

Yes, Kate thought, quietly crying to herself. She opened her eyes wide. *Wait. She doesn't know how I drink it!*

Her eyes landed on a young woman sitting on one of the bedrolls. The girl hugged her knees and stared back. She wore yoga pants and a black jacket, blonde hair shoved into a wild bun on her head. Her eyes were bloodshot, her mouth quivering slightly. She looked to be in her late teens.

Neither of them said anything for a while, both with tears in their eyes.

"You made that broth, didn't you?" Kate asked finally, breaking the silence as she slowly wiped at her eyes, the movement creating a stinging sensation from her numb leg. "It was really nice."

The girl didn't respond but she hugged her knees a little closer.

"You're Eloise, right?" Kate asked.

She reacted to the name and nodded lightly.

"I'm Kate. Nice to meet you. Was that a recipe you came up with yourself? Or did you try out and alter something?" she said. Kate knew the last thing the girl wanted to hear was anything goblin related, but perhaps the same was true for herself. She smiled, unsure when she had last talked to someone traumatized while having to deal with some or all of it herself.

"I learned it last year, but Geoff thought it didn't fit into the menu," Eloise said.

"You think it would've fit?" Kate asked.

The girl shrugged. "He has more experience."

Kate chuckled, groaning when she moved a little too much. She ignored the scared look on the girl's face and continued talking. "I didn't ask about Geoff. I asked about your opinion. I really enjoyed it, would totally order that in a restaurant."

Eloise smiled at that before her face went slack again. "I don't know," she whispered. "I heard you... screaming."

Oh no.

"Melusine removed an arrow from my leg," Kate said.

"That must hurt really bad," Eloise said, her eyes going wide. "I'm sorry... I didn't..."

"It does. But it's going to get better now," Kate said. "Didn't expect to be shot with an arrow," she murmured to herself.

The girl giggled, covering her mouth when Kate looked her way again.

She giggled too, lying back and closing her eyes.

"Delirious, I hope this room is getting enough air," came Melusine's voice as she returned.

Kate was brought out of her tired state by a familiar scent. It managed to briefly push through the blood and the sterile smell of antibacterials.

"How are you two?" the woman asked, handing a steaming cup to Kate, and another to Eloise. "I can get milk and sugar too if you like."

"No," Kate whispered, taking the darkness with joyous glee. She took a deep breath and started drinking.

"You'll burn yourself," Melusine remarked.

"Oh, that's what this feeling of heat is," Kate said, looking up sheepishly. The coffee wasn't bad. It wasn't great either.

"Grey has been asking about you, he seems worried," Melusine said. "But he didn't want to come bother you."

"He'll get to see my beautiful face again in no time. I have a feeling we'll be spending the foreseeable future together," she said.

"I'm sure the military will come soon enough," Melusine said, giving her a look before she moved her eyes in the direction of Eloise.

"Sure," Kate said. "But it might take a while because Keilberg is so small."

The woman smiled. "Nothing new on the radio. I saw a pair of crutches in the ticket shed, so you can use those tomorrow. If you're feeling better, I can get the others."

"For what exactly?" Kate asked.

"To discuss. Jon is already planning things but your experience will be valuable," Melusine said.

"I don't need more time," Kate said. She'd rather focus on what could be done than sit and wait while everything burned down around her. "You can get them now."

Melusine gave her a look but ultimately nodded. She left without another word.

"Th... thank... you," Eloise whispered, warming herself on the cup of coffee she held in her hands.

"You already thanked me with that broth," Kate answered. She carefully moved to sit up. It took a few attempts as she tried not to move her wounded parts too much. "What time is it?"

The girl got a phone out of her pocket and checked it. "Two thirty."

"Still no internet?" Kate asked.

She shook her head.

Steps resounded from below, a few people entering the building and coming up. The first to join them was Melusine, holding the hand of a girl she led into the room. The woman had a gentle smile

on her face as she sat down next to Eloise, hugging her daughters close.

Kate thought the second girl to be between twelve and fourteen. Deep brown eyes looked at her with a curious expression. She hadn't said a word so far and simply sat down with her mother. Compared to Eloise, the girl seemed mostly calm, unbothered by or simply not quite comprehending the situation in its entirety.

Next followed three men. The first was Grey, his black hair a little more greasy now. He wore a leather jacket over his hoodie, one that didn't exactly fit very well. Neither in style nor size. He held on to his blade, the weapon sheathed now in a scabbard that seemed to be a bit too broad.

Behind him entered who Kate assumed to be Jonathan, Melusine's husband. He was quite tall at about a meter ninety, with broad shoulders and mid-length hair, well-cut and graying. His build and posture suggested more or less regular visits to the gym but she could tell he wasn't someone who worked with their body. His ice-like blue eyes glanced at his family, a warm smile sent to Melusine before he shifted his attention to Kate. He looked calculating and scared, but most of all just tired.

Kate had seen plenty of men trying to keep their shit together when their houses had burnt down, or worse. Jonathan was doing a commendable job, little of his stress showing despite the situation. She even wondered if he worked in a similar field as Melusine, but comparing the two she still felt like he seemed a little more lost.

The last to join them was a scowling old man. He walked with a limp in his right leg, his back bent a little. He breathed hard after the one set of stairs, an actual double barreled shotgun held in his hands. His nose seemed a little crooked and the hair that remained on his head was thin and gray. He closed the door behind them.

Jonathan grabbed a nearby chair and set it down next to the old man.

Bert gave him a glare and refused to sit down.

Grey had found a corner and shrunk away.

"There's no reason to be that stubborn," Jonathan said in a smooth voice and walked over the bedrolls and to one of the glass display cases. He turned around and rested his back on it.

"I'm not your grandfather, boy," Bert said. "Now why did we have to come here? Much better to be out in the fresh air." He gave Kate a glare.

"You remember the woman who saved us with her intervention last night? Kate is a firefighter from Falstadt. This situation demands that we discuss our priorities, and frankly, I'm not well versed in this outlandish scenario," Jonathan said and gave her a smile. It didn't reach his eyes.

Bert took a step forward and gave her another look. His weary eyes looked downright dim. "Ah, city folk. No need to discuss anything with a firefighter, all they do is come up here and ramble on about safety codes and fire escapes."

Kate sipped from her coffee, closing her eyes for a moment before she addressed the old man. "I live in Keilberg. And if you're too old to keep this place up to regulation, maybe you should finally retire." She had never met the man, nor did she care about the state of fire safety in this castle prior to today. But she knew his type. He would come around.

He growled, one side of his mouth going up in a wicked grin. "Keilberg. Shit village, not what it used to be. I'm more than capable of keeping this place running, girl."

Jonathan closed his eyes and put a hand to his brow.

“Then I’m sure you have an inventory of all the food and weaponry ready and with you? Escape routes and ways to enter and leave the castle, access to water, and a map with all the hiking paths, roads, and storage or hunting sheds in the vicinity?” Kate asked. “I also hope you’re not too senile to hold and use that rifle. I’ve already been stabbed, I don’t need to be shot too.”

He smirked now, cackling a few times. “Maybe Keilberg got out one or two capable youths after all. I have what you asked for, in my house.”

“The one next door,” Jonathan informed.

“This place is more defensible. We should have it here,” Kate said. “Or does anybody disagree?”

“I suggested that already,” Jonathan said, giving him a look.

The old man scowled. “We’ll have it here then,” he muttered.

Jonathan gave them all a look. “I’m glad you survived, Kate. And I know you’re not the only one who would need a few days of rest after everything that happened.”

He sighed and glanced at his daughters. “But it doesn’t look like this situation is going to get resolved anytime soon. We need to prepare what we can to deal with it all. I’ve made a few plans already and discussed some things with Bert and Grey, but let’s make sure we make the most reasonable decisions. With everyone here.”

Nobody seemed to object to that, exchanging a few glances to gauge each other.

Jonathan continued.

“Yesterday, in the early afternoon, monsters started to appear in and around Keilberg. Based on the radio broadcasts, gun shots, and military jets, we have to assume this is a country wide thing. Maybe even worldwide, as Grey suggests,” he said and gave the man a nod.

“The monsters don’t seem willing to negotiate... despite their obvious intelligence, which leaves us few options to deal with them,” he said and looked at Kate, breaking the eye contact again quickly.

“We already lost people. I think our goal should be to protect the ones that are still here. If we work together, we should have a better chance of survival, but I completely understand if you want to leave, to find your loved ones.

“This castle should provide far superior shelter than most everything else in a few hundred kilometers. I think it would be reasonable to stay for at least a while. Until we better understand what is happening,” he said and looked at everyone again.

“The best case scenario is the military clearing out the creatures that now walk through these forests,” he said and paused. “Anything to add so far?”

“We’ll need food and water,” Kate said.

“Enough food here to last a few weeks,” Bert grumbled. “Water we have.”

“For now,” Kate said. “If this is a widespread thing, it’s possible that we won’t have working water lines in about two to four weeks. We should think about a way to get water from the Willow while staying behind the walls.”

“Bucket and rope,” Bert said.

“Do you have that much rope?” Kate asked.

He shrugged. "Yeah."

"We'll have to treat the water too. Keep an eye out for water treatment tablets or pumps. We can't have everyone get sick," Melusine added.

"Right. There's a wood stove below. Is that cleaned out and usable?" Kate asked.

"It's been usable for hundreds of years," Bert said.

"Yes. But is it usable now?" Kate repeated.

"Gotta clear it out. Can't reach the back, not with my knee," the old man answered.

Jonathan nodded. "Grey, you can help him later. The nights are going to get colder, Kate is right. How much wood do we have to burn?"

"Not much," Bert supplied.

"We'll consider that later then. Kate, how long can we expect the heating to work? Same with electricity," the man asked.

"Hard to say. Depends on what kind of heaters there are, where the electricity comes from, who takes care of those facilities. I think we should prepare for the worst. Stacking up on wood will be a priority nearly as important as food. Without an internet connection and a wood stove here, we won't need a lot of electricity. Light sources will become an issue so we should figure out how to make torches and get all the batteries and flashlights we can," Kate said.

"But we looked through everything here already," Eloise murmured.

Jonathan gave Kate a look.

"We will have to go out for supplies," Kate said. "Who thinks themselves capable of fighting?"

Grey looked back at her, as did Bert, Melusine, and the little girl in her arms.

Jonathan looked to the floor, grinding his teeth.

"Bert knows the castle the best, and is frankly too old to be of any help outside. No offense," Kate said.

He just grumbled something about the old days and of course lacking respect.

"I can... f fight," Grey said in a near inaudible tone.

"You'll come with me then, once I'm better. Jonathan, what did you do before?" Kate asked.

The man looked up again. "I...", he started and shook his head. "I'm the owner of an architecture office."

"Do you feel capable of taking on the organization of everything here?" Kate asked. "We have a group of people with different talents, resources, and knowledge. Efficiently using all that will be the key to our survival."

He looked into her eyes, seeming vulnerable for a split second before he steeled himself. He gave her a grateful look and smiled ever so slightly. "If everyone agrees to that."

"I won't take orders from a city brat like you," Bert muttered.

"It doesn't matter where I'm from," Jonathan said. "I've organized projects involving hundreds of

people from different companies and contractors. If you think yourself more capable of doing this, we can have a vote.”

Kate gave Bert a nod.

He grumbled and finally sat down on the previously offered chair.

Jonathan took a deep breath. “Alright. Alright. Eloise, you’ll be the cook for everyone. I want you to organize and store all the food we have in the cellar of this building. Categorize everything and plan to ration. The people who will go out need to get the most food. Everyone else, just as much as we need. Can you do that?”

The girl looked at Melusine and gulped. She wiped away at her eyes and glanced at Kate, a light smile coming to her face. “Yes.”

“That’s Eloise for you. Melusine dear, choose a defensible place in the castle and set up a field hospital of sorts. Make a list of the medicine and materials you’ll need the most. If there are survivors in the area, they might know about this castle and come here. And if there are injuries in the future, we’ll need to be able to treat them in an efficient manner. As a second priority, take care of sanitation in general,” he continued.

Melusine smiled and gave him a look.

Not now, woman, Kate thought and sipped on her coffee.

“Celeste, you help where you can. Do you think you can do that?” Jonathan said, looking at the girl. She nodded, a serious expression on her face.

“Kate, as much as Bert will complain, I think it would be good to give the place a thorough fire safety check. I know you can’t move yet,” he said.

“I’ll do it once I can move. Just get me those crutches you mentioned,” she said, addressing Melusine with the second part.

“Grey, we’ll take care of the bodies first, after that we help the others,” he said.

The young man seemed a little conflicted. He opened his mouth and closed it again, looking to the floor.

“What is it, Grey?” Kate asked, looking at him as she finished her cup of coffee.

“I...,” he started and gulped.

“You all saw the numbers,” Kate said. “I know it sounds weird but I think they might become the most important thing to help us survive this thing. I think I already survived just because of the Class I got.”

“A Class?” Grey asked, glancing up with an excited look on his face.

“Yes. And it turns out that this scenario much like zombie apocalypses and alien invasions is not something people haven’t turned into fiction already. Grey knows a shit ton about what he calls a system apocalypse. Jonathan, I think it’s best if you listen to him when it comes to everything that seems otherworldly or has to do with the numbers we see in our minds,” Kate said.

The man gave Grey a look and sighed. “This is ridiculous...,” he murmured and rubbed his temples. “Very well. Grey, you’ll tell me what you know. And I think it would be best if you could suggest

our course of action when it comes to these matters. Kate I'll want you to double check that all. Can you do that?"

Grey nodded and looked at Kate. He hesitated as most of the people looked his way. "The... b... bodies. We s... s... should not bury them."

Kate started chuckling, slowly lying back down. "This is just bizarre," she murmured. "But he's right. You should burn them."

"Why?" Jonathan asked, glancing between the two of them.

"Undead," they both said at the same time.