

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Priest of Ceres]’

Jasia stared at the cones of light moving through the cavern. She spotted her allies, fighters of the Union, survivors, and friends. Roars and shouts rolled through the darkness, both red veins and pale blue starlight gone from this cursed place.

“The creature is dead!” someone shouted, another fighter crying out with joy nearby.

She read through the rest of her notifications to confirm it and finally relaxed the hold on her rifle. Sweat dripped down her brow, Jasia finally giving in to the pain in her legs and arms. She broke down to her knees, tears welling up in her eyes as she slowly lowered her gun, putting on the safety before she set it down on the ground with a clattering sound.

Her fingers hurt, her arms hurt, just breathing hurt. Everything smelled of blood, the air was terrible, and the heat. She reached up and fiddled with the straps on her helmet, crying softly when she finally managed to open the thing, lifting the headgear up and away.

They’d won.

They had won. Against all odds, against that nightmare. She shivered, closing her eyes for a short moment as her breathing hastened. *It’s gone. It’s gone.* She glanced behind herself, and sure enough, there was nothing there. That being, that feeling of terror, that pressure, it was gone. And with it, the monsters that had fought them here, the antlered creatures, and the pale blue eyed nightmare.

They were dead.

She bit her lip, her mind playing back flashes of the fight. The red sphere that had looked like blood, the suspended creature, eerie and connected to the broad red pool. The altar. The sword covered in blood, the dead fighters. She wanted to look, wanted to know who had been killed, who had survived. She wanted to know if everyone in her team had made it. If Bastian was alive, Niklas. *He was hit!* She’d seen him strike at the monster with his swords. Pride welled up in her heart. He’d been right there, the same Niklas who’d been so afraid to fight. *And Mateo.* She wanted to shout their names but her throat was dry and felt like it would burst if she so much as talked. Her legs and arms felt heavy. All she could do was sit there and cry. The fight was over. At least this one.

And they had won.

She glanced up when she heard the sound of something heavy scraping against the stone floor. She saw Kate walk towards her, pulling her heavy mace after her. Jasia gulped. It hurt.

Kate’s armor looked downright shredded, a deep gash covered her chest, the scales cut through or ripped away, her right shoulder half exposed. Everything was covered in blood, from the cut, shredded, and mangled armor, her helmet with its six horns, to the skin that showed, and her weapons. Not just covered. Drops of blood still rolled off of her. And even in that state, her eyes were focused, but there was something unnerving there. Jasia looked away, seeing Logan as he followed behind Kate, the man glancing between the groups of combatants.

His armor looked dented, bloodied near as much as Kate’s.

“We have slain the creature but we are not yet done,” he said, his voice firm but not unkind. “Those of you who can still fight, who can still hold their weapons, who still have mana, join us at the bridge.”

Jasia opened her eyes wide. *The horde. The undead that were coming down here, back into the dungeon. To cut off our retreat.*

She sobbed once, then grit her teeth. *You’re not injured Jasia.*

Get up.

She pushed, but her arms and legs didn’t move. Breathing in, she calmed herself. *One thing at a time. You’re of no help if you can’t even move your fucking legs.* She slowed her breathing and gradually reached up with her arm, pulling away one of the straps of her pack. The whole thing fell to the ground. She reached out with shaking hands. It took her a few tries to undo the small latch but she finally managed it.

There was food in there, and water. The first thing she did was wet a bit of cloth before she cleaned off her face, the cold sensation breathing some semblance of life back into her. Next, she raised the bottle with some difficulty, then drank. And she drank deep, forcing herself to slow down before she choked. *Stop.* Next came food, Jasia again trying to eat steadily, taking one bite at a time. She didn’t even notice what she was eating. Just food. Energy.

By now, she had started to listen to the people all around, the conversations, the quiet sobs. A few healers were going around by now, checking in on the fighters one by one, doing what they could with their magic, prioritizing those with the worst injuries.

Someone crouched down next to her and gently touched her shoulder. Jasia glanced over to see green eyes staring back at her. She gulped down the bite of food. “Aisha,” she said with a slightly croaking voice. She wanted to hug the woman but couldn’t quite manage the movement.

“Don’t exert yourself, you’re spent. Pushed yourself too far but no major injuries, it seems,” Aisha said. The tone of her voice was colder than usual.

“Who died?” Jasia asked with a quiet tone before she could stop herself.

She stared into the green eyes before her. “How many?”

Aisha looked back at her. “Six people. Lina and Mateo. Matthias, Lukas, Lea, and Fabian. Four more in critical condition but they’re still breathing.”

Jasia gulped. Six people? That wasn’t too bad, was it? They’d come down here with over thirty. *Less than a fifth.*

Dead.

They’re dead.

She didn’t know what to say. The pain in her legs and arms didn’t feel quite as bad anymore. She just nodded to Aisha. “Thanks,” she said finally and stood up, staggering slightly with the movement.

“Don’t try to do too much,” Aisha said and touched her shoulder, then moved on.

Jasia gulped. With slow movements, she bent down and grabbed her helmet, quietly putting it back on. It was cool and wet. Then she put on her pack and grabbed her rifle. With shaking hands, she checked the magazine and set it back into the weapon. *You survived. You're still alive.*

Others aren't.

She shook her head, taking in a deep breath before she started towards the exit of the cavern. Maybe the air out there would be better. Even with the undead coming. She couldn't fight for shit anymore, but she could maybe aim her weapon in the direction of a horde and pull the trigger.

On her way, she joined the others who could follow Logan's call. She saw Annika, one of the healers sewing shut a large wound in someone's stomach, the thread in her hands glowing with faint white light.

The atmosphere was solemn. Nobody spoke as they made their way out. Grief, anger, or just exhaustion taking over the spent warriors.

When she walked past the open stone doors and out onto the broad bridge, she saw the lines of people preparing for the incoming horde. Kate and Logan were still there, she noted, the woman in a tense stance, holding her mace and axe one in each hand, the ends of the weapons on the ground as her chest and shoulders heaved with her breathing, eyes focused towards the exit leading farther up and out of the dungeon.

The other fighters stood farther back, a few people setting up the second machine gun but there wasn't a lot of ammo left in it. The first one already faced the high reaching stone gates on the other side of the bridge. Their headlamps were the only light now present.

"The corridors are too small to allow any of the bigger monsters through," Logan said.

Jasia saw Valery step past her and move towards the armored man.

"We have several injured in there still. All the healers are occupied. We have to hold them back. For them. For us," Valery said and looked around. "Get in position. Check your weapons. And fire on my command."

Jasia stepped in with the others. The rifle in her hands still felt heavy but it didn't matter anymore.

She saw Kate glance over at Logan.

"Wait until the guns are out," he said to her. "There will be enough left."

Jasia heard a growl coming from Kate, and then she heard the moans of the undead. She narrowed her eyes at the gates ahead, seeing the stone railings and the stone bridge of this abysmal shit dungeon. They'd fought their way down here, had killed every fucking Emissary, every flying Harbinger. And now they'd killed the Priest of Ceres, the monster at the core of this place.

They'd come here and finished what they'd set out to do.

She didn't plan to die now. Not after everything that had happened. After everything they'd accomplished, after every monster they had fought, had survived, had killed. She gripped the rifle in her hands, glancing at Logan and Kate, glancing at the gunners ready with the heavy machine guns, seeing the other fighters of the Union that were still standing, exhausted and spent like she was, and yet they were here, next to her, ready to face the horrors on their way.

“Union fighters,” Logan spoke. “Humans of the Maar Valley.” His armor did not glow like it had before. He was spent, just like the rest of them. And still, Jasia could feel his words, could feel herself straighten ever so slightly.

He raised his rifle now, the screeching sounds of the undead coming closer. He looked back at them and spoke in a more quiet tone.

“Hold the line.”

Undead rushed out onto the bridge in the next moment, almost stumbling over each other, they were so numerous. Screeches, groans, and the running limbs of hundreds.

Jasia aimed, and pulled the trigger, her hearing drowned out as the guns erupted, bullets tearing into the charging horde of undead, the last attempt of their enemy to corner them here, to kill those who had resisted, had survived.

Her weapon clicked and she looked for another magazine on her belt. She found one last one and gingerly removed the empty one, then set the other one into the weapon with a shaking hand. The plastic clacked against her assault rifle before she finally managed to slot it in. It took all her strength to load in the first bullet.

Fewer guns were firing now. She didn't manage to raise her weapon very high but aiming wasn't exactly important. The undead were pouring in. Former humans, orcs, goblins, and the occasional other creature, all of them shredded through by bullets.

Her rifle clicked again and this time she lowered it, then let it fall to the ground, drawing the pistol from her belt. She fired it until it was empty too, the machine guns around her falling silent now as well. She gulped, looking at the undead that still pushed past the corpses. She could feel a sob welling up in her throat, looking for anything else she could use to fight the monsters. But there was nothing.

Her guns were out. The grenades she'd had were gone. The magic she'd had was all used up. She raised her hand to try and summon a spell but the splitting pain in her mind let her know that this was it.

Jasia unsheathed her combat knife and grabbed her assault rifle again, fiddling with the two before she managed to fasten the blade to the bit at the front.

The last of the guns fell silent.

It felt like the world stood still. Her ears were ringing, pain wracked her brain. She grit her teeth, unsure of what else she could even do, but she would fight nonetheless.

She saw Logan raise his hand before he touched Kate's shoulder. “Go.”

Jasia watched on as Kate leaned forward, then moved into a sprint. She sped up when she was halfway down the bridge and roared, her heavy weapons swung into the horde, stopping an entire line of them dead as flesh and bone was broken and cut through.

Jasia thought back to the first time she had met them, the way Kate had slaughtered through the undead in the office building of the chemical plant. She had thought her a monster. And she had seen her fight the hordes, had now seen her fight and kill the creature in the cavern behind her. They had struck her, had injured her, with their wild strikes and unyielding tenacity. And yet she stood. She stood and fought, and killed.

And so had Jasia. She smiled to herself, ever so slightly. Not as efficiently. Not as unyielding. Not as strong. But she'd survived all this way. Had fought, had killed.

If Kate was a monster, then so was she. So were they all.

"Get your weapons ready, whatever you have left," Logan said. "Whatever gets through." He raised his sword and stepped forward. "We kill it."

Jasia held the knife tipped assault rifle in her hand, seeing a large man step past her with his mace and shield. Fred. To her left, she saw Valery with her shield and spear, falling in formation with Logan. She saw Niklas with his swords, all of them blood covered, quiet, and ready.

Kate swung her weapons through the hordes. She didn't need to aim, didn't need to hold back, didn't need to consider. With every strike, she could feel energy flow back into her, with every strike, she heard them screech and groan, could hear the flesh and bone break under her assault. She had left the bridge, had fought her way through the hordes and into the dark hall where they had fought the Emissaries before.

Several impacts rocked through her back and she jumped, landing in the hordes with an explosion of blood. Her headlamp was gone already, ripped away by one strike or the other. But she didn't need to see while she heard. The undead she faced now were weak. Her weapons felt light. She killed another drove and rushed back to the gates of stone, out onto the bridge where her allies were pushing forward, killing the monsters that had moved past her. She cornered the creatures and swatted them aside, some of them thrown down into the abyss below, Kate thinning out the group before she moved back towards the horde.

This is where they would hold. Some had died in the fight. But no more.

They had come down here to hunt the source of the undead, and they had killed it.

For these monsters to rush down here, to try and catch them at their weakest, to try and kill the allies that had fought with everything they'd had. It made her blood pulse, made her grip her weapons harder, made her cut through the unthinking horde with all the strength that she could bring behind her swings. She looked at the undead and roared into their thoughtless hate, their thoughtless destruction. She roared at the human faces that had once been living, stripped of everything they had once been, to serve the purpose of the creature that had waited here for them.

The creature that they had already killed.

Nothing is left for you, she thought, and swung her mace and axe through the mass of flesh, cutting through muscle and crushing bones. *But death.*

Christian heard the primal roar, tears running down his cheeks as he gripped the assault rifle and stabbed down at the undead before him. He saw another rifle stab down before an axe split the creature's head. He reeled up and looked for more but the monsters were dead. Someone shouted, others mimicking the call. He roared too, roared with all the hate that he felt, all the anger, all the grief.

"We will not fall here!" Logan shouted.

He'd seen Kate run into the hordes and he knew that they wouldn't put her down. Not after what he'd seen her do at city hall. Even in her injured state, even with her armor broken, he knew that she would fight, to the last breath. And this time, he wasn't afraid. He would fight too. Would fight for everyone here, next to them, and with them, for his own survival, and for theirs. For everyone in the bunkers, for every human still alive.

For Lukas.

Kate heard some of her allies coming closer now, saw the bright light of their headlamps. She stood among the dead, feeling more tremors from ahead and above. There were some undead left still but they no longer moved in their direction. She wondered if she should go and hunt them down but some of her allies had been injured, and they had been exhausted.

Her weapons felt heavier now too, more so with every moment that she stood here and didn't fight.

"Kate, we killed their main force. Snap out of it," her ally said.

She heard his words, unsure if she agreed. How would he know? He didn't have the same tremor sense that she did. But it made at least some sense, she thought. Maybe a short break wouldn't hurt. She could assess the situation, could check her equipment, and then she could go and hunt down the rest. Yes, that made sense. As long as she could go and hunt them down soon.

Kate breathed in, and shuddered. Her weapons fell onto the corpses, a sea of them around her. She wanted to open her mouth to say something but only a small sound escaped.

Logan was there and held her back before she collapsed. "It's over, Kate," he said. "You killed them."

She closed her eyes and relaxed, feeling his steadying arm.

"Let's retreat back to the bridge, we need to rest before we move back up," he said.

She heard Valery, Lewis, and a few others nearby, checking the perimeter.

Her body felt as if she'd worked out for an entire day straight, every muscle and sinew tense and frayed. It hurt. Everything hurt. "I can walk... on my own," she said, her voice more strained than she would've liked.

"Sure you can," Logan said, and propped her up all the same.

Lewis came up and supported her other side without a word.

She could hear their tired breaths and grunts as they made their way back towards the stone bridge.

Kate saw the still masses of the dead all around. It felt as if she floated above them. Her breathing calmed and her eyes closed a moment later. *A good fight. That was a good fight.*

A good fight, she thought again and realized that she was tired. Then she drifted off.