

## Chapter 48 Time

Kate held the sheathed katana and closed her eyes. She breathed in, smelling the stale smell of blood and what remained of the burnt flesh and hair. Clearing the armory of corpses left her completely spent. Physically and mentally. She wanted to roll up into a ball and sleep for a few days but she knew just as much that it wouldn't work.

She grit her teeth, then consciously tried to relax her jaw. *You're not alone here.* She looked at the hatch, then at the sheathed blade in her hand. She gulped, then smiled.

*Scared hmm?*

Would the others meet the same fate?

Would she?

Kate found that the former scared her more. But what was the alternative? Leaving all of them behind?

She stepped forward and listened with her enhanced hearing, then opened the hatch and went down into their storage cellar.

She went down the ladder and turned to find the huddled group of survivors. Not strangers no more but friends, brothers and sisters in arms. Fighters, just like her. She looked at the shelves stacked with supplies but what she focused on were the fairy lights carefully tied to the wood. She heard her hammer fall to the ground, tears welling up in her eyes before she cried.

Melusine stood up and walked over, grabbing her in a tight hug and rubbing her back. "Oh dear. Let it out. We're here."

Kate sobbed, soon feeling something hit her leg. She glanced down to see Celeste grabbing onto her.

The girl looked up with teary eyes and smiled. "I won't let go!"

Kate smiled and ruffled her hair. She sobbed and held the two, feeling some warmth return to her. She quieted down after some time and wiped at her eyes, letting go of Melusine. "I'm sure you won't," she said, looking down at the light brown haired girl.

It felt so mundane. The girl standing next to her. The blood above. The death outside.

She took in a deep breath and looked at the healer.

"How are you feeling?" Melusine asked. The woman looked exhausted herself, her hair disheveled, the braid the only thing keeping it all together.

Kate looked at her and smiled. "Hasn't been this bad in a while."

"You should rest for a bit," Melusine said and grabbed her hand, then gently led her over to the others.

They only had one chair in the cellar but everyone sat on the ground, the table turned over to provide some cover in case any of the undead would've made it down here.

Kate saw Eloise's wet eyes. She saw Allison's empty stare. Jon and Logan were focused, the former tapping the ground with a crossbow bolt, the latter simply sitting, resting.

She joined them and sat down, resting against one of the shelves before she closed her eyes. She heard Melusine sit down next to Eloise. Celeste sat down next to Kate, handing her a fresh jacket with a stare.

"You stink," the little girl said.

Kate glanced at her, grinning with one side of her mouth. She didn't comment and exchanged the two jackets, throwing the ripped one towards the ladder. Closing the zipper, she sat back and closed her eyes. She felt Celeste shuffle closer before she grabbed onto her arm.

*She won't let go*, Kate thought and focused on her breathing. In and out, the latter for as long as she could.

She found it difficult to think of anything else but Grey, Ethan, and Bert. She felt doubt and guilt come up time and time again. She tried to accept it, to let it go through her but it didn't go away.

"This sucks," Eloise said in a tired voice. She scrambled up. "Can I cook something?"

Nobody answered her for a long moment.

"Sure," Jon said. "That would be nice."

"With magic?" Eloise asked.

"Yes," said Logan.

Kate watched the girl set the table upright. She would've helped but found it difficult to even think of standing up.

Eloise struggled for a moment but managed finally. She started going through the shelves and picked out choice articles. Cans and jars, potatoes, a small pot. No cooker. A few minutes later, she stood with raised hands and glowing palms above a pot, an assortment of spices standing next to a few cans.

Kate could see the intense look on her face and turned away. She closed her eyes and sighed, feeling the warmth of Celeste's hand.

"Where is Bert?" the girl asked.

Melusine stood up and walked over. "I'm sorry," she said and took the girl. "He's not here right now, sweetheart."

Time passed but Kate found it difficult to focus on much of anything. She blinked her eyes and saw Eloise standing above her, holding out a mug.

"Eat. Slow, it's hot. No spoons down here either," the girl said. She looked a little better, Kate thought.

"Thanks," she whispered and took the mug, smelling the rich and hearty flavors. A potato soup with red beans, oats, and freshly ground nutmeg.

Kate could feel the heat from the mug and closed her hands around it. It felt nice. The smells were nice too. She narrowed her eyes when she saw a strange reddish hue flow through the liquid. Looking up, she saw the self-satisfied look on Eloise's face.

She sipped on the soup and gulped, then drank it all.

“More?” Eloise asked after distributing mugs to all the others.

Kate drank four mugs and sighed, feeling a little bit of energy return to her. She hugged her knees and grabbed for her hammer with her left hand, pulling the weapon a little closer.

“A cold resistance,” Melusine murmured. “Well done, darling.”

Kate checked her status and found the food item listed.

***Equipment:***

***Torso: -***

***Legs: -***

***Trinket: -***

***Food: Hearty Potato Soup +10 Stamina regeneration. Low grade Cold Resistance. Duration 6 hours***

“Can I put on some music? This is making me mad,” Allison said.

“Just make it quiet so that Kate still hears approaching beasts,” Jon said.

Kate didn’t say anything. She was glad for a bit of music.

Eloise handed her a coffee as well.

She had forgotten as soon as she went down into the cellar.

Time passed. Celeste had fallen asleep at some point, likely exhausted from all the frantic chaos and the stressed people around her.

Kate sat with her eyes closed and focused on the indie tune playing from Allison’s phone.

The third song ended and Allison spoke up.

“What now?”

Kate opened her eyes. *What now?*

“What now?” Logan repeated the question, his voice empty.

“We do what we can do,” Jon said. “What we discussed earlier...”

“It still stands,” Kate said. She still felt like shit but her exhaustion had faded somewhat. And she itched to do something. Anything at all. “Our approach will change slightly,” she said, looking at the large armored man, seeing the cuts and dents in his old plate mail. It was a wonder the armor still held up at all. “Right, Logan?”

His eyes focused when he heard his name and he looked up. “Right.”

“Then once we’re ready,” Jon said. “We should clear the ground floor. And prepare a pyre.”

“Not with all those corpses still in our walls,” Kate said.

“What do you suggest?” Jon said.

“I’ll fill the trailer, we clear the snow up to the gates and move that thing outside. The ogre, we’ll have to carry,” she said.

“I want to have a look at their gear, and fur if there were any wolves,” Allison said.

“There were,” Kate answered.

“I’ll prepare guns. Glocks for you three,” Logan said, then glanced at Jon. “A rifle for you.”

“I don’t know how to use it.”

“You’ll learn, and your skills will help,” Logan said and slowly stood up. He opened one of the straps of his chest piece and removed the damaged plate, sighing. “I’ll need something new.”

Allison stood up and grabbed the plate. “Anyone mind if I work on the ground floor for the time being?”

“We have to clean it first,” Melusine said.

“Then let’s do that. I’ll help,” Eloise said.

“Me too,” Jon said.

Melusine smiled as Celeste stirred and woke up.

The girl opened her eyes wide and smiled. “Cleaning!”

Melusine raised her brows, then sighed. “I guess this mess does change some parenting guidelines. There is blood up there, Celeste. You’ll have to be very careful.”

Kate couldn’t help but smile. She closed her eyes and sighed. When she opened them, she saw Logan hold out a hand.

She breathed once, then grabbed it.

Kate worked slow, knowing that she would only hurt herself if she rushed or pushed herself too far. And still, once outside, she breathed in the cold air and found that it felt good. To move. To do something. Anything at all.

The sky was gray but no more snow was falling and the winds no longer drowned out the sound of rushing water from below.

She moved the corpses of goblins, wolves, orcs as large as men. All of them felt light despite the strain in her back, arms, and legs. She had found the cold temperatures had felt subdued because of her Vitality but now it had lost most of the bite it had left, likely due to Eloise’s cooking. She didn’t know what exactly a low grade cold resistance meant but she found that it helped. And not just her.

Allison was by her side, checking each corpse as they worked in silence. She let Kate know which ones she wanted to work on. Mostly the wolves but she removed pieces of boiled leather from the dead warriors and she collected every sword and dagger the creatures had wielded.

The work took a while, Kate noticing herself falling into a trance, glad for the simple goals she had in the moment and glad for her Perseverance stat, knowing how much more difficult it would’ve

been to focus on anything at all without it. She occasionally considered using Mindless Ferocity as well but decided to keep that in case of more attacks. Ignoring pain and exhaustion had its uses but not when doing mundane work.

They had soon cleared the yard, the trailer already full with Allison cutting away at the wolves in the barracks. Kate would help her move everything to the armory once the others were done with cleaning. And so she started shoveling the snow. It felt heavier now, the snow somewhat settled after the night. So Kate worked slower, taking breaks in between as she watched the others work in the armory.

The wood stove remained cold, their bedrolls and sleeping bags moved down to the cellar. Logan occasionally checked on the corpses above. They knew the risk. The trope so often used in zombie movies didn't feel quite as funny anymore. She supposed she understood now why it was used. Only a cold feeling of dread came to her when she thought of fighting her friends as undead creatures. Though she didn't think she would hesitate. Her skills would make it a fight like any other. What she dreaded was coming back to herself after they had won.

Eloise handed her a hot water bottle without a word, Kate sitting down on the cleaned leather chair. The only chair that had survived the battle besides a small one in the cellar and the couch itself though the latter would need to be soaked in cleaning agent first. She received a few blankets and sighed, feeling the warmth return to her. Eloise's magic was the only thing besides their bodies capable of creating warmth. And as exhausted as they were, nobody dared burning any wood. The low grade resistance helped but more than anything it seemed to just delay the effects of exposure.

Logan sat on the stairs. He had found a few more pieces of plate armor though it didn't fit quite as well as the last one nor did it cover near as much. He filled up the magazines they had used in the fight with bullets.

Kate wondered how many there were left. A single fight and she saw nine magazines sitting on the stairs next to the man. Though she knew how many cases they had hauled here from Grenndorf. At least with pistol ammo, they wouldn't run out anytime soon.

They still had a few hours of Eloise's food magic to go when they managed to repair the door, Kate holding up the large and partially splintered entrance as the others drilled holes into the stone wall before they added dowels and long screws. Kate had gotten a few more hinges from other doors in the castle, mainly from Bert's house.

Jon repaired the table as Melusine finished her third round of sanitation.

Kate helped Allison move her furs, weapons, and gear to the cleaned ground floor. The smells weren't particularly nice but the large ice cream coolers Allison used to store them somewhat tackled the problem. Nobody complained either way. It was safer for her to be there.

Allison handed the crossbow bolts she had removed from the bodies to Jon. She then started to set up on the repaired table, hooking up the sewing machine she had found in Bert's home before she started her work. The generator she had used remained undamaged, the machine hum and monotone sound of the sewing needle bringing some noise back into their home.

Eloise and Celeste brought some order back into the strewn supplies they had stored on the ground floor beforehand, then the former moved everything down into the cellar. It would be cramped, all the supplies coupled with them now sleeping there but compared to before it felt sensible now.

Kate had to push away feelings of doubt and guilt from time to time but as always, staying busy helped tremendously.

Melusine added fairy lights and torches to the ground floor while Eloise soon began cooking downstairs, smells wafting up and out from the open hatch.

They didn't talk much, everyone taking their own time to process what had happened. Everyone stayed busy.

Kate used the remaining time on their cold resistance buff to clear snow from the trailer up to the castle gates. She worked slow and methodical, the amount of snow normally an impossibility to clear in a single day but her Strength and Perseverance won out. She left the gates shut and instead pulled the trailer in front of it. With Logan and Jon, they moved the monster bodies up the watchtower, to the battlement, and then threw them outside.

Kate used Mindless Ferocity to cut up the ogre corpse before they got rid of it too. Allison made a point about keeping its bones but nobody had the energy or will left to strip away the burnt and mangled flesh. They threw everything out and Kate hoped that wild beasts and monsters would eat and drag away the corpses. The short trip to the battlements also outlined her work for the next day.

Shoveling more snow. A trench around the entire castle.

The sky was getting darker now and Kate breathed in a cold breath. She shuddered, glad to see the corpses gone from within their walls. She joined the others in the armory and closed the door behind herself. She saw that they had screwed a few more pieces of metal against the stone.

"The orc swords," Jon pointed as he walked towards the hatch.

Kate saw the crude weapons and slotted them into the makeshift holders. The purpose was the same as the thick wooden bar slotted into the holders beside the castle gates. Anyone breaking in would have to do so with a lot of force.

Kate doubted it would hold back any of the undead but it would give them time to react.

Allison still worked away, sewing dark yellow pieces of wyvern scales to a gray jacket.

Kate went down the hatch and joined the others for dinner. It was still quiet as they sat on the bedrolls, leaning against supply boxes and shelves. It was cramped but Kate found it comfortable. She was glad they were all there.

Allison soon joined as well.

"So what should we do?" she asked after a while.

Kate didn't look at her.

"A pyre could attract monsters," Jon said.

"They could turn into undead," Logan said.

They were quiet.

"As much as I understand the risks, we should sleep tonight," Kate said. "We need to be rested for the next fight. We can't hold off another assault. Not right now."

"I agree. But one of us must stay awake, even down here," Logan said.

"I will take first shift," Allison said. "Got a few things I can work on quietly."

"I'll take second," Melusine said.

“Third,” said Eloise.

“And I take the last one,” Jon added.

Kate breathed in deeply.

“Tomorrow morning. We set up a pyre,” Jon said. “Until then. We rest.”

Kate got another bowl of soup, then got into a winter sleeping bag with all of her clothes on and her hammer nearby, hunting knives strapped to her jacket. It was warm now, the cellar heated by hot water bottles, cooking, and the people nearby.

Kate fell asleep to the sound of soft whispers, Jon and Melusine weaving a grand story of heroes and knights to Celeste, and everyone who would listen.

She thought of Grey and Ethan, fighting against monsters by her side. The pit in her stomach remained but it felt just a little lighter.