

Chapter 67 Tremors

Much of the mall's roof was accessible through the restaurant on the top floor, the outside area providing more seating for guests. There was even a bar outside. Everything was now of course covered in a thick layer of snow, strong winds howling past when Kate and Logan stepped outside, the two no longer sheltered by the many buildings of Falstadt, nor the hilly terrain found throughout.

Kate could tell the air was freezing but she found it didn't bother her. She checked instead if she could hear any undead or other creatures. There was nothing, same as the mall itself.

"Do you think they're all hiding in those corridors? Or sent out to look for more bodies?" she asked when they reached the snow covered railing on the eastern end of the roof.

"There's definitely some purpose to what they're doing, with them dragging those corpses down into the halls. I just wonder how defined that purpose really is," Logan said as he got out his binoculars and started scanning the horizon.

Kate didn't feel like doing the same. She just looked out over the houses and streets below, the sight almost familiar. Just the lights and sounds of people and driving cars was missing. The mall was taller than most other structures in the city but not by much. The snowfall prevented her from seeing far, Kate trying to get a glimpse of the Weywater lake to the east but it was a little too far away to be visible.

"Anything?" she asked after a while.

"It looks like a ghost town," Logan murmured. "No wonder, with the undead around. Even if there was anyone left, they'd hardly be running around in the streets."

"What if it's actually safe here?" Kate suggested. "If all the undead are going farther out to-" she paused, raising her brows.

"What is it?" Logan asked.

"I feel something." Kate closed her eyes. "Vibrations. Slow, repeating. Steps maybe? It feels pretty far away, and heavy." She pointed. Somewhere northeast.

They moved along the railings and Logan checked with his binoculars.

"Getting closer too," Kate said. She could feel it pretty clearly now. The city wasn't empty after all. She touched his raised arms and pushed him a little farther right. "That seems better."

"I can't see anything. The streets are empty. Oh." He didn't elaborate for a long moment.

Kate didn't wait for him to explain and got her own binoculars out, feeling out the vibrations and looking in the direction. Past a few lines of houses, she could see between a set of office buildings and onto a broad and snow covered street. There she saw them, moving like ants. Undead, humans, orcs, goblins, ogres, wyverns, direwolves, and other forms she couldn't exactly place. There were hundreds, if not thousands of them, scouring the distant street with silent purpose.

She saw two Overakar pass before the source of the vibrations revealed itself. A single humanoid that looked similar to an ogre, parts of its body covered with massive chunks of steel. Enormous

rust covered chains went around its arms and hung loosely down towards the ground. Its massive jaw was open, one of its eyes gone. The creature was as tall as the apartment buildings it lumbered past, each slow and heavy step felt all the way through the ground and up to the roof of the mall.

Kate sighed.

“There they are,” Logan said.

“There they are,” Kate confirmed.

He glanced over to her. “You’re not going to run off, are you?”

She raised an annoyed brow at him. “How could one even kill such a massive thing?”

Logan looked back through his binoculars. “It’s undead. I’d say artillery, machine gun positions, explosives, a few tanks, or carpet bombing.”

“We don’t have any of that,” Kate said.

“Then we better think of something else because as long as that thing is walking around, our castle walls look like a sandcastle by the beach,” he murmured. “Let alone all of the undead near it. There are still more of them coming. Did they fight something together? Or just smart enough to move in large groups?”

“They haven’t seemed that smart out in the forest,” Kate said.

“A proximity thing maybe? To the dungeon, or whatever is giving them instructions? If there is anything like that at all,” Logan murmured then put away his binoculars. “Too much we don’t know, and too much to fight and kill for the two of us right now. How’s your leg?”

“Bit sore, could use a few undead,” Kate said. She found that she felt annoyed about the large group more than anything. Not afraid, even of the massive thing. She just knew that she lacked the power to fight and kill them all. “Maybe if we could funnel them somehow,” she thought out loud.

“There are Ogres and Overakar too. We’ll need more of a plan and prep than you standing in a narrow alleyway,” Logan said.

“Hey, you guessed my plan,” Kate said, with a heavier dose of sarcasm than usual. She looked at the horde again and this time, she smiled. Yes, there were hundreds of them, with more dangerous and even unknown variants mixed in but the monsters also distracted her from the empty city. They provided another goal, now that they’d gotten the juice already.

More than a goal, she found that they provided something to aim her confusion at, her anger, the helplessness she felt, and the overwhelming feeling of Falstadt entirely wiped out. The ones responsible were right there. She couldn’t make things go back to how they were, but what she could do, was figure out a way to wipe out those motherfuckers that did this to their city and its people.

She put down the binoculars and started towards the exit. “Any clue where we can find some artillery, machine guns, and explosives? I’d think asking for tanks and air support might be a little much.”

He grunted. “I don’t think tanks and artillery will be anywhere near, but even if we found anything like that, I’m more concerned about getting it here. But Jon did mark a few police stations and gun shops here in the city. Not familiar with the military presence here but I’d imagine there are at least

a few storage facilities as well. Just a matter of finding them and getting inside. Good thing we have a superhuman with us who can break down doors and jump over fences.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “I thought you were the one who can now charge through barricades?”

“I’m happy to try, if we run into anything like that. We could explore a little more but I think it’s best if we go back and discuss with Jon. We have our meeting with the Union tomorrow as well,” Logan said.

“And the scales to bring back. And the juice,” Kate said.

“The juice is very important,” Logan confirmed.

She glanced his way. “I like this thing we’ve got going. Feels like we’ve been friends for longer than we’ve known each other,” Kate said.

“Just takes fighting monsters side by side,” he said and held open the one intact glass door that led back inside the restaurant. “Just wish the others were still around as well.”

“Yeah. But then we couldn’t be depressed about them being gone.”

“Mhm. We’d just be stressed out of our minds trying to guide them. At least you’ve always had an excuse with your magic.”

“That’s why I chose to get stabbed by that first orc I saw. Thought I’d for sure get a Berserker Class if I just nearly died helping everyone else.”

“I knew it,” Logan said, his tone entirely dry. “Maybe I should try nearly dying as well sometime.”

“The heavy blood loss feels great, I can only recommend it,” Kate said. “Though to be fair, I’ve been practicing that one since I was a teen.”

“No comment,” Logan said as they reached the stairwell. “That one’s a mine field.”

“Could use some mines,” Kate said with a smile.

“We could,” he said and checked his guns, then clicked on his headlamp. He gave her a nod. Kate answered with a thumbs up.

They were still in enemy territory but compared to when they’d gotten here, Kate felt quite a bit better. There were things she could control, and things she couldn’t control, she knew that, but sometimes it could just feel overwhelming. Walking past the large and armored man, she was glad that she hadn’t been alone during this trip, and throughout the past weeks.

They soon reached the inner city entrance to the dungeon, or what they’d started to call a dungeon. Collecting their bags full of Overakar scales, they started on their way back through the dimly lit tunnels, headlamps off with Kate on listening duty.

Throughout the entire way back, the two didn’t encounter a single moving undead or other creature, only the mangled corpses left from the very battles they’d fought. Dozens of undead, and Kate knew they were far from done. That horde was out there, and she could only guess at how many more of those were lumbering throughout the Maar valley and beyond. And then there was the stairwell leading farther down into the dungeon. At least with the horde, she could kind of imagine

the level of the threat, and the difficulty of such a large scale battle. But with the dungeon, she felt a little more apprehensive, asking herself what kind of unknown horrors were waiting down there.

She heard the first moans of undead when they reached the last corridor leading out, close to the chemical plant. She signaled to Logan, four undead, two of them orcs based on the sounds they made.

They closed in on the stairs and quietly set down their packs, Kate sneaking closer before she checked the sky for Wyverns. She couldn't see nor hear any of them. Glancing back, she got the nod from Logan and activated her skills, not holding off on Blood Frenzy to make sure she got the health steal benefits from the skill as well.

She heard her ally behind her and moved, as quietly as she managed. Not quiet enough to her but the monsters were stupid, unthinking, undead. She saw them outside in the snow, crouched, two of them moving around. Kate raised her axe, took one step forward, and threw it with all the strength and momentum she could muster.

She heard the weapon strike with a dull thud, the blade of the battle axe piercing all the way through the orc's chest. Kate heard the other undead take notice but they didn't turn towards her yet, so she raised her hand and called for her axe, seeing the orc fall to the ground. She saw her weapon wrench itself free with a sleek sound before it flew right back towards her, almost snapping back into her hand with its comfortable heavy weight.

She smiled, then looked at the next undead. It had turned her way and snarled, then rushed towards her, its quick start to its momentum brought to an abrupt halt when Kate's axe split through part of its neck and chest, the weight of the thrown battle axe downing the undead, the noise it had made attracting the remaining two enemies.

Kate looked at the running human and orc, her hand raised towards the creature she'd just killed as the monsters charged her. She heard her axe whistling through the air and caught it, stepped down onto the ground with a cone of blood magic flashing out and into the creatures, slowing them before she swung wide and roared, both creatures collapsing a moment later, one cut all the way through at the waist, the other one with its torso cut sideways. She stood there for a short moment, then paced left and right, looking out into the snow covered landscape.

Was that it?

Not enough, she thought to herself, ground her teeth, and deactivated her magic.

"Leg healed up again?" Logan asked.

"Feels better, yes," Kate replied.

"Then come and grab your stuff, if you're done," Logan said.

Kate turned his way and went to grab her things. *Didn't even complain about the roar. Was he hoping for more of them too?*

She checked her messages and found two of her skills had leveled up.

'ding' 'Bound Weapon Return reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Heavy Weapons Expert reaches lvl 2'

And so it starts.

They didn't encounter any more undead or other creatures on their way back to Keilberg Castle, soon reaching its walls. Light snow was still falling but Kate doubted that it would cause any major problems, not like the initial blizzard. She set down her gear and made the jump, grabbing the ladder before helping out Logan.

Kate heard Melusine and Allison coming out of the armory when she was setting the ladder back down near the battlements.

"The heroes return," Allison said, with about as much enthusiasm as a teen asked to do dishes.

"Injuries?" Melusine asked.

"We should be good," Kate said. She knew Logan had already reported to Jon but Melusine liked to double check. A good thing too, she thought.

"You should have a look at her right leg," Logan said as they joined the others and went back into the armory.

Kate's reply died on her lips when she saw and smelled the inside of the room. The warm lights, the smell of chili and pepper hanging in the air.

The sound of the cold and howling winds lessened further when Allison closed the door behind them and Kate realized how cold she felt. She sighed, walked over to the couch, and fell into it, closing her eyes.

Melusine gave her a hot water bottle and a blanket right after, despite the blood that covered her.

Jon walked over and handed her a cup of coffee. "Too late in the evening?" he asked.

"I don't think it will stop me from sleeping," Kate murmured and took the cup, smelling the steaming liquid inside. She could feel a smile blossom on her face. "Thank you."

"I'm glad you came back alive," Jon said.

"Presents?" Allison asked, nodding to the bags that Logan set down.

"Presents?" Celeste asked, her head popping up from the cellar hatch.

"Let them arrive and relax for a moment," Melusine said. "They've been out there for the whole day."

"Should probably get a shower too," Kate murmured. She would've liked to teleport into the shower and then back onto the couch, getting up seemed pretty much impossible right now.

"Your leg, Logan said?" Melusine asked.

Kate sighed and nodded, the healer pulling up the blanket.

"My bone armor!" Allison exclaimed as she knelt down next to Kate and touched the flimsy remains of the leg armor. "What did you do?"

“Tried to jump over some alligator thing. It caught me,” Kate said. She leaned her head against the sofa and smiled, thinking back to that moment. *That would’ve been that with ten fewer points in Vitality. Or without that bone armor.* “It splintered instantly.”

Allison frowned.

“And it probably saved her life,” Logan said, the large man setting down his weapons. He’d taken off his helmet by now, a thin line of bloody grime marking where the visor had been.

“We had a thing going,” Kate said.

“Are you getting more mean? Or have you just been holding back all this time?” Allison asked.

Kate grinned. “It’s a sign of affection.”

Allison glanced over to Logan. “Is she hitting on me?” she asked in a mock whisper.

“She likes her axe way too much for that,” Logan said.

“The axe,” Allison said and stood up. “Chipped too, Jesus, what kind of violence do you... don’t answer that.”

“We’ve found out a few more things, got a route into the inner city, and we saw a horde, with new variants of undead,” Logan said.

Jon had sat down in the armchair, intently listening before a tome appeared in his hand. It opened without him touching it, pages fluttering before they stopped at a page. “Anything emergencies we should discuss immediately?”

“Not really,” Logan said. “You got an upgrade too?”

“It’s quite a lot to figure out with the subclass. I feel like I’m back in university with all of this magic,” Jon said. He looked wistful for a moment, staring into nothing before he refocused. “Some of the items you’ve recovered. The small crossbows from the Eratur. They’re enchanted, empowered with magic. I’m still trying to figure out how exactly it works but it empowers things, makes them better, puts focus on what the enchanter deems its purpose. I got the skill earlier this afternoon and it feels strange to use. I feel like I’m just grasping at its potential, and... it feels similar, all of it, to how we ourselves are able to use magic, how our goal and purpose is focused and strengthened, with the things we do and the choices we make. I’m rambling.”

“Everything we learn is valuable,” Logan said.

Kate sipped from her coffee, watching Melusine remove the bandage before she checked her leg with healing magic. She knew it was important but she felt a little too tired to listen to Jon’s theories on magic.

“Can I look at the things you brought?” Allison asked.

“Sure,” Logan said. “Overakar scales. The alligator thing we killed, you should have it listed already, Jon, that’s its name.”

The pages in the tome flickered before Jon wrote into it with a pen. He looked focused. His gray hair didn’t look quite as well cut anymore, growing longer by the day, and he’d grown a short gray and black beard though it looked like he still tried to take care of both. Kate imagined him with a mustache and a feather pen, the image both amusing and fitting with the architect turned Keeper and wielder of the arcane.

“Oh... oh yes,” Allison exclaimed, her voice taking on a deeper note. “This is some good stuff. And a lot of it too. I’ll get to work immediately.”

“Would you mind taking a break in an hour or so?” Logan asked. “We brought some other things.” He opened Kate’s pack and got out the wine they’d taken from the mall, adding the other things as well. Olives and crackers, dried and potted tomatoes.

“That is lovely,” Melusine said, glancing at Logan before she returned her attention to Kate’s leg. “A board game evening maybe?”

“We could watch a movie too, Bert had an old laptop,” Jon said.

“We’d be using a converter to charge it,” Allison said.

“There’s more diesel out there,” Kate said. “Feels like an eternity since I’ve watched a movie.”

“A movie?” Eloise asked, the girl handing up steaming bowls of food for Kate and Logan. “Can we not watch something scary please?”

“I’d like something scary,” Celeste said and nodded.

“Of course you would,” Eloise murmured. “Is that wine?”

“Wine is gross,” Celeste said.

“And how would you know that exactly, young girl?” Jon asked, glancing up from his book.

Kate smiled, looking at the girl before she glanced to Logan.

“We got something for you as well,” he said and reached into the pack. He paused, seeing Celeste’s eyes widening before he smiled and took out the orange juice.

Celeste raised her hands and jumped. “Juice!”

Kate smiled at the scene, watching as the girl struggled to hold the pack of four liters whilst giggling to herself. She felt the warmth of Melusine’s magic flow into her leg, a bit of an itching sensation coming with it but nowhere near as bad as she’d experienced before.

Melusine looked up at her with a look both amused and questioning. “You nearly died for orange juice?”

Kate laughed.

Not about the juice, she thought. It’s about what it means.