

## Chapter 90 Climb

“You chose the darksight skill?” Logan asked, the man standing with his sword at the ready, guns on his back. Out of ammo, like everyone else.

Kate watched the Union fighters prepare to leave, the stronger members carrying with them the dead. She gripped the two weapons in her hands, taking in a deep breath before she glanced at Logan. “Yeah. What did you go for?”

“Nothing yet,” he said. “I wanted to coordinate with you. But I think if you’re able to see in the dark now, I should get the same. It should allow us to infiltrate much better.”

“Already thinking about the next job?” she asked, shifting her back a little. She carried her own *modified* machine gun next to her pack.

“We still have a dungeon to get back out of. But yes. I hope killing that monster will lead to some change in Falstadt and the Maar valley, but the monsters are here to stay. You know that too,” he said.

“I do,” Kate said. She watched the others finish their preparations, seeing tired faces in the dark. The break they’d had had certainly helped but they all needed a little more than rest down here on some blood covered dungeon floor. And they deserved more too, with how hard they had fought. With those they had lost. And with their victory. “We’ll take point,” Kate said, glancing back at Valery and Alexander.

“I appreciate it,” Valery said. “And we can switch out whenever you need a break.”

Kate smiled under her damaged helmet, then she tapped Logan’s shoulder. She didn’t comment on what Valery had said. Instead, she moved out and into the corpse covered hall where she had already fought twice. Her new skill let her see the carnage she had left behind, where it had been utter darkness before.

Darksight wasn’t the only thing that had changed. She found that her third tier Sound Perception affected her Echo Awareness as well, the added awareness going out farther, the blurred image clearer than before. She wasn’t sure about her Tremor sense yet but she supposed it made sense that those skills fed off each other in some ways.

*Don’t plan to get surprised again anytime soon,* she thought, looking up at where the Harbingers had come flying down at them, the skeletal creatures now mere corpses within the mounds all around, monsters cut apart or riddled with bullets.

She focused and led the way onward through the dark, a few of the Union combatants using their headlamps in the back, to not stumble and fall on the sea of bodies.

The floor was clear, none of the undead she had detected above having come down in the last few hours.

Kate ascended the broad stairwell to the next layer of the dungeon with calm and steady steps. Much of the heat remained, corpses and blood still covering the tunnels. But the dim red glow was gone, and the darkness that had come back to replace it felt far less oppressive than it would’ve a few months back. They had come down here to find and kill the source of the undead. And as far as Kate could tell for the time being, they had succeeded.

The remaining undead that were strewn about in these tunnels, or waiting up and above, in the city of Falstadt, they were just another thing now, to take care of.

Throughout the next six layers, they only encountered three small groups of normal undead. They rushed at Kate and Logan just like the first ever undead they had encountered had charged at them.

Compared to the difficult fights those battles had once been, Kate and Logan slaughtered through the dead without resistance, each blow decisive, brutal, and unwavering.

When they reached the top floor, there were a few dozen more of the creatures but their numbers didn't make a difference.

Kate killed the last four with a wide sweeping strike of her mace, their bodies splattered against the former dungeon wall before she moved on without another thought. They were quiet as they crossed the distance towards the broken section in the wall, the same place where they had killed their first Overakar. Where Kate had nearly lost her leg.

She gripped her weapons and listened closely, tuning in her hearing to find any traces of large undead monstrosities. But she heard nothing. Kate tapped the axe in her left hand once before she walked into the hall, Logan and the Union fighters following behind.

She stopped near the broken in entrance to the dungeon and looked outside. Bright white snow and decaying undead corpses littered the street beyond but Kate looked up instead. She took off her helmet and closed her eyes, feeling the warm light on her skin. She breathed in deep and smiled, then shielded her eyes as she looked up at the sun, and the clear light blue sky.

*Been a while*, she thought and breathed out with more relief than she'd felt since the first goblin had tried to kill her in the forest. Logan was right, she knew that. The monsters were very likely here to stay, and in time, they would have to face the next challenge. But here, down below Falstadt, her and Logan, and the Union, had proven that humanity was not done. Not by a long shot.

And while the cost had been great, they had all grown in power, had all proven to themselves and to others, that the dark could not just be survived, but it could be pushed back. It could be overcome.

"Dispatch, this is Union Spear," Valery said. "We're out. Do you copy?"

A few nearby radios crackled. *"God, I am glad to hear your voice. I assume we have you to thank for the sudden change in weather?"*

"It's really just good to breathe some fresher air," Valery said. "What's the status up here in the city?"

*"The undead have cleared out as soon as the weather changed. They're still around but hiding in one place or the other. I've got you a clear way back to the villa. Beds, food, and drinks are ready,"* Veronica reported.

"What about showers?" someone asked into their radio.

*"Already sent the cooks to heat up the tank. I'm afraid there will be a line."*

Kate smiled. She grit her teeth then breathed out with a slight shudder going down her back. She didn't know which of those things sounded the best. Maybe the fact that she didn't have to decide.

"Still got undead left in the city. Stay focused everyone," Valery said but she didn't sound particularly tense. Mostly tired but Kate supposed that after everything they had faced down in the dungeon, what was another Wyvern or Overakar?

She still focused on her hearing and tremor sense, knowing that not everyone had the Vigor stat, let alone at such a high number as herself and Logan. She felt spent but many of the Union combatants here with them would not be much help in another fight. Not today.

Kate jumped down and landed in the street, waiting for a moment to listen for anything nearby. But nothing moved and she signaled for the others to come down as well. *The smells will be horrible in the coming days. Now that the weather has cleared up.*

She sighed and helped the others. *A thought for tomorrow. To safety first. And to sleep.*

Veronica and the more perceptive members of their group led them back to the Villa without any monster encounters, the gates of the estate closed behind them before the last of the tension in the group fell away.

Kate set her weapons against the estate wall and took off her helmet, then set down the machine gun and her pack.

*“Just got the news. Congratulations from everyone. Call in whenever and take your time to recover. Orders from Melusine,”* Jon’s voice came to her mind.

She smiled at that, making her way into the villa to grab some food and drinks. With everyone here, she supposed it was safe enough to take off her damaged armor but she’d have to find some fresh clothes first. There was already a line and when she got to the front, she saw two people from the dispatch team handing out fresh sets of clothing. She gave them her size and received a set as well, then moved on to the next station where cooks had food and drinks ready on the right, and the line for the shower was on the left, crafters helping with removing armor.

Kate had eaten the beans earlier so she decided to get the shower first.

When the combatant in line in front of her glanced back, he nodded her way and gestured for her to go past.

“It’s fine,” she said.

He stepped aside further. “I insist. Wouldn’t be here without you, Kate.”

The people in front heard it and turned around as well, each and every one of them stepping aside.

“First shower for the Berserker,” someone said.

“Just don’t wreck it,” another one called out.

“Might wreck you first,” Kate retorted instantly, rolling her eyes as she walked past them with a smile. She stopped in front of the two crafters, both of them glancing at her and then each other.

“Jesus, woman, what did you do to that armor,” the man said, touching his black beard with a gloved hand before he grabbed a set of pliers.

“She fought,” the other crafter said, a younger woman with blue eyes. She smiled at Kate and got to work helping her out of the set. “Like everyone else,” she added with a whisper.

Curtained off, Kate stepped into the shower, steaming hot water flowing down on her a moment later.

She sighed, nearly sobbed, feeling the filth and blood cleaned away from her skin. She stood there almost stunned for a minute or two, then reminded herself that they had limited water and an entire

line of exhausted fighters were waiting to get their turn. She sighed with a smile and grabbed a brush, then got to work, the white shower floor already brown and near black.

She was done far too quickly for her liking but she knew that Eloise could provide a bath as soon as they were back in the castle. Drying off, she shivered and put on the fresh set of clothes. She felt as if she was reborn, stepping back out into the entrance hall with a tired smile on her face, seeing the line of blood covered combatants with broken armor, envy, joy, hurt, and relief on their faces. They would not forget the past few days, that much was certain.

Kate went to the food station and got a plate piled up with smoked ham and mashed potatoes, everything drenched in wonderful smelling gravy. Thanking the cooks, she sat down on one of the nearby couches and dug in, occasionally listening to one conversation or the other. But mostly, she was focused on the food. It was good. Really fucking good. Magically enhanced. Unnecessarily as they would all want to sleep right after stuffing themselves with food.

She found that she didn't find the mana to have been wasted. Not in the slightest. Even if she wouldn't utilize the stamina buff for once, it was most certainly the best meal she'd had in her life.

Logan joined her soon after. The others must've let him cut the line as well.

Kate smiled at him when he sat down opposite her.

"What?" he asked and started eating. "Oh. This is good," he murmured, too quiet for anyone but her to hear.

"There it is," she said and leaned back. She looked around and saw some envious glances coming her way, the group of waiting fighters a strange sight to her now that she was showered and stuffing herself with food. It felt almost mundane. Like they'd come back from a long shift.

*But I suppose that's exactly what this is,* she thought, her smile waning before she took the next bite.

She glanced back at Logan. The day had been a lot. She didn't want to spend the rest of it on worries. She was showered. There was food. And soon, she would sleep.

"Strange to see you like that, out of your armor," she said.

He wore track pants and a hoodie, both light gray in color, neither too baggy nor too tight.

He smiled a tired smile. "Yeah. I'm dressed like one of the youths I used to work with." He chuckled, looking out the nearby window. "Should have a pack of smokes and my phone in my pants, maybe a flip-knife."

Kate leaned back and sighed. "They used to carry flip-knives?"

"A few, yes. Not one of them knew how to use one. I even tried to teach one of them but she lost interest as soon as she found out her forty-five year old social worker was more skilled with the illegal weapon she was carrying than she was. Disappointing."

Kate smiled. She felt like there was a story there. But she felt too tired to socialize more, and she didn't want to keep him from eating.

She also wondered if she could get seconds.

It turned out that she could.

Valery joined them a while later, herself still in her armor. "I'm sorry to interrupt you two again but knowing you'll likely want to return to your castle soon, I thought we could quickly discuss the next potential steps. If that doesn't suit you, I can contact Jon in the coming days as well."

Logan glanced at Kate, then looked at Valery. They were all tired but they knew that even with everything they'd achieved today, there was a lot to do. "Shoot," he said.

Valery nodded. "Our scouting teams and dispatch will monitor the situation in the city and especially around the dungeon, to see how things develop. We'll try to locate the remaining undead before our combat teams go in to take them out. As safely as possible. The experience should help quite a few people gain some more levels. Is that acceptable for you, or do you want to hunt them down yourself?"

Kate glanced at Logan, then back to Valery. "We're good," she said. "As long as the undead are taken out."

Kate felt like she did in fact want to hunt them down herself. But if it benefited the other combatants more, she was fine with taking a step back. She'd certainly killed her fair share of Overakar, Wyverns, and Ogres by now.

"Do call us if you need assistance," Logan added.

"We will," Valery said. "We will take stock and spend time recovering before we start clearing out the city. I'm sure some of our people will figure out the best ways to deal with all the corpses littering the streets."

"You plan to move into Falstadt?" Logan asked.

"There are no definitive plans yet. But I do think it is our responsibility to clean up this mess. Before diseases start spreading or some new magical phenomenon takes hold again. We do plan to stay in the bunkers for the time being but we'll invest time afterwards into moving goods from the city back into the bunkers, and we'll likely expand our foothold here. Whatever you and your people at the castle need. From Falstadt or from us, if we can provide it, you get it, no questions asked."

"We appreciate it," Logan said. "I'm sure Jon has some ideas already."

"We'll stay in touch," Valery said. "There will likely be a funeral next week near Kruppenhof, the closest village near the Hein Pass. We'll wait with any definitive plans until we know the undead are dealt with, but I'm sure everyone here would welcome it if you two and everyone at the castle would come. We can provide a combat team or two for safe traversal if it's too much of a risk but I know everyone at Keilberg Castle has at least some combat experience. Let alone you two."

"We'll talk to them about it," Logan said.

Valery yawned, then refocused. "Sorry. And I appreciate it. The last thing I wanted to ask about are the artifacts we've recovered from the Priest of Ceres and its cavern. I wanted to have our crafters have a look, there's a wide range of Classes we have available but we're happy to incorporate Allison, Jon, and Eloise as well, if they are interested. The main priority for now is to make sure everything is safe, then they can figure out what to do with them."

"What did you find exactly?" Logan asked.

"The sword, of course. Then, a small glowing ruby, already identified as a powerful magical conduit of some kind, though apparently unusable in its current form. Same is true for a small shard of a

glowing material we found near the altar. I have some ideas for all that but if you two wish to claim the items, you are free to do so. Your contributions to the clearing of the dungeon and our survival was paramount, without question.”

“I don’t mind. The crafters can check and see what they can come up with. But Allison would bite off our heads if she won’t be able to have a word in that process,” Kate said.

“We’ll check with them. Is it possible to keep the items here in Falstadt?” Logan asked.

“Of course. Our highest leveled crafters are here already, and once we confirm the undead threat has lowered considerably in the coming days, we’ll move more people here as well,” Valery said and glanced at Kate. “Word on your Overakar armor has made the rounds, and not just combatants want a similar set.”

Kate smiled. “Plenty of corpses around in the city.”

“And a few more to be hunted down as well, I’m sure,” Valery said. “Thanks for your time. I’ll leave you to your recovery now, and let us know when you’re leaving.”

“Will do,” Logan said. “Thanks for your work, Valery. You did well.”

Her mouth was a thin line but she nodded slightly. “We are here.” She stood up. “Now. There’s still quite a lot to do before I can get some sleep as well. Good... fighting with you.” She smiled now.

Kate gave her a nod.

“You too, and the Union,” Logan said.

“Oh, and if you want to talk to Jon, the radios are set up. Just talk to Veronica.” Valery added.

Kate smiled at the thought. If she could, she’d just choose to teleport back into the armory but talking to the others seemed like the next best thing.

“A chat and then sleep?” Logan asked.

“Yeah,” Kate said and yawned.