

Chapter 40 Wasteland

The drive through the forest was quiet. Kate heard nothing but the car itself and the occasional movement from Ethan or herself. She kept her eyes and ears open for any dangers, often checking the skies to see if Wyverns were in the vicinity. She didn't see a single one.

"Shit," Ethan murmured and slowed to a stop.

The road ahead was split, the asphalt ripped open with a several meter gulf between this side and the other. To the left and right were toppled and burnt trees, glowing embers still visible. There was no way to drive on.

"We shouldn't stay here in the open," Kate said, pointing to the left side of the road. "Park where the trees are still whole."

"How close are we?" Logan asked, the man standing on the back of the truck as Ethan drove to the left.

"Not sure, half an hour or so on foot, maybe more," Kate answered.

"The road doesn't look much better farther down into the valley," Logan added.

Kate opened the door when Ethan turned off the car. She jumped out and landed on the ash covered ground with her heavy boots. Hammer in both hands, she waited and listened as the others disembarked.

"We should eat the sandwiches," Grey said.

Kate got the prepared food and unwrapped it. She didn't think much of it until she took the first bite. *Wow*. Looking at the sandwich in her hand, she raised a brow. It was way too good for the ingredients that were there. As if she had found this sandwich freshly prepared after an entire day without eating. But they just had lunch.

They ate in silence and Kate checked her status. A change only occurred when she was done.

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: Common Cheese Sandwich +10 stamina regeneration. Duration 2 hours

"Two hours," she murmured.

"Yes, seems like it's the same," Logan said.

"My benefit just reset to two hours. The time was down to one before," Ethan said. "Is there any open space nearby? We could drive off road," he added as he joined her side.

“No, not up towards the mountain side,” Kate said. “Maybe if large parts were burnt away entirely, but even then I’d think it difficult to get through with a car. Circling around via Grenndorf or Keilberg is going to be difficult as well.”

“And way too dangerous,” Logan said. “This is as far as we drive. Keys?”

“Left them in the car,” Ethan said.

“Safer,” Kate confirmed. “Let’s grab the bags and go.”

The others got to work without another word, Kate joining them.

Lugging around goods for half an hour is going to be an issue. She assumed they would have to decide more carefully on what to take with them and what to leave behind.

Stepping up to the gulf, an elongated crater stretched for several dozen meters across and past the road. Several power poles had been downed, the remaining wiring hanging loosely to the ground. Trees had been burnt, nothing but blackened trunks remaining, stripped of their branches, leaves, and needles. The familiar smell of burning and burnt wood lingered, though the scale was entirely different from most things Kate had seen before.

Beyond the gulf, where the forest rolled into the Maar valley, bombs and subsequent forest fires had left the previous autumn trees in devastation. The sky was cloudy, but visibility wasn’t bad. Logan and Grey looked through their binoculars, Kate keeping her eyes and ears on their surroundings.

She thought it strange that entire sections of trees had been spared. That wasn’t how forest fires worked, but she assumed it either had to do with the bombs or the tree creatures she had seen in the Willow River.

“It looks like a war zone,” Logan murmured, taking down the binoculars. “A wasteland.”

“Because that’s what it is,” Kate said, starting towards the left side of the gulf. “We should keep going. Let’s hope there’s enough left of the village.”

She heard the others follow. Logan’s steps were as heavy as the last time. Ethan seemed hesitant but not careless, and Grey, he sounded lighter. More precise.

They crossed where the gulf began, walking over ash and embers, the gray pants and jackets providing accidental camouflage in the burnt landscape.

It’s so quiet, Kate thought as they followed the side of the road, entire sections of asphalt ripped out, fallen trees blocking the way. With a scene like this, she would expect helicopters, dozens of firefighters, trucks, sirens, and shouting. Instead all she heard were the steps and breaths of her companions.

Her own steps, she noted, were just as subtle as those of the Assassin.

They occasionally stopped to check their surroundings with and without binoculars. The burnt stumps at least meant that the Bograths they had encountered before would have a harder time hiding up between the branches.

“Buildings,” Logan said after they had walked for a while. He leaned out from behind a tree, binoculars close to the slit in his helmet. “There are people. Not sure if orcs or humans. Fires too.”

“Quiet,” Grey said, letting go of his bags. “Something is moving ahead. Fast.”

Kate heard them a moment later, seeing the figures of orcs and goblins running between the trees, towards the village buildings in the distance.

“They haven’t seen us,” Grey said.

“What’s with them, they’re running so fast, they’ll tire out in no time and nothing is following them,” Logan spoke, watching through his binoculars.

“Undead. We should move, in case there are more,” Grey said.

“He’s right,” Kate added.

She walked next to Logan until they found a small crater and a few fallen trees providing shelter, the others getting out their binoculars as they got closer to the settlement.

“Orcs and goblins with torches, campfires. I think they built some fortifications too. It’s a camp,” Logan said. “Fuck.”

“You shouldn’t swear,” Ethan said.

Kate didn’t miss the smirk on his face. She raised her brows. “Can we manage them?”

“I don’t know- wait. Is that, yes, I think there’s an undead. They’re shooting it with arrows, more coming from the east,” Logan said with quick words. “Not the group we’ve already seen, I think. Half the barricades are already destroyed, there are bodies all over. Wolves and other things are with the undead...”

“So at least we’re not the only beings attacked by the undead,” Kate said.

Logan turned her way. “What do you think?”

She shrugged. “Several birds with one hammer?”

“We’re talking about fighting monsters that could kill us. We could retreat and find another village less problematic,” Logan said. He looked at the three in turn.

Kate looked at Grey, then at Ethan, and back to Logan. “They probably killed everyone in Kahrsdorf. I’m going.”

“As a... as am I,” Grey said.

“That fire comet spell needs sacrifices,” Ethan said with a grin.

“You were out for a while, old man,” Kate added, though she kept her senses focused on the surroundings.

Logan was quiet for a few seconds before he shook his head. “Can’t believe I’m doing this again,” he whispered, too quiet for anyone but Kate to hear. “Alright. We try to sneak in while they’re distracted, and see what we can do. Kate, you wait with your berserker spells until we really need them. Let’s try to use the houses for cover, or what remains of them.”

Kate nodded and followed the sword wielding Paladin as they advanced through the partially burnt down forest, the many trees and trunks providing ample cover. She soon heard the sounds of battle. Steel hitting steel, screeches, painful moans, and the guttural shouts of orcs. She grit her teeth and kept low, the four of them sneaking closer to the village. Kate clicked her tongue but nothing in the vicinity suggested traps or hidden monsters.

The trees led close to a gated two story mansion, most of the upper floor collapsed, bricks, stone, and furniture piling up in front of the burnt down structure. They moved alongside the steel fence when Kate heard a whimpering sound from near the rubble. *A dog?*

"I hear something," she said in a quiet voice. The group stopped. Her echo location didn't give her much. "I'll be right back," she added, silently moving past the fence where something had bent it out of shape, until she came up on a large pile of rubble.

Below a chunk of wall, she found a white fluffy tail. *Fuck. It's one of those wolves.* She moved ahead and found its snout, one eye staring back at her.

It growled.

Kate knelt down, and growled back.

More whimpering was the response.

Quiet now. She looked to her group. *A risk, but this thing will be ripped apart if an undead finds it.*

"Don't you dare make me regret this," she whispered and grabbed onto the massive chunk of wall with one hand, gritting her teeth before she pulled. The wall moved ever so slightly, raised more until she could see the large head of the wolf. Gray fur and black eyes. *You're a large one.*

It just stared at her.

"Go on," she said, gesturing outwards with her head.

The wolf moved out and past her, limping with one of its hind legs.

Kate listened carefully to hear any erratic changes in its movements before she lowered the wall section carefully. The wolf was gone when she returned to the others.

"We're saving them now?" Ethan asked.

"Have you never played any games?" Grey asked in a whisper.

"It could've attacked you," Logan said.

"It didn't," Kate said. She hadn't even been uncertain. The wolf was injured and scared.

"It didn't," Logan repeated slowly, taking in a deep breath before he continued along the fence and towards the first houses of the town.

Just like the surrounding forests, the village hadn't been spared by the flames. Entire buildings had collapsed, smoke still rising from a few in the distance.

The orcs had started to build palisades but they had either not gotten far, or the fires and undead had already destroyed most of it.

They moved quickly past the last remaining tree trunks before the village and came up on a burnt out cottage. Crouching when they were inside, they reoriented as Kate listened.

"Fighting from the front of the village, seems like the undead reached it," she said in a whisper. "I can hear growls and shouting from deeper inside, along the street. Wargs, possibly an Ogre."

"Shit," Logan murmured.

"Nothing on the left flank," Kate said.

She moved closer to the windows on the other side, trying not to step on the broken glass. The smell of fire and ash was all present. Looking out, she could see charred bodies on the road, human or not, she couldn't be sure. Many of the buildings were burnt out entirely, others merely damaged.

Grey opened his pack and started sketching into a small book, sometimes glancing out of the shattered and burnt windows. "Two Ogres, I think," he said after a few seconds had passed.

"You think?" Ethan asked. "You're not sure?"

Grey's hand stopped, his mouth opening and closing. "I l... I listen t... to the winds."

"Two it is," Logan said as he stepped over.

Kate glanced at the rudimentary map that Grey showed. She raised her brows, seeing the lines perfectly straight, barricades and roads marked, store names and possible targets already included.

"This side is clear?" Logan asked, looking at Kate as he pointed at a part of the map.

"I can't hear anything from there," Kate said.

"Then we go around the back, focus on the left flank and take out any guards as fast and quietly as we can. Stores and buildings we deem useful, we raid, any objections?" Logan said.

Kate shook her head, the others doing the same.

"Then we move," he added.

Kate went out past the burnt out kitchen and through a collapsed wall. Keeping close to the trees and bushes beyond, she followed the line of one story buildings, all of them homes, most of them at least damaged. She still heard the fighting on the other side of the village but none of the creatures seemed to come this way. When she reached the last house, she went back towards the road leading through the village, the others following behind, first Grey, then Ethan, and Logan at the rear.

She saw corpses on the street, though most of them were goblins or orcs. Burnt and destroyed palisades remained on the other end of the village, dark fields beyond. She saw copses of trees in the distance, some burnt, others carrying ash subdued autumn colors. Between, she saw high reaching barns and silos, the farm houses somewhere past. Kate listened and pointed towards the fields. "After we're done here," she said, not waiting for an answer as she scanned the two story buildings lining the other side of the street.

A bakery, windows shattered and glowing embers still within, the building barely standing. Next, a small woodworking store, burnt down as well. Past that, she saw the shattered windows of a real estate agency, the office within mostly untouched, at least by the flames. Next to that store, she saw a broken down wooden door leading into an intact but dark interior. Above the entrance hung a small fir tree made of what looked like fake grass. There was no storefront window and the small lettering above the entrance was singed but she could still make out the word *Nadel*.

Kate pointed, checking both sides of the street. She saw a few goblins running on the other side of the village and waited until they had vanished into the cottage their group had initially entered. Motioning to the others, she rushed past the burnt corpses and debris, her hammer ready as she entered past the broken in door. She could see the dark outline of stairs beyond and went up to make space for her companions. She listened to the surroundings, still hearing battle sounds and now the heavy steps of her allies on the creaky wooden stairs.

The door above was opened as well, light drifting in through the windows. There were no monsters.

Kate nearly hit a table covered in boxes and about three dozen small wooden figures, decorations, tape, nails, needles, clocks, and pieces of fabric. The entire broad room was covered in stuff. The floor didn't look much better, but she supposed no matter how much chaos someone could bring to this place, it would just rearrange everything.

"Whoa, what the fuck did we stumble into," Ethan whispered as Logan closed the door behind him. There was barely enough space for them to stand, Kate and Grey already stepping onto the wooden floor covered in tiny goods.

"This place is busy," Logan said. "To work then. Anything useful into the bags. Fill up the boxes to make everything less loose."

Kate put her hammer into the leather strap added to her belt and checked if her Glock was still holstered. It was. She heard Logan move one of the tables in front of the entrance.

"Is there a back room?" Grey asked.

Kate unsheathed one of her hunting knives and pointed to the back. Four windows lined the right side wall, several tables and shelves covering the rest of the rather tight space. She wasn't sure if there was another door but let the way, small pieces of glass and wood breaking below her heavy boots until she came up on another open door. A small and dark room with two more open doors was beyond. She flicked on her headlamp and listened. Not hearing anything, she checked and found a tiny office where she saw a cash register, a tiny safe, a small table with a laptop, and a chair. There was no sight of the owner. The other door led to a small bathroom.

"Clear," she said and went back. "No exit either, only one way out," she added in a whisper.

"Still have the windows," Ethan joked.

"I can jump that. Not so sure about you," Kate said as she set down her bags and grabbed one of the boxes. *Now, where to start.*

There was an insane amount of different things. Kate sighed, remembering how she had fantasized about filling up a shopping cart as a kid. This store kind of felt that way, with how high the shelves reached and how stacked everything was. A tremor that slightly shook the walls brought her back into the reality of the moment and she started to pack things.

Kate heard the others doing the same. Grey in near silence, fast and deliberate movements, Ethan in broad and louder sweeps, and Logan, slower and with presumably more thought.

She packed candles, fabrics, Christmas lights, cups, several kinds of string, packing materials, needles, buttons, leather straps and pieces, entire sewing machines and replacement parts. Three bags, she filled before she heard the now familiar guttural sounds from the street below. *Frantic and injured. They're afraid and scrambling.*

"Quiet," she said to the others before the noise would reach them too. All of them stopped. They didn't move.

Kate heard more than five goblins and several orcs, all of them rushing down the road. Two of them stumbled, one fell. She heard one of them breathe heavy, he fell behind the others. Grunts and snarls now resounded farther down the road. *Undead.*

A few of the goblins ran down the road but some of them entered the intact stores, going into the real estate agency. Others came up towards them. "Hide," she whispered. "Goblins and orcs coming

up,” she said and grabbed a hunting knife, stepping past Ethan as Grey crouched and moved into the mess of goods.

Logan looked at her before he pushed past one of the tables, several things falling to the ground as he tried to get space. All of them crouched and hid in the chaos as best they could. Kate knew the goblins hadn't heard or simply didn't expect any more adversaries in the town.

They're afraid, she thought and prepared, feeling her heart beat as she itched to activate her magic.