

Chapter 52 Stakes

Kate raised the battle axe, steadied herself in the snow, and brought it down with all the strength that she had.

Her arms shook and the wooden handle vibrated as the blade sunk deep into the wood. Almost halfway through the one meter tree trunk. She could hear the sound of steel tearing through wood, could feel the vibrations moving through the handle of her weapon and the vibrations that traveled along her body and into the ground.

The tree shook slightly as she ripped out the axe. The massive weapon made for war. It felt the same as her hammer had. No longer a ridiculous thing to wield. It felt light. Another tool that she could use.

She raised the one broad blade, aimed, and brought it down again. Her hands traveled past the tree, her grip on the heavy weapon steady, the wood splintered and broken on the left side of the trunk. Not a perfect cut but then she supposed the weapon hadn't been sharpened in a long while.

Kate put a hand against the trunk and pushed, hearing the leaves and snow above shifting against each other as the tree fell into the forest near her new home. She moved along the trunk and cut away the branches, each with a single strike of her axe.

She heard Logan shift and aim his rifle. Kate stilled and waited, her breath a white mist in the cold.

He lowered his gun once more. "Wolf. Not undead it seems."

Kate smiled. She knew the creatures were dangerous too but so far they hadn't attacked them outright. She was glad some of them were still out there, not yet turned into mindless monsters.

She put her arm through the small leather strap Allison had added to the axe to sling the weapon around her shoulder. Kate saw Logan pick up her rifle, herself crouching down before she touched the fallen tree and reached her arm around it as far as she could. She grabbed on and lifted with a grunt. The trunk moved and she pulled it up. She could feel it slip and let it fall.

Kate breathed deep and reached down again. This time, she got a better grip.

Logan nodded her way.

She nodded back and started pulling the trunk in the direction of the castle wall. Not far but she could feel the weight, glad for the snow as she dragged the trunk back and set it down beyond the tree line.

She breathed hard and felt the cold air in her lungs, rolled her shoulders, and went back towards the trees. They would need more for what Jon had suggested. A lot more.

The hour passed with reasonable progress. It turned out cutting down and dragging around entire tree trunks was a lot more difficult than digging a trench through snow. Logan's strength level wasn't as high as Kate's either and he had next to no experience cutting down trees, which meant

most of the work was for her to do. With the food buff running out, the two returned to the others and ate their next meal.

Kate wolfed down the barley soup with smoked bacon, checking and preparing her gear before they went out again, this time not to cut down trees but to hunt and kill undead.

They went west and circled around the castle, first south, then east. Soon, they found their first target. A group of four undead humans and a single orc.

Kate watched the creatures stalk through the forest, then lowered her rifle. She set it down against a tree and grabbed her axe, then set that one down too. She stepped a little closer to Logan and looked into the forest. She closed her eyes and focused on her feet. It was difficult to make out the vibrations in the ground through her boots. With her experience and the skill level of Tremor Sense, she wasn't even sure she really felt the monsters, or if what she felt was just a strange placebo effect because she knew the creatures were there.

She kept a hand on the head of her hammer and gave a slight nod in the direction of Logan.

He stood a few meters away from her but Aura of Silence had leveled up to seven, half a meter more for each one.

Logan aimed and flicked the safety of his rifle.

Kate breathed out. "Three. Two. One." Her magic activated, the world around her stilling, as if sound itself did not exist. She saw the first flash from the corner of her vision. It was brighter than before, enhanced with sacred magic. Flash after flash flared up in perfect silence as she counted. Ten bullets in five seconds.

She dropped her Aura of Silence, hearing the last cartridge case falling into the snow, a slight sizzling sound coming from the heated cases in the cold.

"One human standing, and one orc. The human is hit once," Logan said. "Ready to fire?"

Kate glanced at her rifle. She heard the screeching of the two remaining monsters now. They were coming in their direction. "No." She tapped the hammer head and raised the weapon out of the leather strap on her belt. "I should try my new skills."

"I'll have your back," Logan said and raised his rifle.

Kate looked at her hammer and focused on the metal. She activated Reverberating Charge and felt her blood pulse, her chest heating up as her mana flowed into the weapon. Breathing out, she could feel the slight vibrations running through the war hammer in her hands. Her hearing let her know the creatures were coming close, her tremor sense did the same but more subdued. She clicked her tongue and perceived a flickering hazy image from ahead and behind her.

Kate started walking towards the beasts and activated both Mindless Ferocity and Blood Frenzy, the world around her narrowing to her single minded goal.

The human was first to reach them.

Kate breathed deep and screamed, activating Thunderous Shout. She felt her body tense as she felt the magic rush through her, the world shaking as her scream made the undead stumble to the side.

It tried to get up but stumbled again.

Kate stopped screaming and walked forward. She could feel the vibrations in her hammer but instead brought down her boot into the snow. She watched the undead screech, its chest already half gone from Logan's bullet. Blood Rupture activated as she heard her second foe rush her from the right. A wave of blood like magic formed from near her boot, spreading out in a wide circle around her, slamming back the two undead and burning through their skin and armor.

She saw the human fall and turned towards the orc, the creature pushing on, unwitting to the damage done by the burning blood covering its face and arms. It rushed her. A wild beast. A monster existing only to kill and purge the living.

Kate swung her hammer, charging her strike with blood magic to combine with the sound trapped within her steel. A moment later, her weapon connected with the side of the charging monster, all the magic released into it with the singular blow. Its skin bulged and rippled right before its entire left flank exploded in a mess of gore, its crude sword flung away as its arm exploded into bits of flesh and shattered bone.

She watched the undead orc stumble back with half its head and torso gone before it fell and died its second death.

Kate breathed, listening to her surroundings before she deactivated her abilities. She could feel her blood pulse as the health she had used for her strikes returned to her. Some of her mana was gone too but her Aura of Silence had been more demanding by far than the single use of Reverberating Charge.

It takes time to charge up, Kate thought and looked at the spread out gore left in the wake of her short fight.

"Usable," Logan said. "The scream hurt to hear. Maybe some more distance."

Kate glanced at him and walked past. "Maybe you just have to get used to it."

He grunted.

Back by her gear, Kate sat down in the snow. "Keep guard and drag me back to the castle if I don't move or say something after a minute or two."

"Will do."

This time, Kate focused on her Sound Perception. Already, her hearing was enhanced but with the evolution, there was a change.

Slowly, she noticed her vision blurring, the tongue in her mouth feeling burnt, the connection she had felt from her body to the ground slowly fading. She couldn't smell the forest anymore and she closed her eyes when she could feel her heartbeat picking up due to her worsening vision.

Don't be afraid, she told herself and focused only on her ears.

The wind moving through the leaves. Logan's breathing. His heartbeat. The slight shifts of his body. She tuned him out and reached beyond. Out into the forest. Wind. Wind and leaves. A creature, running, two small legs. A squirrel perhaps, or a fox. She breathed and heard her heart beat in her ears, loud like thunder. Kate grit her teeth but couldn't feel the pressure. She opened her mouth instead and focused her attention outwards once again.

Nothing and then crunching snow. Fast steps. Heavier than the critter. Groans. She deactivated her spell, breathing hard as she opened her eyes. Her breathing hastened when her vision remained impaired but Kate calmed down soon after as the effects faded. She could feel the ground once

more, slowly but surely, and she could see. And she felt the pain from her cheek. She must've bitten into it.

Before Kate's senses returned to normal, she pointed in the direction from where she had heard the moving creatures.

"Are you alright?" Logan asked.

"It's a freaky spell," Kate said. "Will take some getting used to. But what's new." She waited another few seconds and finally stood up. The spell used mana too which made her consider adding at least a few points into Wisdom in the future.

Without a dedicated mage, she supposed both herself and Logan would have to cover all the bases.

"You heard something?" Logan asked and looked through his scope. "Can't see anything in this direction."

Logan lowered his rifle, checked the magazine and loaded it back in.

"I heard them," Kate said, shouldering her weapons before she started towards the sounds she could no longer hear. "Come on."

The rest of the afternoon passed with Kate and Logan hunting for undead. They decided to continue their woodcutting work into the early evening, even without the stamina regeneration bonus. Staying close to the castle walls provided them with a fast way to retreat if necessary. Slowly, they cut down the closest trees to the wall, Kate pulling them closer to be further processed.

They had dinner, not infused with magic, and soon went to bed, Kate waking up six hours later, feeling rested and ready to tackle the next day. She had to wait a few hours longer for Logan and the rest to wake up, taking over Melusine's last watch to let the woman sleep a little more as well.

The next day passed much the same, Kate's abilities steadily rising, herself and Logan more efficient now at hunting down the undead invading their territory, Kate's Sound Perception helping them find the creatures more quickly. Whenever they couldn't find more undead in the range of their radios, they would continue with their work near the walls.

Three days of this passed, the sky remaining gray throughout it all. They were glad another blizzard hadn't come and gone, their work progressing well. And still, Kate felt uneasy. The undead came from the east. Smaller groups and larger ones, most of them once human. People once from the villages and towns in the Maar Valley.

No matter how many they killed, there were always more the next day.

Kate raised her axe and brought it down, splitting the thin trunk with a single strike. She let go of the axe and grabbed the orc sword left on the ground, slicing away at the front of the halved trunk until she produced a pointed stake. She went to the other side and did the same, then continued with the second half of the trunk. This one had been thin enough to be used as is, other trees she'd had to split two or four ways along their length, a lot of work without any machines, likely weeks and months for her old self, but mere days with all her magic and abilities.

She dragged the two stakes back to the trench they had dug in the snow, waiting until Jon and Logan gave her the clear before she slid down one of the slopes they had added.

Kate grabbed the shovel leaning against the castle wall, raised it up and slammed it down into the frozen ground. She split the earth, feeling the vibrations traveling through the ground as she loosened the earth as well as she could. Setting aside the shovel, she grabbed the first stake and slammed it straight down. The second one, she angled out and away from the wall, both to catch any undead or other monsters that would charge their castle. They'd had to extend the trench to make the defense more effective. Any creature charging at their walls would now have to get past a two meter wide trench and stakes both angled up and outwards.

By now, they were done with the eastern and southern facing parts of the castle. The northern side faced a several meter cliff to the Willow river rushing past below. They weren't yet done with the western part, though they had added stakes in front of the gate already.

It would make it more difficult for Kate and Logan to get back inside as well but they didn't want to compromise. Jon had added several ropes to the battlements that could be thrown out to allow either of the two to get back inside in an emergency, they had more than enough Strength by now to use them without much trouble.

"It's getting dark," Jon said.

Kate checked the stakes she had added, making sure they could take at least some weight before she left them. She turned around, finding the stakes a little too close to safely climb out on the slope.

Logan walked over. "Your hammer."

Kate held it up, getting the shovel out as well when Logan grabbed on and pulled her up, each holding on with one hand only.

Jon and Melusine handed down the ladder they had made.

Kate pushed it into the snow and checked if it sat solidly. She caught the rope Jon threw her as well and wrapped it around her arm before she climbed up the slanted wooden ladder.

Logan followed, the wood creaking with the weight of the large man and all of his equipment.

This time, it was Kate who reached out her hand and helped him up the last bit of distance.

She grabbed onto the ladder and pulled it back up once the man was on the battlements. She lowered it down on the other side until it touched the ground. They had cleared out most of the snow in the yard, a thin layer left and more added with the light snowfall of the past few days but now they would be able to walk around and fight in the open once more.

Kate looked down at the row of stakes pointing up and outwards in the broad trench they had dug in the snow. She knew it would feel a little more safe again once they were done with the entire length of the wall. She sighed and checked her equipment, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything out in the snow. Hammer, pistol, knives, battle axe, her rifle, and her pack. She looked out towards the trees and found the increased distance to the forest due to their work helped as well in making this place more defensible. They still had to be wary of Wyverns or other flying or jumping creatures but none had shown themselves since the blizzard, now nearly a week past.

Kate joined the others in the armory, Jon shutting the entrance before he added the orc swords into the holders.

"I need a shower. Logan, you want to go first?" she asked, putting away her rifle and battle axe.

Logan put away his guns and greatsword as well before he sat down on the couch. "I need a few minutes. Go ahead."

“You should warm up first,” Melusine said and pointed to the couch, Eloise handing up steaming cups of tea from the cellar hatch.

“Thanks,” Kate said and grabbed the mugs, handing one to Logan before she sat down as well.

“Still more undead?” Jon asked.

She nodded. “Five groups in the afternoon, all of them fewer than seven creatures. No Eratur at least.” The small gray monsters were by far the most dangerous beside direwolves and ogres, though they hadn’t faced one of the giants since the one who had broken into the armory.

Jon nodded and took his notes.

Kate sipped on her hot tea as she covered herself with blankets.

Melusine checked both of them with her magic, making sure they hadn’t missed any injuries like concussions or internal bleeding. She seemed satisfied a few minutes later and got them hot water bottles as well. “The shower will cool you down again.”

“I know,” Kate said. They mostly used hot water, soap, and cloths to keep themselves clean by now but Kate missed showers and the pipes still worked. It was just cold but with her Vitality and Vigor, it just didn’t feel like much of an issue.

“More levels?” Jon asked, turning the page.

“Yeah,” Kate said, going through the most recent messages before she mentally scrolled up to her support Class evolution four days prior. She found that she could adjust the messages to summarize entire time spans instead of showing single battles only, though Jon had documented every increment since after the snow storm.

They had hunted and killed dozens of monsters in just as many fights.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Undead Human]’

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Undead Human]’

...

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Undead Goblin]’

‘ding’ ‘Omen of Vengeance reaches lvl 21’

Stat points +2

Vigor +1

...

‘ding’ ‘Omen of Vengeance reaches lvl 23’

Stat points +2

Vigor +1

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches 2nd lvl 8’

...

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches 2nd lvl 13’

'ding' 'Blood Frenzy reaches 2nd lvl 5'

...

'ding' 'Blood Frenzy reaches 2nd lvl 10'

'ding' 'Vengeful Charge reaches lvl 20'

...

'ding' 'Vengeful Charge reaches 2nd lvl 1'

Active: Vengeful Charge – 2nd lvl 1

You rush forward with a sudden burst of speed. Choose a distance between 1 and 7 meters, each use requiring 10% of your total stamina. The cooldown of Vengeful Charge is reset upon killing an enemy. None shall flee the field of battle.

2nd stage: You gain a medium resistance to any shock and stun inducing effects for the duration of Vengeful Charge.

'ding' 'Vengeful Charge reaches 2nd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Reaper Jump reaches lvl 8'

...

'ding' 'Reaper Jump reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Blood Rupture reaches lvl 8'

...

'ding' 'Blood Rupture reaches lvl 12'

'ding' 'Blood for the Living reaches 2nd lvl 3'

...

'ding' 'Blood for the Living reaches 2nd lvl 8'

'ding' 'Fury of the Unarmored reaches 2nd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Fury of the Unarmored reaches 2nd lvl 5'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches 2nd lvl 4'

...

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches 2nd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Unrelenting Carnage reaches lvl 14'

...

'ding' 'Unrelenting Carnage reaches lvl 16'

'ding' 'Roaring Pursuer reaches lvl 16'

Brutality +1

...

'ding' 'Roaring Pursuer reaches lvl 19'

Brutality +1

'ding' 'Thunderous Shout reaches lvl 7'

...

'ding' 'Thunderous Shout reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Reverberating Charge reaches lvl 7'

...

'ding' 'Reverberating Charge reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Aura of Silence reaches lvl 8'

...

'ding' 'Aura of Silence reaches lvl 14'

'ding' 'Sound Perception reaches lvl 18'

...

'ding' 'Sound Perception reaches 2nd lvl 1'

Passive: Sound Perception – 2nd lvl 1

Your perception of sound is heightened tremendously. You may focus on what you are looking for and you may tune out unnecessary sounds. You learn with focus and mana to deprive yourself of all other senses, for a time, and for a purpose, to tune yourself to sound and sound alone.

2nd stage: You gain a medium resistance to sound and sound magic damage.

'ding' 'Echo Awareness reaches lvl 6'

'ding' 'Tremor Sense reaches lvl 8'

...

'ding' 'Tremor Sense reaches lvl 10'

Kate had invested two of her six stat points into Wisdom to increase the mana she had available. Two each went into Strength and Endurance. She noticed that her skill levels no longer progressed quite as fast once they had reached the second stage, the two new additions to Vengeful Charge and Sound Perception helping both skills become much smoother, her charge now not as dangerous to use even if she directly impacted any monsters and her addition to Sound Perception helping a lot with all the shooting, the gun shots not any less audible but simply less painful and damaging to her ears.

Blood for the Living leveled mainly due to Kate sacrificing her own health to attack, the undead she killed refilling what she had used to help slay them in the first place.

The new stat her evolved support Class provided was interesting as well, though Kate found it difficult to discern the specific impact it had due to all the other changes that had come with the evolution and her growing skills and Strength.

Brutality – Strength Specialization. Increases your ability to critically damage your foes. Increases the damage you deal to enemy limbs.

Kate reported her most recent kill messages and skill level ups to Jon before she focused her attention back to the tea in her hands, drinking the hot beverage as she warmed up. She heard the rattling of Allison's sewing machine upstairs and closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the steam from her mug.

Jon noted down Logan's changes as well. He had overall leveled less than Kate in the past days but had still reached level seventeen in his main Class. The different rewards during specific battles, mostly the ones where Logan had been forced to use his sword, shotgun, and magic abilities more frequently suggested staying back and taking out undead with his rifle alone rewarded less experience towards the next level than getting in close, though they weren't sure if it was merely the higher danger that rewarded more experience or if whatever system governed all of this considered Logan's Classes something oriented more towards melee range, despite his ability to infuse his bullets with sacred magic.

Kate hadn't minded either way. Once Mindless Ferocity and Blood Frenzy were active, she wanted to get in close and personal, wanted to use all of her weapons and abilities. Outside of it, she just wanted to see the undead gone. Increasing her power helped with that goal, as did shooting them from a distance.

She heard the static of one of Jon's radios as he checked the available frequency range. The annoying sound was her cue to get her shower.

Kate cracked her neck and stretched her arms, lifting the blankets before she stood up. "We still have fresh clothes, right?"

"More than enough, yes," Melusine said. "We washed what wasn't unusable as well."

Kate smiled. Fresh clothes sounded really nice to her. She went towards the hatch when she froze in her tracks.

The radio static was gone.

Instead, she heard the voice of a woman.

A voice she did not know.