

## Chapter 72 Skin Care

Kate and Logan moved through the streets of Falstadt with a brisk pace, occasionally receiving updates on the undead horde locations that the Union fighters could spot. The increased frequency suggested to her that Reymond and Aathi or the entire group had found a more elevated spot overlooking more of the city.

Kate's hearing and tremor sense coupled with the updates let them reach the location of the Union group without further interruptions. She'd been to this district before. Northwest from the inner city with various hills and plenty of trees lining the streets. There were a few public spaces in the upper sections but much of the district was taken up by gated villas of varying size and splendor.

It was quiet and the winds flowed through the snow covered trees, the autumn leaves still clinging on due to the sudden and unnatural shift in temperatures.

Kate found the ascent easy, noticing that her breathing had hardly picked up. She glanced behind herself and stopped, turning and looking out over the city below and the Weywater lake going farther east beyond.

"They chose a good spot," Logan said.

She nodded, looking at the nearby cars, dented and broken windows, a few of them crashed into nearby buildings. Trash containers, shopping bags, and shoes lying on the street and sidewalks, covered by a layer of snow. She turned around and kept walking, the two of them soon reaching the address the others had mentioned.

A massive two story villa that looked more akin to a modern interpretation of an old castle. Kate looked up at the round stone tower with a pointed top that adorned the lavish building. The ground floor, she couldn't yet see, obscured by the bushes behind high reaching steel grates set atop a stone wall. The stone of both the wall and villa was light beige in color, snow clinging to the various roofed sections. Kate glanced at the pointed tops of the grates, thinking that each piece of the fence could be used as a spear.

They walked along the spear topped wall and soon reached the closed gate. A massive metal slab broad enough for a car to drive past. *Suppose it was more important to keep prying eyes out rather than show off the immense wealth.*

"Logan here, we've reached the gate, over," he said.

Kate heard movement from beyond and the gate was opened a moment later, Lewis smiling at them before he checked the street and gestured them inside.

He closed the gate behind them as Kate took in the lavish gardens in the middle of the dense city. She raised her brows at the fountain to the side, not quite large enough for a car to drive around but it was ridiculous all the same. She couldn't see Reymond nor Aathi but the rest were sitting near the southern side of the wall.

"Good to see you," Valery said. "No issues on the way?"

Logan shook his head. "Yourself?"

“We took out a small group of patrolling undead. Seven in total. Seems like smaller groups are rarer in the inner city but not entirely absent,” she said and opened a folded piece of paper. “We’ve mapped out the floors as best we could. Windows are shut except for the back facing balcony doors around five meters up. The main entrance is unlocked but we haven’t entered.”

“So what’s the issue?” Logan asked.

“An unknown creature. Aathi climbed around to check the various windows when she saw something sticking to a corner on the ceiling. It apparently looks like a large bat with its wings closed but it’s not hanging down but clinging to the wall in a way that makes us think it’s not asleep but waiting for something to enter the building. There are bones on the ground of the master bedroom, on the first floor. Enough to suggest at least ten people, undead, or orcs have died in there.”

“More than one in there?” Logan asked.

“Unclear.”

“Does Reymond have an angle to shoot it?”

“No, and the windows would be a problem. I think the best approach is through the front gate, the toughest fighters upfront with the rest coming in right behind,” Valery said.

“I can jump to the balcony in the back, get Logan up. If it’s waiting for people to come in, maybe we can catch it unawares. You come in if we call through the radio or if you see or hear fighting,” Kate said.

“More scouting from the inside would be helpful,” Logan said. “I think we should try your idea, see what that thing is about.”

Kate set her pack down and got out the rope, then put it on again. She fastened her axe to her back and checked her gear. “Ready to go.”

“I’ll gather the others and we’ll wait at the main doors,” Valery said.

Kate nodded.

“We’ll radio once we’re in position. Code green to go in, orange to delay, and red to immediately abandon,” Valery said.

“Got it,” Kate said and started towards the back of the villa with Logan following behind. She reached the back and looked up at the balcony. “Some kind of bat thing?”

“One way to find out,” Logan said.

She grunted.

“That’s a long way up,” he said.

“Jump should be at six meters already,” she said and activated the skill. She felt power rush into her legs as she crouched and jumped up, grabbing the railing and holding on, stabilizing herself with her boots before she went over. She could see the dimly lit master bedroom inside, knowing what other rooms there were beyond, where the stairwell was, and where Aathi had seen the creature. She couldn’t hear a thing from the inside, quietly pushing the glass door open a slight bit and clicking her tongue. She saw some of the bones, more with her echo awareness. *Ten dead was an understatement. Thing has been eating well.*

Kate threw the rope down and held on as Logan climbed up, not bothering to fasten the rope to the railing. She found that a lot of procedures could be ignored when you had the strength of a bear. Or however strong twenty five Strength was. *Might even be more than a bear*, she thought when Logan reached the top.

He climbed down next to her and checked his weapons, holding his sword before he spoke into the radio. "Logan, in position. Code green, over."

*"Union Spear, in position. Code green. Proceed when ready, over,"* Valery sent back.

Kate pushed the door open and went inside, immediately hit with the stench. The air was stuffy, iron and rot permeating everything. She forced herself not to gag, focusing on the feeling of the axe handle in her hands as she pushed forward. She found the door to the master bedroom open and clicked her tongue, getting an idea of the hallway beyond through her echo awareness. She felt no tremors and heard no noise other than what herself and Logan produced.

Out in the open hallway of the first floor, she went towards the stairs and heard Logan following with heavy steps. His armor clattered once.

Kate heard something from below and glanced his way. Then she felt vibrations through the floor, confusing vibrations that she couldn't place. She turned back towards the stairs when she heard a fluttering sound and a high-pitched hiss from behind. Turning, she saw a black winged thing emerge through the walls and ground, a long and massive head with no eyes rushing straight at Logan.

Kate activated her magics and used her charge to close the distance, seeing her ally slashing his sword upwards and through the fluttering darkness, the weapon passing without impact, another hiss coming from the creature as its form distorted slightly. She saw its jaws open as it went straight for her ally's head.

He ducked just when she arrived with her charge and slashed her axe upwards, the weapon passing through the hissing being as it fluttered up and towards the roof. She narrowed her eyes as it passed into the walls, two slightly distorted lines visible on the dark wings where their weapons had passed.

Her ally spoke into the radio and pointed to the stairs. "Kate, need more space, use your sound magic."

She raised her brows, understanding what her ally meant. She followed him down into the broad hall and charged her axe with sound when she felt more strange vibrations from above. This time, the creature came for her, rushing down with its broad jaws opening to reveal a single line of sharp elongated teeth.

Kate looked at it and shouted with everything she had.

The large creature fluttered to the side and crashed into the ground, twitching as it tried to get back up.

She rushed at it right when it fluttered up again, the white gold glowing sword of her ally slicing up and through one of its wings, not passing through without an impact this time. She watched and took two steps as it fell, only one wing remaining before it hit the ground. Kate brought her charged axe down in the same moment, right into its large head, vibrations trembling through it. She saw the dark skull shaking before it exploded into a thousand bits and pieces, dark colored blood and skin splattering into her face as she closed her eyes.

A message resounded as she staggered back. Kate let go of her weapon, wiping away at the blood and whatever was burning up her skin.

She listened for more creatures and heard their allies entering now that they'd heard the fighting. Her ally rushed over to her, talking to her but she was more concerned with the pain on her face and hands. She looked for something and found the drapes, using them to get rid of whatever the fuck was burning into her skin.

*Drink its blood.*

She could drink blood to heal. She knew that.

*Wait.*

Kate furrowed her brows, still wiping away at the stuff on her face and armor, hearing a sizzling noise from the drapes.

She raised her brows and nodded to herself.

*Not this blood.*

She felt elated. As if she'd just solved a tremendous riddle. The burning sensation was almost gone but there was a dull pain left on her face and hands. Was the fight over?

She looked at her allies and they were all looking at her instead. So the fight must've been over. She breathed in slowly, and deactivated her spells, wincing immediately at the pain in her face. Her eyes hurt, her nose hurt, her skin hurt. "What the fuck is this?" she murmured, looking at her hands. They were reddened.

"Let me check that," Alexander rushed to her side and carefully moved his hand close to her face. "Your skin is..." He looked at the ground where the monster's remains were currently sizzling away at the stone floor, having already eaten through a sizable section.

Kate looked at the drapes where the remains of the blood and monster bits she'd wiped off were dissolving the fabric at an alarming rate.

"Your skin is, mostly fine, it seems. Just very irritated," Alexander said.

"Your eyes look like you've been awake for three days straight," Logan said. "Do you want healing?"

Kate thought about it. She was sure the kill had already alleviated some of the damage. "The tincture."

Logan shrugged. "Fair. I'll document," he said and set down his pack.

"Close the door again, Reymond, check if anything came in answer to her shout, everyone else stay vigilant, there might be more of them. What could it do?" Valery said quickly.

"Moved through walls, and our weapons passed through it. Mostly," Logan said. "Magic did the trick. I suppose it's not a great idea to make their heads explode like that. Glad I took a step back to let her do her magic."

"What the hell is your skin made of?" Lewis asked.

Kate went through her pack and found the half filled soda bottle and tincture that Eloise had cooked up. "Lots of Vitality," she said, considering a joke about women actually using moisturizer before

she thought her own joke sexist and decided against it. Plenty of men cared for their skin too. *Plenty of guys using those all in one cleaners as well though. Crazy that.* Her thought process was interrupted when she took a sip from the reddish liquid and nearly gagged again.

She stuck out her tongue and shook her head. “Whoa. This is gross.” She focused on the opposite wall and swallowed, feeling a slightly warm sensation spreading out throughout her. Her skin still hurt so she drank more, feeling more warmth radiating out, like a hot tea on a winter day. She sighed, closing her eyes before she drank a little more. It still tasted like a fucked up expired blood gin smoothie but the soothing feeling helped a lot.

And then the itching started.

“Fuck,” she murmured, explaining the process of what she felt to Logan who took a few notes.

“Your skin already looks better,” Alexander said. “What is that?”

“Your alchemist made a healing potion,” Valery murmured with wide eyes.

“Yeah. We didn’t want to share anything about it until we’d tested it at least once,” Logan said. “She used some of the red roses you’ve seen in the dungeon corridors as the main ingredient. I’m sure we’ll be able to share the specific recipe.”

Valery looked lost in thought for a moment before she refocused. “We should check the rest of the villa for monsters, and more of these... what are they called?”

“Naivor,” Logan said.

Kate checked her messages as well, if only to distract herself from the damn itching. Healing with her own magic was so much more convenient. She glanced at the dead creature, mostly just the wings remaining. They looked similar to the drapes she’d used to clean away the acid, just black instead. *With less Vitality or just fewer levels in general...* She shook her head ever so slightly, glad they’d taken this one out. *Another one for Jon’s monster manual.*

**‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Naivor]’**

**‘ding’ ‘Vengeful Charge reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11’**

**‘ding’ ‘Fury of the Unarmored reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15’**

**‘ding’ ‘Terrifying Presence reaches lvl 10’**

**‘ding’ ‘Thunderous Shout reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2’**

**‘ding’ ‘Reverberating Charge reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3’**

**‘ding’ ‘Echo Awareness reaches lvl 15’**

**‘ding’ ‘Tremor Sense reaches lvl 17’**

**‘ding’ ‘Heavy Charger reaches lvl 3’**

## **Fortitude +1**

### **'ding' Heavy Weapons Expert reaches lvl 3'**

"I want to scratch my face so badly," she murmured. "Make sure to check the drapes, maybe more of them are hiding."

"I doubt your nails could leave any damage," Lewis said, looking up at the high reaching window coverings.

Kate looked down on herself and saw that the leather piece protecting her chest had taken a bit of a beating from the acid. Her sleeves were fucked too but the wyvern scales were holding up pretty well.

*"Reymond here. Looks like we haven't attracted any unwanted attention, over."* His voice came from the nearby radios.

"Let's do a sweep of the place and then see where we are," Logan said, the rest agreeing.

The group moved from room to room, checking for more of the creatures or anything else that could be dangerous. The bones suggested that anything that had entered had already been taken out by the Naivor. Kate could see it too, their weapons barely if at all leaving an impact without their magic enhancements. Any lower level human same as orcs and goblins wouldn't have had a way to even damage this thing.

Kate sat down on a sofa in the large entrance hall and living room when they were done, the place clear of any creatures, at least any they could've spotted.

"Makes you wonder what kind of other creatures are out there," Alexander said as he sat down too. "Thanks for taking that hit, you two. The idea was to do this together, not to just use you as bait."

"The point is to protect survivors and to clear this city," Kate said. *Getting a bit of acid on me is just part of the job now. At least now there's healing magic.*

"And it was Kate to take the hit," Aathi said. "How'd it feel?"

Kate glanced at her. "Like my skin was burning up. But honestly, not particularly bad. But I had my magic up."

"What does it do? Your magic?"

"I don't feel like going into details," Kate said.

"It tried to bite my head. Maybe we could've let it hit my shoulder to then attack its head," Logan said. "Or perhaps the species is able to materialize its teeth only."

"So walls are not going to be safe," Latia said.

"It reacted to magic, so maybe there's a magical way to prevent a creature like that from entering," Logan suggested.

"Not much we can do other than what we've been doing already. We'll use this villa as our base in the city. For now, any resources, weapons, medical supplies, food, et cetera, we'll store here for the time being. We'll think about how to move larger quantities out of the city once we have a better

understanding of the dungeon tunnels and potential different routes,” Valery said and spread out a city map on a large wooden desk. “Reymond, I think it’s best if you remain here and in the tower. Keep an eye on any enemy movements and keep us updated.”

“Roger, ma’am,” Reymond said.

“Aathi, if you feel confident to move out alone, I’d like to have scouting reports for the police headquarters and the Uni library,” Valery said.

“Sure,” Aathi said, twirling her pistol in her hand.

“Gun safety,” Logan said.

The woman glared at him with raised brows and then holstered the weapon with a near instant movement. “I think I’m fine.”

“I never said you weren’t but misfires happen, even when you handle them perfectly,” Logan said. “And I don’t think that everyone here can take a nine millimeter bullet to the head.”

Aathi gave Kate a questioning glance.

Kate shook her head.

“Our team will check pharmacies and stores on the route to the northern police station. Kate, Logan, what’s your target?” Valery said.

“I would’ve said the police headquarters,” Logan said. “But call for us if you encounter anything unknown. Better to take any risks with everyone present.”

“I can come with you, can scout and everything, maybe shoot a few zombies before they notice us. Will keep out of your way, Exterminators,” Aathi said, grinning slightly.

Valery gave Logan and Kate a questioning glance.

“Works for me,” Logan said.

“Sure,” Kate confirmed. “If you’re ready to leave, we can go.”

“Food buffs still good?” Aathi asked.

“Yeah, three hours left still,” Kate said. “Ready to go Logan?”

Logan checked his guns before shouldering his sword. “Yeah.”

“Great. Then let’s check out that police station,” Kate said, hoping there wasn’t another Wyvern in there. She thought of that battle, remembering that Grey had gotten injured, and how Ethan had used a riot shield to keep an undead direwolf off of him. She took in a deep breath of fresh air when she stepped outside and into the large yard. The sky was overcast, the distant Weywater lake barely visible.

Logan walked past and stopped, looking her way. “You alright?”

Kate looked at her axe and nodded. “Yeah. Let’s go.”