

## Chapter 50 Hunt

Kate listened to her surroundings, tuning out the heartbeat and breathing of her companion standing a few meters behind her. They each hid behind a tree, using their scoped rifles to find any monsters in the vicinity of Keilberg Castle. Their radios would allow them to go a few kilometers in each direction at least, without losing contact in case the others needed their help.

The snow in the open had solidified enough that they only sank in up to their knees, even less under the trees. With the trenches now dug in the snow around the castle walls, it would be much more difficult for any non flying undead to enter.

They were quiet, except when Logan reported back to the castle, always asking for a confirmation to make sure they didn't go out of range.

Six hours they'd had on their increased stamina regeneration from Eloise's magic. Two had already elapsed.

Visibility was better than when it still snowed but not great either.

Kate froze when she saw something through her scope. "One o'clock from me and down the slope."

She watched the group of humans, saw the wounds, disheveled hair, and torn clothes. They were undead, she knew it before she saw the first goblin in the group. She heard Logan move closer.

"I see them. Wait and count. They're not running," he said.

"Might be the cold is affecting them too?" Kate suggested. So far the undead hadn't seemed bothered by the low temperatures but then they could simply be conserving strength for when they came across something living.

They watched for a few minutes.

"No ogre, no orcs. Eight humans, six goblins, and two small creatures with gray skin," Logan said.

"There was one of those in the group that attacked our castle," Kate said.

"Any specific abilities?"

"I didn't notice anything different. But then I was using all of my skills," she said.

"We position ourselves, prepare your magazines. I'll check our back before we engage. Don't forget your earplugs."

*Sixteen undead*, Kate thought and breathed out, setting down her pack and getting out her two additional magazines for her rifle.

She looked through the scope and checked the safety.

"We're clear," Logan said and walked up next to her. He set down his gear as well and prepared.

Kate watched the undead searching through the forest. They weren't stumbling or shuffling. They were hunting, heads whipping around, muscles tense. Their snarls weren't audible to her yet but they were getting closer.

"Let's test your aura," Logan said and stepped next to her. "Half a meter?"

“Yes,” Kate said and put in her earplugs.

“You activate it and we each fire three rounds. I aim at the left flank, you the right, after that you deactivate it and we stop firing.”

“Sure,” Kate said and pressed the rifle into her shoulder, stabilizing the weapon with her arms as she looked through the scope. She checked to make sure the safety was off and looked back through the scope. The undead were visible through the trees, most of them at least. “I will count down from three. Ready?”

“Ready,” Logan said.

Kate deactivated her heightened hearing and started counting down. “Three.” She slowed her breathing. “Two.” Kate aimed at one of the human undead on the right side of the group. “One.”

Kate activated her Aura of Silence.

Every bit of sound around her was gone. Her heartbeat. Her breathing. The sound of crunching snow. And the wind.

She pulled the trigger.

A small bit of fire flared up from the tip of the barrel. She had expected more from the recoil, holding the weapon steady without issue. The deafening crack she had expected did not come, everything around them perfectly silent. She pulled the trigger again, and then a third time, seeing the impacts rip into one of the undead. Two of her shots found a mark.

She deactivated her magic and winced when all the sound suddenly rushed back into her vicinity. Her heart beat fast, her breathing was steady. She could hear the howls now.

“It works. Again, same as before. Three shots. Let me know how you feel,” Logan said.

Kate steadied her weapon and aimed. “I’m good. On three.”

She counted down and they fired, repeating the same cycle over and over as the monsters were ripped apart.

Only half of them were left standing when they finally turned towards them and started sprinting, likely having seen the muzzle flash of their rifles.

Kate stopped her spell, already noticing her mind strain from the mana expenditure. She didn’t have a lot.

“I will continue to fire,” Logan said.

Kate set down her rifle and grabbed her hammer instead, stepping away from Logan and covering her left ear when the first crack resounded and echoed through the forest. A deafening sound and more followed in quick succession.

She grit her teeth and activated Mindless Ferocity, then Blood Frenzy. There was no need to hold back. They were here to kill everything they could find after all.

Kate still heard the loud cracks, her eyes darting to the trees and the running monsters. The taller humans were faster.

She heard her ally shout something about reloading. That was her cue.

She pushed forward through the snow to meet her enemies, then stopped to steady herself.

Kate swung her hammer wide, seeing the first of the unarmed undead humans reach her, half of its face already gone. One of their bullets had hit its chest but it pushed onward nonetheless, blue eyes focused on Kate. Her hammer struck its shoulder, blood magic surging with health she sacrificed as bits of flesh and bone erupted. She saw the undead stumble as more of them now reached her.

Kate growled, bewildering wave making the monsters stumble before she activated Blood Rupture, stomping her right leg down into the snow and onto the ground, a wave of bright red blood like magic flashing out around her, the monsters pushed back, flesh sizzling where her magic hit.

Kate stepped forward and swung again, striking the next monster and then the next, her blood magic and health infused strikes showing enough stopping power to slow them at least. Her next hit made the head of an undead woman shatter and explode to the side.

*Just monsters.*

Kate laughed out loud, stepping forward in the snow as two more injured undead reached her.

She could feel energy return to her from those she had already killed, the flat end of her hammer digging into the chest of another man, his bones broken and his chest dented inwards.

*Our forest.*

She raised her hammer and finished the last moving human, hearing more undead approach.

Kate watched two goblins and one of the gray creatures run at her, their small forms not sinking in quite as much as she did. The gray one wielded a small crossbow, a helmet on its head and leather armor covering its torso and legs.

Then they were there.

She swung her hammer at the goblins, her blood pulsing with magic as her strike slammed the first charging monster into the second, its arm broken like a twig, its torso dented in as blood erupted from its side. She raised her weapon again and felt something strike her neck. She ignored the dull pain and swung her weapon down, cracking the still standing goblin's head with an explosion of blood and bits of bone before she turned to see the gray being reload its small weapon. Its head snapped back when another crack resounded from behind. She closed the distance and swung her hammer down.

The creature rolled to the side, its small hand crossbow discarded before it grabbed a small sickle blade from its back and rushed at her, the same blue eyes as all the other undead.

Kate raised her hammer and waited until it jumped, her reach far greater than the monster's. She didn't swing wide, instead jabbing her hammer forward and into its chest. Its sickle sword didn't reach her. Kate's next swing impacted the monster's head, the creature slapped into the snow with the momentum. Her next strike came down on its back. She heard bones break, the small creature's insides turning to mush as her blood magic made its innards erupt, blood sacrificed now returned to her as it died.

She listened but found no other monsters in the vicinity, grinning to herself and breathing hard as she reached up to touch the bolt stuck in her neck. She barely stopped herself from ripping it out then remembered her ability upgrades. They were still on the hunt. Kate ripped out the bolt and knelt down, turning the undead creature before she bit down into its arm.

She could feel some life return to her but there was not much left in the creature and she couldn't get a lot of blood out of it. Using one of her knives instead, she stabbed into its exposed neck, cut

sideways, grabbed on, and ripped away its head. She raised it above her as the dark droplets fell into her mouth.

The subdued pain in her neck lessened slowly but it wasn't healed yet. She moved on to the goblins, hearing her ally join her side.

He didn't stop her as she cut into the first monster's chest, ripping away skin and muscle before she found its shriveled heart. She cut it open and downed whatever blood there was.

Her ally said something, his voice agitated but she couldn't see nor hear any monsters nearby.

Something was wrong, she could tell.

There should've been more life in these monsters, she knew it deep down. With the second goblin's heart, the wound on her neck closed.

She breathed in deep and listened, gripping her hammer in her hands as she waited for more beasts to come. Beasts for her to fight and kill.

Her ally reached out with his hand, holding a strange black powder.

Coffee.

She recognized the smell and knew the battle was over.

Kate deactivated her abilities.

She tasted blood in her mouth.

Her throat was sore.

Her blood pulsed with power.

She looked down at the cut open chest of an undead goblin, its discarded heart lying in the snow next to its corpse.

She turned around and retched, puking out the stew and everything else she had consumed. She tasted iron and saw the dark blood mixed in with the vomit. It only made her retch more.

"I tried to stop you. You ripped something out of your throat," Logan said and touched her back. "Are you still injured?"

Kate remembered. She touched her neck and found it slightly painful but there was no wound. "It had a crossbow. Shot me in the neck."

"Good aim," Logan said.

She turned her head and glared at him before she retched once again. Spitting into the snow, Kate walked away from the puke and corpses, leaning against a tree before she sat down in the snow. "I drank their blood," she murmured, seeing Logan had followed her.

"And it healed you," he said and reloaded his rifle. "It's good that your skills allow you to ignore it. Might've saved your life."

"You could've healed me," she said.

"It saved us some mana."

She glared at him, then sighed. Kate hit her head against the tree trunk behind her. *What are we doing?* She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath, then opened them.

“I’ll try not to get shot again,” she said.

“Or you get used to the taste of blood,” Logan said as he went to collect his gear. “Anything that can give us an edge, we should use. They could’ve killed us here but we killed them instead.”

*Doing it his way*, she thought. A part of her resented it all, wanted to go back to the castle to hide. She knew that the person she became once her magic was up did not agree and she found that a part of her didn’t agree either.

She thought of Ethan, Grey, and Bert, then grit her teeth.

Kate grimaced and stood up. *Carving out monster hearts. Drinking their blood. Fighting them with every tool that we have*, she thought and put her hammer into the strap on her belt, then went to collect her rifle. Her hands were cold and her throat still hurt, the taste of blood and puke still in her mouth. *If that’s what it takes to kill these monsters, to survive, and to protect those still alive. Then that’s what it will take.*

Her food buff still remained despite the puking, the magic itself likely already ingested.

Logan reported to Jon before they went to check the bodies.

There were no Class level ups for her. Logan received one in his main Class and two in his support one, though no further skills.

“Is this the bolt that hit you?” he asked, holding up the small metal bit. “Doesn’t look like it penetrated far.”

Kate looked at it, finding that her blood only covered the first few centimeters of the bolt.

Logan grabbed the small crossbow and loaded it with the projectile, then fired at a nearby tree.

The bolt hit with a dull sound and sunk in to half its length.

Kate raised her brows.

“This thing packs a punch, despite its size. We should take it with us,” he said. “You’re durable too. If it was a straight hit, it should’ve easily penetrated all the way.”

Kate touched her neck. Twenty seven Vitality and a low grade resistance against physical attacks. And still, she got injured by a single crossbow bolt.

She knew that without her magic, she would’ve died but these abilities were hers now, these Classes were hers. She ground her teeth, slowing her breathing as she focused on the now. She had to keep fighting, had to keep advancing her new abilities, if she planned to keep herself or anyone else alive.

“Take its sickle too,” she said. “Might be worth to bring its whole body back. An Eratur according to the messages. You shot its head, didn’t you?”

“Glancing shot. Its helmet saved it, here,” Logan said and showed her the dent and line in the metal. “Should’ve still probably killed it.”

“Undead,” Kate said. The creature was a little smaller than even a goblin. It was thinner too but its proportions and the gear it wore made it seem more threatening to Kate than the green skinned

monsters she had already faced on her first day in this mess. This thing was a prepared and trained hunter, not just a small monster equipped with a bow. She wondered if it was more dangerous as an undead or with its life still intact. She wasn't keen on finding out.

"Took quite a few center of mass hits to kill the humans as well, they're as tough as you are."

"They probably just don't care about injuries," she said and looked at the bodies. Humans still wearing the same things as when they were killed, raised again by this strange magic and turned into monsters.

One group removed from the equation but they likely had a lot of work to do. So far at least they hadn't seen any undead rise again after they were put down. "Should we keep looking or head back with the two Eratur bodies?"

Logan was quiet for a few seconds before he talked. "I think we should keep looking. That aura of yours is great for an ambush. How does your mana feel?"

"Low. Not empty but low. I don't think I should use the aura again for however long it takes to recharge my mana," Kate said.

"You used it for a little less than thirty seconds. But I still have mine to heal," Logan said. He looked at her, his green eyes focused. "Ready for more?"

Kate took in a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm ready for more."

Kate and Logan scouted through the snow covered forest east of Keilberg Castle. They moved slow and methodical, using their scopes and Kate's enhanced hearing to check for threats before anything would notice them in turn.

Kate heard neither birds nor critters, the two soon reaching the Willow river running past north of the castle and eastwards towards Falstadt and the Weywater lake.

"Hold," Logan said. "Three undead, two humans, one orc, twelve o'clock."

Kate raised her rifle and looked in the indicated direction. She scanned the snow covered underbrush and found the stalking monsters. They were heading in their direction but were still over a hundred meters away. No other monsters were nearby.

"Ready?" Logan asked and aimed.

Kate made some distance to get a different angle and aimed as well. "Ready."

The cracks of their rifles firing echoed through the forest and into the valley, two of the undead struck before all three started running in their direction. They didn't take cover nor did they slow down with the bullets ripping into their flesh.

Kate had to steady her rifle a few times, more of her shots missing than they hit. Her ears were ringing already, despite the plugs.

The orc she aimed at was still running. Another bullet tore into its chest, slowing it for a split second before it kept rushing forward and through the snow, the ground doing more to slow its advance than her rifle. She dropped the weapon into the snow and unsheathed her hammer, breathing in before she once again activated her skills.

She saw the monster approach and prepared herself, waiting for the last moment before she blocked the wild strike of its sword. She pushed against its strength with her own, shouting as she pushed the orc back and made it stumble. She struck at its arms, the sword flung from its hands as it charged at her again. Kate jabbed at its face with a straight strike and her full strength, breaking bone and denting in the monster's head. She held on as it fell, its arms still flailing as she ripped out her weapon and turned it. She brought the spike down into its shoulder, her blood infused strike leaving the orc unmoving.

Kate turned and saw the second orc rush towards her ally. She started in his direction when his greatsword flared up with radiating white light, a wide horizontal swing cutting past the advancing undead with a shout.

The creature collapsed, its torso falling to the side.

She checked for more monsters but that was it, the undead human likely dead to her ally's rifle.

Kate listened for a few seconds and narrowed her eyes. The battle was over but not their hunt. She focused and deactivated her abilities, her vision and her hearing clear once more, the ringing in her ears from all the firing gone already.

"A good strike," she said when she had grabbed her gear.

Logan gathered his equipment too. "More effective against the undead than bullets, it seems."

"Three more hours. There was a bridge farther east. We should still be in range of the castle," Kate said.

"Lead the way," Logan said and turned on his radio, reporting to Jon and Melusine.

Three more hours to find and kill more monsters. Kate rolled her shoulders. The rifle in her hands felt lighter. She checked the safety and focused back on their surroundings.