

Chapter 57 Snowfall

Kate breathed in the cool air and listened to the surroundings as soon as they stepped out into the yard of their castle. Light snow was falling, the skies overcast and gray. She heard the Willow and the winds but nothing else in the vicinity. "Clear," she said and started towards the east facing watchtower.

Logan grunted and followed, both his armor and copious amounts of weapons clanking with every step he took.

Kate supposed there was no way around it. Her own movements had gotten louder again as well, now that her Hushed Presence had changed to Tremor Sense. Sneaking up to any monsters would be more difficult but if she could hear them first, it wouldn't make a massive difference with her charge and jump abilities. And either way, a thrown battle axe wasn't particularly loud anyway, and she could tell that her aim was improving.

They reached the top of the battlements, Kate seeing the burnt out remains of the corpses they had piled up on the previous evening. The smoke had cleared up by now but much of the smell was still present. Burnt rotten flesh and hair.

Logan set down his sword and shouldered his sniper rifle, scanning the tree line in the distance before he gave her the clear.

Kate checked the rope and threw it to the other side of the trench, a rock tied around its end. She glanced at Logan while shouldering her own rifle. "Want to give me a few of your things?"

He looked at his sword and handed it over, then grabbed the sniper rifle, and handed it to her as well.

Kate held one in each hand before she made some distance to the battlements, ran, and jumped, magic pulsing through her legs and body as she flew through the air, landing in the snow with a crunching impact. She dug deep in deep, pulling herself up a moment later. It was far more comfortable than landing in the cleared out castle yard with the momentum of a full run.

She turned and walked over to the trench, catching the rope Logan threw her way before she walked back and gripped it.

Logan held on and slid down along the rope, jogging off the remaining momentum before he went to collect his gear.

Kate threw the rock back over the battlements, the rope going with it. She grabbed her rifle and looked through the scope, checking for movement in the forest as she joined her companion.

He lightly nodded her way, the slight movement all that was possible with his armor.

She followed him eastwards.

Kate glanced at the burnt corpses of the undead as they passed the pit. The sight didn't bother her much. She was just glad they were dead.

Logan and Jon exchanged their last radio signal before the connection first started to worsen and then broke off entirely. Five minutes later, they received their first message from Jon through his Keeper's magic.

"First message. Be careful out there," Jon's voice came to her head.

"We go as planned, then," Logan said to her, the two making their way eastward and slightly up along the slope on which Keilberg Castle was built.

Kate checked the clock around her wrist. *Bit over an hour until the next message. Let's see if we encounter anything.*

She hoped they would.

With careful steps, the two made their way through the forest, Kate constantly listening and feeling for any monsters or critters in the vicinity. She couldn't find anything.

The winds were cold, the ground and trees covered in snow, Kate's breath leaving a white mist in the air as they walked in silence along the white slope of the Maar Valley. Kate found that she didn't feel cold in the slightest, only keeping her cloak on and her jacket closed because of potential monster attacks.

They soon came up on a steep and rocky section leading farther up towards the mountains.

Logan pointed up. "Good spot to try and angle the laser back for a response."

Kate closed her eyes and listened, Logan waiting for her until she confirmed there was nothing that she could hear in the vicinity. No strange sounds, no strange vibrations. "Let's get to climbing then," she said and set down her pack, only taking her weapons with her, Logan doing the same, even leaving behind his assault rifle.

Kate squinted her eyes, looking up at the steep and jagged rock. It was steep but not quite a cliff or something that required climbing gear.

She could've managed it back before all of this shit had started but it would've been a pain in her ass. Leaning forward, she started making her way up, grabbing jutting out rocks and pulling herself up with ease, every push of her boots or pulls of her arms bringing her higher until she came up on a small plateau. She was just high enough to be past the tree tops below, sitting down and leaning against the rock behind her as she waited for Logan.

She knew he would speak up if he needed help, the man more competitive than she had first assumed. At the same time, he was experienced and aware enough not to overextend. In most cases at least.

His hand came up onto the plateau, steel bracer hitting the stone with a scraping sound. Logan pulled himself up with a groan, his weapons and armor scraping along before he sat down next to her with a grunt. "Hard to climb with all of this shit on."

"Imagine without any Strength enhancements," Kate said, checking her clock. "Twelve minutes."

He chuckled, raising his sniper rifle before he started scanning the far reaching landscape.

Kate got out her binoculars and started doing the same.

They had already gone past the bend in the valley, which would've let them spot Falstadt and the Weywater lake on a clear and sunny day. With the light snowfall, Kate could only make out some few building shapes in the distance, everything else shrouded in white.

She looked towards where she thought Grenndorf would be but had a hard time spotting it in the sea of trees. At least at their higher altitude, visibility was slightly better but still nowhere near anything usable.

A gust of wind howled past, Kate steadying herself until it lessened.

"I could get used to this magical cloak," Logan murmured.

"You're cold?"

"No. I think mainly thanks to the cloak," he said, shifting on the plateau before he lay down. He set up the bipod of his sniper rifle and aimed.

Kate looked in the same direction but couldn't make anything out in the weather.

"Can you see the castle?" she asked.

Logan glanced between his rifle and the compass he had gotten out. "Not a chance," he said after a while. "And the laser will likely not work either."

"What now?"

"We wait," Logan said and shifted back again. He got out his binoculars and looked in the direction of Falstadt. "If we get the message, we go on. If we don't get anything, we return to the castle. If the weather clears, we can try to answer with the laser."

"If we get a message," Kate said and looked at her clock. She rubbed the covering with her fingers to try and get rid of the fog the cold had formed on it.

Minutes ticked by.

The pointer moved once more.

"Second message. Nine in the morning. We're playing a round of UNO. Celeste has asked if you could bring some orange juice. Jon out."

Kate glanced at Logan.

He set down his binoculars and nodded to himself. "Think there's some orange juice left in Grenndorf?"

"One way to find out," Kate said.

Kate felt tense as they neared the small town, the only settlement on their way to Falstadt. She thought of the notes they had left behind in the pharmacies of both Keilberg and Grenndorf. Nobody had come to the castle. At least they knew now that there were any survivors at all. *Too few*, she thought, pushing away the emotion that came with it all, thoughts of Falstadt in flames, corpses littering the streets of Keilberg.

The forest was quiet compared to the last time she'd been here. The snow would absorb a lot and the cold would push any critters into their dens.

She had always enjoyed it. The serenity that came with winter in this valley. She didn't feel serene now. She felt tense. And she felt anger.

Kate held up her fist when she spotted the first silhouettes of buildings in the distance. Still no sound.

Logan closed in. "We go around on the eastern side, check how it looks, and go on towards Falstadt. Through the forest. Scouting first, engagements second. Agreed?"

Kate considered for a few seconds before she spoke. "Agreed."

She moved on, eastward now again with Logan following a few meters behind her, both of them with their rifles at the ready, Kate occasionally stopping at a tree and looking through the scope, listening all the while.

They reached the outskirts of Grenndorf but she still couldn't hear or see a thing. Visibility was worse now that they had lost their elevated position but the undead generally weren't quiet. They crested a small hill and crouched down, then lay into the snow, both Logan and Kate checking the snow covered streets of Grenndorf.

It was deserted.

If there were any corpses left unmoving, they were covered in a meter or more of snow.

"They could be waiting, hiding," Kate said, her voice quiet as she shifted in the snow, the crunching sound the only other thing audible to her.

"We haven't seen them do that," Logan said. "It does look wrong. Something about it."

"We go past? Or do you want to make some noise?" Kate said.

"We stay quiet for now, and go past," he said and lowered his rifle. "Agreed?"

Kate nodded, the two leaving the outskirts and making their way north and east, past where snow covered street signs indicated where the road crossed through the wilderness. They walked in silence through the forest until the trees cleared. Kate held up a fist, carefully walking forward until she saw the drop. She knew the area, a steep decline going down to the base of the valley. A few dozen meters at most but nearly invisible with the snow and overcast weather. She pointed east and followed along the decline, soon finding what she'd been looking for.

A viewing platform, snow covered but a few bits of railing were visible. She walked down and cleared away some of the snow to reveal the plaque displaying Falstadt, the Weywater lake, and all the mountains that would've been visible.

Taking out her binoculars, she looked out onto the valley, what little she could see.

Below, she saw the gap in the treelines, the Willow river passing through and towards the lake. She saw a few roads too now, snow covered but the street signs reaching out of the snow were obvious. She saw various slopes and small hills jutting out of the landscape, and on them she saw the first few houses, then a few larger blocks, apartment buildings, all of it half destroyed, most of it blackened. There were no cars, no lights, no buzz of a city. It was all quiet and unmoving.

“Around two thirty, right next to a hill with a few nice looking houses on it, the first with a pool. You see it?” Logan said.

Kate followed with her binoculars, her brows rising when she saw the movement below. Dozens of people, all of them running. Undead, she was sure of it. They ran past, southwards. “Fifty of them maybe?”

“Wyvern above,” Logan said.

Kate looked, finding the creature in the air. Far away and following the group. Something about the way it flew felt off to her, unbalanced.

“Undead too, I’d wager,” her companion murmured. “We should avoid that. More a few hundred meters to the right. That group is even bigger.”

Kate kept her eyes on the Wyvern, wondering how hard it would be to take down an undead version of the flying beasts.

“Some kind of crocodile with them,” Logan added.

She now found the group and saw the creature. “Puts it lightly,” she murmured. The thing was damn near as large as a truck. *A fucking dinosaur if anything. And it’s undead too.*

“Don’t think we’re getting into that city,” she said, wondering how many thousands of the monsters were invisible beyond the veil of snow, stalking through the streets and homes of the once bustling town. She grit her teeth when she saw a flash somewhere to the left, from the western outskirts of the city where large industrial complexes had their home, chemical companies mainly, large dome like structures, warehouses, and high reaching pipes dotting the landscape where the ground became flatter. “Saw a flash, west, industrial complex.”

She watched, hearing Logan shift as well.

A few minutes passed, then she saw it again, a small flare. “Second warehouse to the right.”

“I saw it too,” Logan said. “Too far away for the binoculars,” he said and got out his sniper rifle.

Kate waited.

He breathed in deep. “Undead are running towards the complex. Someone is there. Fighting. Blue flashes too but more subdued... swords maybe, covered in what looks like fire.”

“Doesn’t sound like anything we’ve encountered. People?” Kate asked.

“I’m not sure but it’s possible,” Logan said. “More undead going their way.”

“If they’re humans,” Kate said.

He grunted.

“It’s some distance away.”

“We should help,” she said.

“We should,” Logan confirmed. “Let’s stay low until we get there, no guns until we know what we’re dealing with.”

Kate saw another tiny flash. She put on her pack and checked her weapons, then turned around. “This way.”

Jasia ran, her heart pounding in her chest. She heard the dead behind, hounding them through the compound. She heard a whooshing sound, seeing Mateo near a door, nocking another arrow into his compound bow with a fluid motion. She saw Bastian slow to a stop, the large man in riot gear turning around and shouting, his riot shield and fire axe ready.

Jasia didn't look back, running past Bastian as Mateo shot another arrow, a heavy impact resounding behind her, the groaning noises closer. She passed into the massive office building, finding an unlit hallway beyond the door, blue light flaring up from one of Amin's spells as he grunted, blood on his face.

Niklas ran inside as well, his two curved blades covered in fire bringing more light into the nondescript hallway as he cursed and muttered to himself, one hand to his thigh.

Aisha went to his side, her hands glowing as she checked his wound.

Jasia breathed hard, leaning against the wall as she looked outside, seeing dozens of undead running towards the light and noise. *We fucked up.*

Jasia felt some of the tension leave her when Bastian called out the clear. Lina's glittering illusion spell had been enough to divert the undead for some time. They had rushed up through one of the stairwells and finally found a suitably large conference room to rest.

Her head still pounded. If she would've known about the pain brought on by excessive mana usage, she might've chosen a different Class altogether. Not that she'd had much of a choice.

She could hear the others breathe hard. It already started smelling of blood and sweat. They'd been running and fighting for what felt like hours and now that she got the chance to take a breather, she noticed how spent she really was. Her body felt frayed, her mind even worse.

She thought of the white marble stairwell going down into the hillside, the dim red light, the beasts down in the hallway. She gulped and shook her head.

"Everyone here?" Mateo asked as he panned around his dimmed flashlight to check on everyone.

Amin looked pale, Aisha helping him sit down as he groaned through gritted teeth.

"Nobody else injured?" Aisha asked. "This is your last chance to speak up, I don't want to find out you've been bitten and infected with some fucked up virus when we get back."

Jasia closed her eyes, gritting her teeth through the pounding headache.

You survived and got through this so far. You'll get through this too. Come on, Jasia. Just a bunch of zombies. Now that we have an entrance, they'll send someone in to clear everything out.

She gulped, realizing that they had been the ones who were sent.

Every minute slowly ticked by. The room was warmer now and at this point, Jasia just felt exhausted. She had eaten something and a painkiller helped with her headache.

“So much for looting the industrial sector,” Mateo murmured as he got out a map. “Probably too risky to do anything but return at this point.”

“We should wait till sundown, if we can,” Bastian said.

Jasia looked at the map when she heard a dulled scream. She froze up, goosebumps on her arms and neck.

They were entirely silent.

“Did you... did everyone else hear that too?” Niklas asked with a quiet tone.

“A scream,” Bastian said.

“Some new type of undead?” Aisha suggested.

“Or another magical creature,” Bastian said.

“Quiet,” Mateo said. A moment later, screeches came from the hallway, several undead running in the direction of the scream.

Silence returned.

Jasia could hear her heart beat in her skull. *What other shit is the world going to throw our way.*

“I hope we didn’t walk into the den of yet another nightmare,” Aisha whispered.

A gunshot resounded. Not close but likely somewhere in the building.

Jasia tensed up, hitting the wall with her back as she breathed faster.

“Guns. Sounds familiar too,” Bastian said.

Three more shots. Then more.

“A rifle,” Bastian said. “There are people here.”

“Or an undead wielding a gun,” Mateo said.

“No. This is deliberate. Listen,” Bastian said.

It was true, Jasia found. There seemed to be intent. The few undead who used guns that other groups had encountered were using them without any concern for ammo, point and spray until they were out. It was quiet for nearly half a minute before more gunshots resounded.

“Someone is here,” Bastian repeated. “Maybe they saw us run into the building, came to help.”

“Pretty optimistic,” Jasia said. “What if the orcs finally figured out our weapons?”

“Could be a random group as well, or someone sent by Lang,” Mateo said. “Either way, any undead in the vicinity is going to follow those sounds.” He looked torn.

They were quiet, more gunshots resounding in the large office building.

“Perfect for us to get away,” Niklas said, saying what Jasia thought.

“And let someone die if we could help?” Bastian snapped.

“We’re in no condition to fight,” Aisha countered. “My healing is out, our casters are spent, Lina has a few more spells in her but it’s too much of a risk.”

“Don’t want to catch a stray bullet either,” Amin said.

“I think they’re right, Bastian,” Mateo said.

Bastian grunted, sighing a moment later. “Fuck.” He grabbed his pack. “At least let me send out a radio signal.”

“What if they’re here to kill other humans?” Jasia said.

“We are to inform other survivors of our presence,” Bastian said. “You all know that.”

“They have guns,” Amin said.

“And they have no reason to attack us,” Mateo said.

“We don’t know that,” Niklas said.

Bastian tapped the holster on his belt. “I have a gun too, if it comes down to it.”

“Do it,” Aisha said.

Bastian tapped the radio. “This is Bastian Recht, sending on police and common public short range frequencies. Survivor group of the Falstadt Union. Hiding in the office building where gunshots are being fired. Do you read? Over.”

Jasia held her breath as he waited for five seconds, before changing the frequency and repeating the message.

Bastian sent out three more attempts.

“This is a waste of time, we should leave while they’re still shooting,” Niklas said.

The radio crackled.

“Roger, this is Logan Westering. Survivor group from Keilberg. We are firing at undead. Are you in immediate need of help? Over.” The voice was crackly but the man sounded calm.

Bastian glanced at the others. “Roger. We are not in immediate need of help. I repeat, we are not in immediate need of help.” He paused and glanced at the others. “Are you? Over.”

It was quiet for a long moment, Jasia holding her breath. More gunshots resounded, then the radio cracked.

“Wait out.” The voice said before more gunshots echoed through the building.

Bastian looked up at the others as the seconds ticked by.

“Clearing out undead. Secured an entrance to the west. Suggest we join up or you sneak out while we fight. Over.”

“We should go north, keep in touch with them, see what happens, maybe we can join up once we’re outside,” Mateo said.

“Agreed,” Bastian said. “Everyone ready up, we’re leaving,” he said and spoke into the radio. “Roger. We will sneak out northwards, keep us informed, out.”

Jasia breathed a sigh of relief. She put on her pack and soon followed the others out, Bastian leading them to the northern section of the office building, looking for a stairwell. They found a door that led to one.

“Wait,” Mateo said just as the large man touched the door handle. “Back where we came from. Move fast.”

Jasia turned around when she heard the undead groaning and scrambling up the stairs, following the others as they made their way through the narrow hallways of the dark office building.

Mateo stopped them again after a brisk walk, the group now in front of a closed elevator door. He checked the open door leading into another stairwell going down. He quietly closed the door. “More this way too,” he said in a whisper.

“Shit,” Aisha murmured.

“There are too many, we’ll get into a fight no matter what,” Bastian said.

“Tell him we’re meeting up,” Mateo said before he glanced at the group. A single dull gunshot resounded some distance away. At a lower level.

Bastian nodded. “Alright,” he said and walked over to the building plan next to the elevator. “This is Bastian. Can’t find a way through. We’re at the northernmost elevator on the fifth floor. Where can we meet up? Over.”

There was no answer for nearly half a minute.

“Roger, Bastian. Stay or hide east of your position. And don’t attack the red-headed woman. Seems like she’s bringing the party to you. Over.”