

Chapter 75 Momentum

Logan and Allison set up the radio after dinner. Kate enjoyed just watching the others, Eloise brewing more potions, Jon taking frantic notes as he worked through all the information they'd brought back, and Melusine playing a board game with Celeste. It felt nice but Kate couldn't help but glance at the heavy door of the armory from time to time, thinking back to the undead that had breached this place.

Not happening right now, she reminded herself and breathed. *One day at a time.*

She heard the radio crackle from upstairs, smiling when she heard Maximilian's voice speak through it.

"You're the other survivors. Good job on that... ehm, Valery told me about you. I'm just... supposed to pretty much function as a bridge of sorts, between the Union and your group. Is this Jon I'm speaking to?"

Kate smiled. "Jon, Max is asking for you."

"How?" Jon asked. "Oh, you mean upstairs, you can hear it... still weird, sorry."

"All good," Kate said, watching him stand up and leave to talk to the first person outside of this castle since this thing had started. *The first of many*, she told herself, getting up herself to sit down next to Melusine and Celeste.

"Do you want to play too?" Celeste asked.

"I do," Kate said. "Can you explain the rules to me?"

The girl smiled. "I can."

Jon and the other returned around half an hour later.

Kate didn't miss the confident smile on Jon's face.

"Good talk?" Melusine asked.

"Yes. A lot of potential," Jon said. "Should we discuss now or tomorrow? I know you two have been out there all day, so you decide."

"Fine to have a chat now, for me," Kate said.

"I doubt you'd be getting any sleep if we don't talk now," Logan said, looking at Jon.

Jon tapped his book. "Yes, I mean, I see that. But that would be fine if you two need to sleep early."

Logan glanced at Kate. "We're fine, let's start."

Jon smiled. "Alright." He opened his book and sat straighter in his armchair. "Let's start with what we've learned this past week, what we, and what you two specifically, have achieved."

“We now have a semi-safe route into the inner-city of Falstadt. Through the supposed dungeon. And we know there is at least one stairwell leading farther down into those depths. The undead are moving in large hordes during the day, and the Union has learned that by night, they split up more and hunt in smaller groups both inside and outside of the city. They’ve adapted to traps as well. Not always perfectly but the undead are learning, adapting. And you two have learned that they bring bodies back to their dungeon, either to make the dungeon stronger, or to raise more undead.

“There are many possibilities here. The undead could be moving and learning on instinct, somehow sharing what they’d learned with others. The dungeon could just be the place where they’ve been created, perhaps not even that, and undead are raised for other reasons we don’t understand yet. Maybe there’s some kind of controlling entity deep in that dungeon, or the dungeon itself is somehow alive, influencing the undead, or using the undead as some type of defense mechanism. Or they work together in some sort of symbiotic relationship. What we know for sure is that something is happening within that dungeon, and we have to find out what.

“What we also know is that the undead are hunting throughout the valley, and their numbers so far, have been growing. Which means next to finding out what is happening in the dungeon, and stopping that, we have to simply deal with their numbers. The hordes would be a fantastic target to wipe out large numbers of undead in a single swoop, and the weapons you’ve found today could make that possible, even if we don’t have an entire group of level thirty humans. The longer we wait, the more uncertainties will come into play, the longer these monsters will have to adapt and bolster their numbers.

“However right now, Kate and Logan are the highest level and most effective fighters both among our group and that of the Union. It would be too much of a risk to send you two into the dungeon right now, and it would be too much of a risk to have you two fighting a horde together with the Union. Which means there will have to be a balance of sorts. Preparation to help level up and gear both crafters and fighters here and with the Union, gathering and production of weapons and supplies, and ambush preparations within and without Falstadt. We know the city, have maps, and we have both our newfound magic as well as military equipment to deal devastating blows to the undead, and any other monster populations that may become a problem.

“So in terms of more practical steps, Maximilian will inform the Union and potential other survivors through their radio about the current situation. Most of the Union combatants will be moved into the city, escorted through the tunnels every morning and evening by Kate and Logan, until they’ve met, fought, and killed monsters like the Emissaries or Overakar by themselves. Any roses in the dungeon will be collected and brought here until the Union has Alchemists themselves. Eloise will brew potions and she’ll prepare meals for Kate and Logan. I myself will help enchant weaponry and if possible, armor as well. Allison and any other crafters with the Union will prepare gear, all to supply the combatants that will be in the city and beyond, fighting any smaller groups of undead that they can find, or other monster infestations that remain in the city.

“The Union will focus on supplies and preparations for the next few days, gathering what they can within Falstadt and leveling their fighters as safely as they can. The Union has observed undead behavior at night but they’ve had few engagements. I think this is where Kate and Logan could come into play. The risk is high but if the undead truly move in smaller groups, it will be safer to engage them instead of the hordes they move in by day. With your levels and experience, I think you could be the first to try this approach.”

“Hunt by night?” Kate asked.

“Exactly,” Jon said. “Maximilian has informed me that the Union owns a few pairs of night-vision goggles. In a few days, once the Union is more established within the city, with safe houses and escape routes prepared. Distractions and support spells would be invaluable in some sort of guerrilla warfare, you two being the first to try this approach, with more combatants to follow. And once we have enough suitable fighters, equipped with tinctures, guns, and enchanted magical gear, we will set up an ambush to fight and wipe out a horde of undead.

“All that to both equip and level up our groups but really as a preparation to scout deeper into the dungeon. And to make sure the undead numbers at least don’t grow for the time being,” Jon said.

“It’s risky to wait,” Kate said. “We could scout more of the dungeon now already.”

“We could,” Logan said. “But there’s a lot of risk in that too.”

Kate nodded. She didn’t know which approach was best. Nobody knew. The undead could grow more dangerous by the end of the week, could maybe even follow them, strike at their bases. Or they could remain mostly the same, their numbers weakened while the Union fighters and crafters became stronger. What Jon and Valery suggested was a compromise, the risk assessed and their choice made, with potential consequences. To Kate, it felt like a somewhat conservative approach but then she recognized that if herself and Logan went deeper into the dungeon and died there, both of their groups would be set back by months.

She felt her blood pulse. And she knew why too. She didn’t want to wait. Didn’t want to consider, to plan, to be efficient. She just wanted to go in there and kill all the undead, all the monsters that were responsible for what had happened to her home, what had happened to Grey, Ethan, and Bert.

But she saw the reason in it too, and if she focused on their next goal of hunting the undead by night, it felt more manageable. She didn’t have to wipe out all the monsters in this valley or the world in a single day or week. She couldn’t, and she knew that, as much as it pissed her off.

Kate breathed to calm herself down. “When do we start with the night hunts?”

“When Allison is done with your armor, until then, we help the Union with scavenging,” Logan said. He looked at her with an intense gaze. A questioning gaze.

Kate knew what he meant. She nodded. She could wait that long.

Allison grumbled something about pressure and stood up. “I’ll get back to work then, don’t want her to go nuts and run into the dungeon.”

Kate smiled. She knew it was a joke but it didn’t feel like one to her for once. She caught herself thinking that the other fighters were too weak, too cautious, that they hadn’t fought as much as they should’ve, hadn’t capitalized on their opportunities enough if she was the highest level one. She grunted to herself. The thought was interesting and she allowed herself to feel what she felt, just like Logan had told her. It came and went, Kate knowing that these were really just her frustrations talking, her grief, and the anger that came through that.

She would play along, knowing that it would benefit their long term goals.

But don’t go complaining if there won’t be a horde left to fight after our hunts.

“Are you okay?” Celeste asked. “Do you need some juice?” she asked and held up her glass half full of orange juice.

Kate smiled at her. “I’m frustrated and angry. You’re right, maybe some juice would help.”

Kate woke up early the next day, feeling rested. Eloise had more tincture of healing for life for them to take to the Union, or to use themselves. Jon had enchanted one of their Glocks with magic, to be tested by Logan, somewhere in the forest between here and Falstadt.

They did just that and it turned out that while the gun felt more substantial to Logan, the impact of the bullets were the same. “Does feel like it handles a little better though,” he said. “And the sacred enchantment feels easier to flow into the weapon.”

“So it’s worth it but we should prioritize weapons and armor, if he can manage the latter,” Kate said. Jon had tried apparently but had gotten a splitting headache both times, with pants and a jacket. They assumed what he needed was more mana, or a higher level in his enchantment skill.

Nothing came to face them after testing the handguns, so they moved on to join the Union fighters at the chemical plant.

And fighters there were.

The ten people they had met the day before, plus the entire group Kate and Logan had initially seen and helped out in this very building. Next to those, there were nearly thirty other people, kitted out in different clothes, armor, and weapons, ages ranging from teenagers to early retirees. Valery greeted them and introduced Kate and Logan to the people they hadn’t met before.

Kate knew one of them already and smiled when she saw Fred among the group. Firefighter and self proclaimed poet.

He rushed and hugged her, holding her close. “You stupid girl, always taking so many risks.”

“I missed you too,” Kate said, hugging him back before they each let go.

“You’re the one to lead us in there,” he said. “A warrior’s heart. I’d never doubted you’d be alive. And now you’re stronger than both me and Lewis. Can’t have that. We’ll catch up soon enough.”

“What was that about risks?” Kate asked. “Stupid boy, seeing everything as a competition.”

He laughed out loud and grinned, the thirty two year old bearded man grinning very much like a boy would.

Kate had missed him, she realized. As annoying as that thought was. And he knew it too, had missed her too. “It’s good to see you.”

He sobered up and nodded. “Yeah. Been rough out there.”

“It has,” she said.

“We stumbled, we all did. Got hit really bad, us humans, with our little lives,” Fred said.

“But now we’ve caught ourselves. We’re ready, standing once more,” Logan said as he joined them.

“Who’s this guy? Knight armor and all? Finishing my speech? I like this guy,” Fred said and shook Logan’s hand. “You’re the other one in team Kate. Strong grip, good sword, good guns. Nice.”

Logan chuckled. “Good to meet you, Fred.”

“Wasted enough time,” Kate said. “Let get this going.”

“Always the pragmatic. No time for a heartfelt reunion,” Fred said with arms held wide. “But so be it.”

The Union was ready, and so were Kate and Logan, so were their friends at Keilberg Castle. And so they walked together, down into the dungeon corridors, through the undead infested halls and out into the inner city of their former home. Kate could see it, the fear in many of their eyes, the apprehension but it was good. They were here, together, all of them, survivors ready to work and fight together.

The next three days passed in a flash, the Union organized by Valery and her team spread out through the city of Falstadt, finding defensible locations and reinforcing them, moving supplies and weapons, and taking out any smaller undead groups while keeping an eye on the hordes, reporting their movement continuously. Before night fell, they would leave once more, to return the next day.

On the evening of the fourth day, Allison was done. By now, all groups of the Union had at least a few tinctures of life, filled into small glass containers that could be drunk in a few seconds. They had set up motion sensors within the tunnels leading through the dungeon and into the city, and they were scouting other potential routes, the main issue being patrolling undead Wyverns and the fluttering butterflies. A few people had gotten injured but thanks to the growing skills and quick response from the various healers, nobody had died thus far.

They had secured the main university library and they’d looted the ancient weapons kept in the Falstadt historical museum, many of them now enchanted thanks to Jon.

“What do you think?” Allison asked.

Kate looked at the set of armor made specifically for her. Padded direwolf leather armor topped with the rough black Overakar scales, small bits of Emissary horns added to the helmet. It didn’t look like something hastily thrown together, nor like padding and scales added to existing clothing. Each piece was crafted individually, bracers, arms, thighs, shins, chest, back, shoulders, neck, and head, all of it propped up on the armor stand on which Logan’s set had been on initially.

It looked like something out of a movie, or a game.

“The scales are rough but I didn’t want to sand them down fully, the edges are angled in a way that should help deflect incoming arrows, claws, and blades, and the padding should help with any heavy impacts. The overall weight is below the requirement for your Unarmored skill, enough so that you can still wear normal pants and a shirt below. It won’t be particularly warm but you’re not affected much by the cold temperatures anymore. I prioritized functionality and protection rather than artistry, embellishments, and accessories, due to the weight restrictions.” Her tone made it clear that she was annoyed about that last fact. “It’s armor made for one purpose only. I suppose the singular intent gave it a sort of... rough and intimidating look, practical and thus somehow more intimidating than something more over designed.”

“It looks crazy,” Kate said, walking over before she touched the rough scales covering everything, not just a few spots on her arms and abdomen like with her Wyvern scale jacket did. “You made this?”

Allison grinned. “I did. Specifically for you. Want to try it on?”

Kate looked at the helmet. “I don’t suppose the horns are practical,” she said. There were six of them, each a few centimeters long and protruding out and backwards. Three on each side of the helmet.

“Emissary antler bone, both meant as a message but I had to add at least *some* flair, something distinct. Flowed into the name too, you’ll see,” Allison said.

There were straps to make sure the helmet fit well, two separate openings for the eyes, each protected with a see through material. Kate tapped it.

“Polycarbonate. Don’t think it can match up with the scales in terms of defense but it should protect your eyes against venom spit, fire breaths, and the like,” Allison said. “Don’t ask me how I cut and put it in there. Fucking nightmare.”

Kate raised her brows. She touched the helmet again and this time was sure.

“You can feel it, right?” Allison said, her grin widening.

“I thought he couldn’t do armor?” Kate asked.

“He got to a high enough level earlier today. Helps that the pieces are not overly large by themselves,” Allison said. “And I have a feeling it was easier too because I made it from scratch. But maybe I think that to make me feel better.”

It’s all enchanted, Kate thought and touched the shoulders, looking into the imposing visage of the scale helmet. “This is the dream armor for any fifteen year old boy.”

“No, too practical. It’s almost boring compared to most modern designs,” Allison said and laughed. “Always wanted to make something along these lines but you get better engagement with more revealing stuff, and helmets are not great either, if they don’t show most of your face. But what the fuck is the point of a helmet if it doesn’t protect your face.”

“I like it,” Kate said.

“That’s it? You have to at least say you love it and jump up and down from excitement and joy. I put my heart and soul into this. Maybe literally, we don’t really know how magic works yet,” Allison said.

“I’ll have to wear and use it to see if I love it. Love is not something that immediately comes up. It’s something worked for, something that takes time,” Kate said and touched the chest piece of the armor.

“Didn’t expect you to think that way,” Allison said. “For me, time and usage usually blunted and faded anything resembling love.” She sighed theatrically. “Oh well. I can see that you’re willing to build an intimate relationship already. Now put it on.”

“Yes ma’am,” Kate said with a smile, thinking of Ethan for a moment. Her joy turned bittersweet. She knew they would’ve loved to see this. They would’ve probably fought to see who would get the next set that Allison made.

“Are you okay? You actually looked sentimental there for a moment, I hope you don’t have inappropriate thoughts about armor. I mean I’d get it but you? Let’s just say I’d be surprised,” Allison said.

“I’m okay,” Kate said. “Can you show me how to put it on?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” Allison said.