

Chapter 86 Depths

Layer after layer, their group explored and fought through, undead taken out as they followed the pulsing red veins, the dim red light pushed back with every Celeavir that they killed.

When they reached the sixth layer down, Kate noticed that the walls were no longer quite as smooth, rocks jutting out here and there. The veins kept pulling them downwards, the dim red light a constant in the oppressive feeling corridors.

They reached a more natural looking corridor that seemed to lead to a dead end. It had been two and a half hours since they'd entered the dungeon.

"Check your gear, eat and drink," Valery said as she walked to the front.

"Something shiny here," someone called out from near one of the rocks that jugged out of the white stone. A single red glowing vein snaked along the wall and ended in the rock.

When they shined their headlamps at the wall, they found lines of hardened red rock.

"A metal of some kind," one of the others said, tapping it with a knife.

"Think it's something magical?" someone else asked.

"Hard to say. Might just be a metal I'm unfamiliar with."

"We'd have to take a crafter down here. Leave it for now, we're focused on the undead," Valery said.

Kate took off her helmet and cleaned off some of the sweat on her. It had gotten warmer with each layer they'd descended. She drank, glancing at the supposed metal, perhaps magical, perhaps part of the dungeon. *Like the roses*, she thought.

She made her way back and through the groups of people, meeting their eyes in the dim glow and flashlight reflections. She could tell that some of them were already losing focus. Two and a half hours down here, near constant fights, undead lurking around every corner. They killed them but the sounds, the smells, and the air itself, it was grinding on her too.

"We should go on soon," she said.

It took them another half hour to find the stairwell down into the seventh layer, three more groups of monsters taken out in the process, more blood and death left in their wake, the already blood covered corridors littered with the corpses of the undead.

The stairs before her were broader than the ones before. And compared to the steps and tremors she'd perceived from every other layer, the faint scratching noises, the quiet groans, this one was entirely quiet.

She raised a fist and glanced behind herself, waiting until a few team leaders joined her up front.

"It's quiet down there," she said in a whisper.

“An ambush?” Bastian asked.

“The stairs are bigger, maybe there are just no monsters close by?” Fred suggested.

“Could be,” Valery said. “But it’s a change, so be vigilant. Send anyone with perception skills to the front, then continue but with more care. No lights at first.”

Kate nodded, waiting for the few combatants that soon joined her. She felt the gun in her arms. It felt heavier than when she’d jumped up into the dungeon.

She checked with the others and then moved on, every step deliberate and as quietly as she could manage without her Aura of Silence.

She breathed harder with every step. It felt as if the air grew more oppressive, as if her world narrowed just a little. There were far more steps too on this layer, the dim red light a constant follower, the only noises and tremors that Kate could perceive the ones from her allies. She held her breath when they reached the bottom, Kate seeing the faint outline of solid ground.

She glanced up at the red veins flowing down along the walls and then out into the next layer, vanishing from her sight.

All the other floors had been corridors, the red veins enough to illuminate their rectangular shape but always enough to suggest the path continued. Here, the light veered off to the left and right. Before them, there was utter darkness.

Kate could feel the hair on her neck stand up.

She waited for a long moment, then spoke in a whisper. “Anything?”

“Negative,” someone next to her spoke.

“Lights?” someone else asked.

Kate reached up to her headlamp and turned it on, now seeing the blood covered stone floor expand before her. Up until the light was swallowed again by darkness. She’d expected some hiding monster to jump her but there was nothing at all.

Kate saw more cones of light flashing up and out, the rest of their group slowly walking out into the hall to join them. She tapped her gun and started walking again, the rest following in formation, the flat ground continuing for a long while.

She could feel sweat dripping down her brow, readjusting her gun before she continued.

Someone to her left tapped their gun twice. The signal for danger.

Everyone stopped and looked around, waiting.

Then she heard it. There was a very soft noise. A soft sound of moving air. Glancing up, she took a step forward and clicked her tongue. A shape flew out of the darkness, and straight at her.

Illuminated now by her headlamp, she could see a gliding and winged skeleton, covered in blood, spine dangling free with its lower half missing, two long arms ending in clawed hands extended as if to catch her. Its skull had three empty eye sockets, its large mouth open, no teeth in its jaws.

“Incoming!” someone shouted, lights flickering upwards just as Kate tried to raise her gun at the creature. She could see a dozen more of them gliding down towards their group, and there were tremors too, on the ground, coming from ahead, and from their left and right. She wanted to warn

them but all she could focus on were the three dark eyes of the flying creature, as if the world had narrowed, as if she was staring into an unending depth.

She had felt this before, terror gripping her heart as she grit her teeth and fought back.

It was time.

Blood Frenzy narrowed her world even further, washing away the fear as if it hadn't existed in the first place. She no longer saw terror, she saw a monster to kill. She roared, straight at the monster and catching its arms as it tried to grab onto her head. She made to headbutt its skull when a spike of bone flashed out of its gaping mouth, the monster pulling itself closer, trying to impale her head with it.

She pushed the creature to the side, hearing gunshots and shouts now, her shout having pulled her allies out of their terror. The spike scraped against her cheek and past her head. The creature rocked back, shot in its chest by an ally, golden glowing bullets and spells flashing up at the gliding creatures, as the monsters reached their formation.

Someone shouted about creatures on the ground, machine guns firing before a first explosion resounded, lighting up the oppressive darkness to reveal the antlered skulls of walking and crawling Emissaries, dozens of them.

Kate felt the grip of the creature loosen from the bullets impacting its thin frame, enough for Kate to be able to rip it away and smash it down to the ground. She stomped on it but found it scraping its claws against her armored leg. Her mace raised, Kate brought it down onto the creature's form, cracking its skull to the side with the first strike and shattering it with the second.

She felt the Emissaries were speeding up now, no longer stalking in the dark as the fight had started, quickly closing the distance. Around her was chaos, her allies fighting off the fliers that had clung onto several combatants, others firing wildly into the approaching monsters.

She stepped forward, letting go of her mace before she grabbed her machine gun, loosely aimed, and started firing, a streak of her bullets tearing into the silhouettes of antlered monsters, flashes of light from sacred bullets and explosives letting her aim and shoot at the charging groups, the monsters trying to evade in the darkness.

Somewhere to the left, another heavy machine gun began firing, and then nearby, people shouting for healers and reloads, others shouting to hold position. Her machine gun clicked, the last of the bullets gone before she turned to her right, hearing more enemies rushing their way. She reached out her hands and caught her weapons, then started running with a roar, warning her allies that she was there.

With the roar, she jumped, landing in the darkness with an explosion of blood, the creatures turning her way and crashing into her form. One of them swiped at her helmet, its claw scraping past and making her tumble to the side before she caught herself and blocked the next swing with her mace. She charged both of her weapons with sound and used Crushing Storm with its full angle when she saw four antlered silhouettes closing in around her.

Power flowed into her arms and back, Kate roaring as she swung wide, her two charged weapons slicing and crushing through the dense bones of the blood covered monsters, crippling them with her first strike before her second crushed a head and chest in the flashes of light and echo she perceived. She was struck in the chest and back before her third strike crushed through the last two monsters, Kate gritting her teeth against the heavy strikes as health flowed back into her.

More of the creatures had already rushed past, sacred bullets and spells impacting their ranks as they entered the light of the formation, claws blocked by raised and enchanted shields, scraping past armor and blocked by raised swords and axes.

Kate charged her weapons again and ran, slowing down before she threw her axe at one of the monsters, the blade cutting deep into and through its spine, one of the other combatants slamming a burning mace into its head, bone splintering and blood splashing to the side. Kate rushed another Emissary, its claws just barely blocked and deflected by three of her allies with their various weapons, the third one sending a shard of crystallized ice at its chest which slowed it for a moment. Kate reached it then, her charged mace breaking through the monster's left knee and cracking the right one, downing it with the swing.

She left the others to finish it, turning to see more creatures still coming, assault rifle fire and a few flashing spells of fire slowing them slightly, a spark of lightning illuminating the creatures in the dark. One of the gunners used the light to aim, the heavy and infused bullets cutting down into the creatures, a few of them dodging out of the line of fire, rushing back into the dark.

"Formation! Injured to the back!" someone shouted.

Kate saw a few people getting dragged past the other combatants, clutching wounds on their chests and heads, more bursts of lightning and fire flashing out, explosions resounding in the darkness, lighting up the silhouettes of their enemies, followed by more rifle and machine gun fire. Kate rushed to the right and back, where three of the creatures were held back by two groups of fighters, rifle fire striking their heads repeatedly, the monsters grabbing at shields and weapons, pulling one of the combatants away before they started slashing into them.

Kate used her charge, swinging her mace wide and breaking the back of the first monster, her allies charging, weapons clad in fire, golden, green, or blue light, spears and axes thrown while rifles were fired in bursts or on full auto, the creatures hacked down and killed before they pulled down the injured and groaning warrior.

Kate stepped back to join into the ranks, calling for her axe before she roared again in case any of her allies had been caught in terror. She stepped past screaming and shouting warriors and mages, to the left of the formation where Emissaries were held back by spear wielders and her ally, golden glowing rifle blasts ripping out chunks of their skulls. She jumped over the formation, landing amidst the creatures before she swung her weapons, one in each hand, aimed loosely at the legs and backs of the creatures before her. She infused her strikes whenever possible, blood and sound rupturing through the undead as some of them turned her way and were cut down by her allies instead.

She slapped a hand coming at her to the side, slamming down her axe into the creature's left shoulder, the blade cutting deep. She pushed, ripping off its arm, slamming down her mace onto its skull, the blunt strike leaving the monster staggering back and to the left. Someone shot the creature in the head as Kate let go of her axe, clutching her mace with both hands before she brought it down onto its skull again, wedging it deep into the bone and downing the monster with the strike.

She felt the tremors and heard the steps. The remaining creatures were retreating. Kate ripped out the mace and raised it up, roaring her cry. She heard her allies doing the same.

"Stop firing!" She heard one of her allies shout. "Reload! Formation! Injured to the back, healers call for tinctures!"

Kate grit her teeth and smiled, reaching up to right her headlamp as she took a few steps towards the fleeing monsters. Then she started running, her eyes focused as she listened for the creatures, a cone of light illuminating the dark before her.

She heard a few of her allies calling after her but she didn't mind. If they didn't want to join, she would gladly kill the rest.

They were here now, in the den of their enemies. She roared and pursued, charging her weapons with sound before she caught up with the first of them, jumping up before she brought both her weapons down into its back, downing the creature and falling herself before she slid for a few meters with the corpse and staggered up again.

She could see faint red light in the distance now, pulsing in the dark. Her enemies had stopped.

She rushed in, hearing the steps of the Emissaries. They had spread out, and were advancing again, stalking around her. Kate crouched, then stomped down her foot, blood rushing out as the creatures closed in. Crushing Storm empowered her strikes before she delivered three broad strikes, crippling two of the creatures with the first blow, the rest making distance as she killed her foes. One of them rushed back in and tackled into her, the momentum sending her flying, her weapons clattering to the side. She was struck with another blow right after, Kate turning before one of the creatures grabbed her arm. She raised her other hand and called her mace back, the monster striking at her face, the weight thrumming through her skull and leaving her sight blurred before she brought her mace down and towards where she thought its skull would be.

She raised her weapon to block the strike of another creature when a golden glowing bullet tore through its right leg, another one punching through the chest of a second Emissary. She went down to one knee, gripping her mace as she smiled. Her ally was here. She glared at the last three monsters, and charged forward, ducking low under a wide swing before she shouted and broke through its right leg with a brutal strike, then smashed her mace into its chest, downing the creature. She was struck in the side and stumbled, wheezing as she tasted blood. She staggered back when she blocked another strike, seeing her ally shooting at the third monster, one last one facing her down.

Kate called for her axe, the weapon striking the Emissary's back right when it moved to charge her. She brought her boot down, blood surging out and into the creature. Then she walked forward and swung, upwards and into the clawed arm that came her way, the edges of her mace cutting into the flesh and bone, the arm bending around her weapon. She ripped it out but found the creature's other claw coming her way. She was just barely able to raise her arm before the strike sent her flying to the side. Kate landed and pushed up, stumbling before she fell to the ground, coughing up blood.

Grey.

She blinked her eyes and grit her teeth.

Ethan.

Kate roared as her mace surged with vibrations. Her lamp was gone and the flashes of light provided little, so she listened instead, stepping up and pushed to the right when the monster reached her, swinging her mace as she heard its claws pass by where she'd just stood. She screamed, her mace bludgeoning into the monster's side, the strength of her blow raising it up from the ground before it fell, unmoving.

Her breathing was rough, Kate going down to one knee as her spells deactivated. There were no more enemies right here, and she was injured. She groaned, a shaking hand going for the tinctures

before she managed to grab one and uncork it. She drank deep, her breathing calming just a little before Logan reached her.

He helped her stand. "Can you move?"

She grunted with an affirming sound.

"Back to the others now," he said and helped her walk, Kate leaving her weapons as she focused on not passing out. She breathed slow and deep, in no way worried. She needed to get healed up so that she could go and find the rest of them. She could see the glowing veins still, all of them coalescing at the same point, and she could hear it now, as if a heart was beating, as if there was a pulse. They were getting close, to whatever was at the core of this dungeon.

She could hear the pained groans when they reached the others yet again, a formation ready to take on any incoming monsters they had missed. Nearly half of the fighters were injured in one way or another, blood covered and looking into the darkness.

"We killed the rest of them," Logan said before he helped her sit down and checked her wounds.

Kate blinked her eyes at the bright light before she closed them and tried to relax. "My right shoulder and arm," she said. The scale armor was mostly fine, it seemed, but the strikes had injured both her body and joints. "And my right side, near the ribs." It still felt a little hard to breathe.

"Pierced your armor there," Logan said before his hand started glowing.

Kate sighed, her breathing stabilizing as she noticed the smell for the first time. Blood and sweat, the air itself heavy with iron, smoke, and burnt flesh.

She could hear the others clearer now, the pained groans, the prayers, curses, the hasted discussions from the healers stabilizing those who were in a really bad spot. She could see tense glances going her way before they looked back out into the oppressing darkness.

"None dead!" Valery shouted, a few others shouted too and Kate allowed herself to relax for just a moment.

She took the bottle that Logan handed to her and drank, then checked the straps on her helmet. He handed her a new headlamp too which she put on. "The end of the hall isn't far," she said as she stood up, stepping to the edge of the formation before she recalled her weapons.

"Heal up and prepare, everyone," Valery said as she walked around the group. "We won this fight but we're not done here," Valery said. "Five minutes, then we move on."

Kate's pack was shredded from the fight, even though it had been enchanted. She handed her axe to a combatant who offered to carry it, then found her machine gun. She went and got someone who was carrying the heavy ammo. They reloaded it together, the mechanical sounds joining the quiet murmurs and sounds of preparation, the complaints of those who'd gotten injured.

Kate went to the front of the formation, mace in one hand, machine gun in the other. She glanced back at the group of combatants, blood covered, exhausted, and healing up. She saw tired and sweat covered faces, torn and dented armor. She didn't know how much more they had in them. Looking back towards the darkness, she grit her teeth and closed her eyes.

She opened them back up, quickly putting her new two stat points into Wisdom. She'd used a lot of her mana to charge her weapons, and with more fights to come, she needed to be ready. Her health and stamina was replenished by her kills after all. No new skills had changed, other than the few

levels she'd gained, her other Classes providing a few more points in their unique stats. That was all.

Logan reached her a moment later. He glanced her way, his armor darkened by the blood, slick in some places. They locked eyes before he looked out into the open space, his headlamp shining into the dark.

"Everyone, get ready again, make sure you're not injured, drink up, check your food buffs, explosives, magazines," Lewis said in a loud voice as he walked around and helped people up and patted their arms and shoulders, a few others doing the same.

"Get in formation," Valery said. "We're moving on."

Kate and Logan waited for the others to be ready, then led the way, onward, and into the dark.

They found the remaining dead Emissaries soon after, once more seeing the red glowing veins ahead, pulsating in the same serene pattern. Shining headlamps illuminated the open space, their group moving steadily, rifles and magic at the ready.

Kate heard something and squinted her eyes, then raised her hand.

"Halt," Lewis called out.

"What is that?" someone to Kate's right called out and walked ahead a little.

The red veins coalesced in the same spot, the light vanishing behind a writhing mass of flesh, at least ten meters high and broad, clinging to the stone wall ahead.

"Celeavir," someone said. "A massive one."

"Think that's the core of the dungeon?" someone else asked.

Valery stepped up. "Everyone with enough strength to throw at this distance, get your explosives ready. We're not getting close to that thing."

Kate set down her mace and readied her gun, in case something came running in response. She heard the rest of the combatants get ready, explosives prepared while the rest hid behind the few shields bearers and mages who could raise protective spells.

"Throw!" Valery called out, grenade pins removed in response, makeshift explosives activated before everything was thrown in the direction of the large monster.

A moment later, explosions echoed through the space, far and wide. Kate couldn't tell how large this cavern or hall was, feeling the tremors and hearing the groans of the massive Celeavir, tendrils of flesh striking down into the stone around it as it tried to kill whatever attacked it. Flesh was ripped through, chunks of it falling to the ground. They threw another set of explosives, the creature stopping its movements a moment later.

"Kill notification in," one of the others said.

Kate waited with her machine gun at the ready, then picked up the mace and moved on, the others following.

She soon saw the bits of charred flesh on the ground, the massive Celeavir peeled from the wall with the explosives. And where it had hung, she could see a tin line in the stone now. A gate, ten meters high and half as broad, made of stone and set into the wall. No longer the white marble but gray. It looked almost natural, other than the slight red glow that came from the thin line going from

the ground up to the arched top. The glow pulsed with the same pattern as the veins vanishing into the edges of the door.

Kate walked up to the massive gate and touched the stone. It felt cool against the warm temperatures all around. And it was heavy. She didn't wait, Logan stepping up to cover her as she started pushing. She couldn't move it, setting down her weapons before she steadied herself against the ground and pushed with both hands. She groaned, feeling her muscles tense before a grinding sound came from the ground, the right side of the stone gate slowly pushed open.

"Get ready," Logan said, the others having spread out slightly to cover different angles.

When the gap was large enough for Kate to get through, she waited for a moment and listened.

All she heard was a slight rhythm. A slight pulse.

She pushed the door open fully, seeing the red glow, and seeing a stone bridge ahead, leading to a smaller set of doors made of stone. The veins snaked over natural rocks jutting out from the distant walls and ceiling of what looked like a natural cavern. An abyss went down on the left and right side of the broad stone bridge near thirty meters long.

Kate stepped to the left and slowly pushed open the other side of the gate, seeing the veins vanish down into the rock formation ahead, into whatever was past the door of stone.

The pulse was stronger now. She could feel it, and her own blood pulsed too. They were close.

Kate grabbed her weapons when several radios crackled with noise. *"C... red! Hordes comi... towards city... rushing to the dungeon. T... sands of undead! R... peating Code red!... Hordes..."*

The signal repeated before it broke off.

The group was quiet before a few murmurs erupted.

"They trapped us down here," someone near Kate said.

"No," Kate said and readjusted the weight of her gun and mace. "They're afraid."