

## Chapter 60 Into the dark

Kate set down her pack and downright fell into one of the office chairs in the room. The same place where they had talked to the survivors they had found earlier. It had been barely an hour since they had brought them to the western outskirts of the industrial sector but to her it felt like a lot more time had passed.

Logan had taken off his helmet, setting down his bloodied gear onto the table.

No undead had followed them here, everything in the vicinity already wiped out by her and Logan.

“Did you find the message?” Logan asked.

Kate nodded and read it out to him.

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

“Ominous,” she said. “And it took all of my magic just to cut through most of its arm.”

“When I looked at it...” He paused and shook his head. “It felt like, like there was no way I would survive. I think the amulet helped, kept some of the terror at bay, but I couldn’t move for a while. I even tried to use the spell I have against stuns. Didn’t work until it focused on you and started fighting.”

“I felt it too,” Kate said. “I think my berserker stuff helped. Maybe the low grade resistance against mental attacks. It definitely felt like a mental attack.”

She shuddered, thinking back to the feeling. She was glad for her magic, knowing that she wouldn’t have found a way to push against it without. As if the creature became a walking nightmare. *How is a human supposed to face that?*

She shook her head. Yet another reason to wipe out every last one of those monsters.

“It did,” Logan said. “I hope I unlock a similar resistance in time, or I’ll just be a liability against one of those creatures, or anything like it.” He shook his head. “Even sacred infused rifle bullets barely slowed it down.”

“It made us level up,” Kate said. “And now we know what they can do.”

He glanced at the wyvern scales on her armor. “We do. I wonder if my steel can take those claws.”

“It hurt, more than just a deep cut, even through all of my magic,” she said.

He sighed. “We try not to get hit next time. I was worried you were dead when it kicked you through the hallway, and when it struck down at your arm.” He paused and nodded. “I’ll get in close as well when we face another, with all of my spells. That should allow us to flank it. And if we see two or more of them, we run for now.”

Kate nodded. “I’ll try.” She knew it wouldn’t be easy with her spells active, and she knew Logan was aware of it too. *Might help that we talked about it at least.*

“With its magic, it felt like I was drawn into its eyes,” Kate murmured.

“We can try to avoid looking at them and see what happens,” he said. “And I’ll use all my spells as soon as we encounter one. Maybe it helps if I’m not already affected.”

“Sounds good,” she said and looked at him, then the guns. “Back to the castle?”

“I still have some ammo. I did use a lot of my mana but I can meditate for a few hours. We have Eloise’s rations as well, might be a good time to try them out,” he said. “Though your armor is damaged and you look spent.”

She sighed. “I am.” Tapping the scales, she grinned ever so slightly. “Mostly holding up though, and I can try and rest a bit too, see how I feel once you have your mana back.”

Logan leaned back in his chair. “It would be interesting to see if anything with the corpses has changed. The ones we left behind. I wonder if they can get up again,” he said. “We should soon be getting another message from Jon as well.”

Kate leaned forward and opened her pack, getting out some water and wipes. “Then enjoy meditating. I’ll clean up and prepare, then try to rest a bit.”

Logan nodded and soon sat down on the ground, leaning against the wall with his eyes closed.

She could near instantly tell how his breathing changed, wondering how his ability worked compared to a conscious effort to meditate. Maybe it just helped him get there faster? The fact that it helped restore mana could imply a great deal of things but she wanted to stay focused on their current objectives.

Cleaning up took some time but Kate found it relaxing, some of the tension she still felt in her body leaving with every bit of blood gone. Her jacket still held up but there were dozens of small cuts and a few bigger tears, especially where the so called Emisary had injured her.

She soon started setting up a gas cooker to later heat up what Eloise had prepared for them. After that, she wrote down a note with the abilities of the new monster they had killed, how its magic had felt, how tough its skin or lack thereof had felt. She would share it all with Jon later as well but would leave the note here in case any other survivors came back here.

Afterwards, she stretched first, nestling herself into her bloodied direwolf cloak, and then tried to meditate a little as well. She found her enhanced hearing helping a lot, all the small sounds easy to focus on, helping her aim her attention on the now, instead of the thoughts going through her mind.

They received another magical message from Jon around two and a half hours later, at six. Logan wanted to go back to the hallway at seven. Most of the sunlight would be gone by then but with Kate’s hearing, no creature that made a sound could surprise them. And if they moved without their flashlights on, they could be the ones striking first.

She heated up the food and they ate, finding the resulting stamina buff lasting for three hours instead of the usual five or six, which meant that some of the magic was lost with heating the food up but not all of it. And it still proved more effective than the sandwiches they had gotten before.

Logan had gotten back a lot of his mana and Kate, while not fully back to a hundred, felt that most of her exhaustion was gone by now.

Ready to leave, Kate left her pack and rifle behind, Logan leaving his sniper rifle but taking the rest.

They closed the doors and went back outside into the cold.

It was much darker now, the two of them not using any light sources to navigate in the dark. Logan held on to the handle of Kate's battle axe, herself using her Echo Awareness to lead them through the night, listening for any undead in the vicinity. They had their headlamps ready, coupled with other flashlights stored away in her jacket and Logan's backpack.

Kate found it simple to navigate through the relative darkness, the snow crunching below their boots coupled with the howling winds the only sounds she heard for a while. All the way to the field in front of the stairwell entrance and into the dim, red lit corridor. She stopped and pulled the battle axe a little closer, then spoke in a whisper. "Undead, at least three. Something is being dragged, near where we fought."

"Let's go in then. Remember to stay close to me and wait as much as you can, even if you hear more monsters. We'll fight them but we take our time," he said.

"I'll start on the first step down," Kate said, the two continuing as silently as they could, the groaning and dragging sounds coupled with the strong winter winds enough to mask their approach to anyone not specifically listening for the slight clanking of Logan's armor and weaponry.

When Kate reached the steps of blood covered stone, she narrowed her eyes to see into the dimly lit corridor. She saw a hunched over creature. Just an undead. A human at that and unarmed. She activated her magic, feeling the world narrow, hearing the pulse of her heartbeat, tuned out in the next moment. She heard the loud sounds of her ally and felt the reassuring weight of her battle axe in her hands. Slowly, she stepped down the stairs, seeing the many corpses laid out before them, those they had killed earlier, still dead and unmoving.

The hunched over creature pulled at one of them, groaning with a beastly sound.

Kate stepped close and swung, the blade of her axe splitting the skull of the undead with a wet crunch. She closed the distance and caught the being by the neck, slowly lowering both the dead and her axe before she wrenched it free as quietly as she could.

She no longer had to hide, no longer had to be considering but she wouldn't have to ignore opportunities like these either. If she could strike first at an unknowing and unaware enemy, she would do that. At least most of the time, she thought.

Another undead went down before the other ones noticed her and looked up, groaning and screeching.

Kate saw that some of them had started dragging corpses deeper into the hallway, now letting go to face her and her ally instead.

Bright light lit up the creatures in the dark, the undead screeching as they shielded their faces against the light.

Kate didn't give them a chance to recover, stepping over the corpses to reach the first of them, her axe deep in its chest before it could recover. Her ally was moving close behind her, his sword stabbed forward, the large blade piercing through the neck of an undead right when she swung her axe at the next enemy. They worked in tandem, killing in single strikes as they moved through the blood and corpse covered hallway until there were no more creatures left to face them.

She could hear more of them deeper down. They would've likely charged as well if her ally or herself had used their guns by now, or if she had used her shout. She would wait with her spells until there was something worthy of them. She hoped there would be.

They walked on into the dark, soon past the remaining corpses from their previous battle.

“Thirty meters,” her ally said.

She understood the words but focused on their enemies instead. They reached a fork in the corridor a while later, one way going left, one going right. Kate heard more sounds from the left and pointed, seeing the red light from the strange veins on the walls glowing brighter by now.

“Dragged them through here,” her ally said.

She saw the smudged blood on the floor and kept on walking. When they came around another corner, Kate heard strange sounds coming from ahead. Undead undoubtedly but among them was something else. Something that sounded like flesh and bones slowly getting crushed. She walked closer, her Echo Awareness showing her that the corridor opened up into a broader hall a little farther in, several undead standing around something she couldn't quite make out in a far corner of the room.

She turned off her headlamp, her ally doing the same as they continued, the red light enough for her to see the outlines of the monsters.

*Distracted*, Kate thought, checking the corners of the stone hall before she entered, seeing rose like flowers growing from some of the walls here, the flowers emitting a red glow that was a little brighter than the veins themselves, and in the corner where the undead stood, she saw the veins themselves pulsing in a slow pattern.

Now that she was closer, she could make out a strange mound of moving mass, connected to the wall, it seemed. Breathing.

One of the undead raised up a corpse from the floor and lowered it into an opening. Not an opening. A mouth.

She could see the rows of teeth and felt her blood pulse, gripping her axe as she approached. Kate knew they had to kill that thing, no matter what. She fueled her sound charge into her body, feeling the vibrations as the magic gathered. She wanted to close in farther when she heard a change in the moving flesh. It stopped grinding up the flesh and bone, instead quiet, alert. She grunted, and charged, dodging left when something whipped past, a wet sound hitting the ground next to her.

Light came from her ally right when she charged forward and stomped her boot down, Blood Rupture and Reverberating Charge releasing in the same moment, a shattering force shaking through the ground as blood magic splashed against the creatures. Kate crouched low, seeing the thorned whip of flesh lash out past the undead, right over her head. She shouted and swung her axe upwards at the injured undead, covered in blood magic, stunned by her Charge.

She killed one of them when a shotgun blast infused with sacred light shredded through another, some of the pellets striking the mound of flesh behind. She heard it screech, the sound deep and unnerving. Not as much of a challenge as the large stag creature's eyes but she could feel herself tense up. Kate struck down the last undead, her ally shooting two more times with his shotgun, the bright flashes further lighting up the carnage in the dark, half destroyed corpses on the ground, blood covering the walls and floor, the mound of flesh like a strange fungal growth, sticking to the wall as much as it was growing out of it.

She heard the screeches, the creature hurt as it lashed out with tendrils of thorned flesh, spikes of bone at the end of them. Kate didn't wait, she used her charge to close the distance, the tendrils lashing past before she cut her axe deep into the flesh. She ripped it out, seeing the mouth open, more tendrils rushing out, a few scraping past her scales, a few finding cloth and cutting through. She swung her axe into the flesh above the mouth, leaving it lodged in there as the creature

screached. She got out a knife and started slashing through the tendrils stuck in her, pushing deeper. When she had cut through the third, she saw another two lashing out from inside the monster's mouth. The first glanced off her scales, the second coming right for her face. She raised her left hand, catching the sharp piece of bone and holding on as it burrowed into her palm. She cut through the thing with her knife, slashing with wild strikes until all the tendrils were separated, more shotgun blasts lashing into the large body of the creature. Ripping out the axe, she slashed down, stepping aside when she heard her ally approach, his shotgun aimed into the mouth of the creature before he fired.

Kate gripped the pieces of bone sticking out of her and pulled them out one by one, the barbed bone ripping out entire pieces of her flesh. She charged her axe with sound when her ally retreated to reload, the sounds of the monster now mere groans, no more tendrils rushing out. She stepped to the side of it and raised her weapon, stepping forward before she brought it down, cleaving a large chunk of the monster out and away from the wall, her blood magic rupturing its insides.

It stopped moving but Kate didn't stop until most of the flesh was separated from the walls. She breathed heavy, feeling the dull pain grow more distant, energy coming back with the kill. The veins on the wall had stopped pulsing, growing weaker.

"Seems like they heard us," her ally said.

Kate smiled, wiping away the blood from her face before she walked to the center of the room, facing the dark tunnel leading deeper into the underground. She flicked on her headlamp and saw the moving creatures barreling down towards them. Brought out into the light. Ready to be slaughtered. At the back, she saw stag like antlers.

"You see it," her ally said as he stepped next to her and switched his rifles, a golden glow flowing through the cracks between his armor and the sword on his back. "I look into the dark," he spoke.

Kate took a step back, feeling a pulse of warmth rush over her. She felt goosebumps on her arms, despite her magic. There were monsters coming but she trusted her ally. This was his moment.

"And what I see, is fear," he said, another pulse rushing out before he pulled the trigger, golden flashes rushing out in quick succession, the rattling sounds echoing through the room as bullets infused with sacred power tore into the horde of flesh, rows upon rows, cut through in seconds.

Kate heard a ringing in her ears and breathed in deep. She heard a magazine clatter to the ground, replaced by another. Her ally pulled the slider to load the first bullet into the chamber, both of them watching as the horde moved closer, just a few meters ahead now and at the end of the tunnel.

He fired.

Flesh and blood splattered backwards, the tide brought to an instant halt, undead monsters stopped with steel and sacred light.

Kate charged her axe and prepared, her eyes focused on the legs of the creatures now, seeing only few of the undead still walking, behind it, she could see the thin and bloodied legs of the Emisary, its knees bending in the wrong direction. When the rifle ran empty, Kate rushed forward with a shout, some of the corpses still falling as she swung sideways and through the first that were still living. Two of them, she cut through with her sound enhanced swing, stepping back when she saw the antlered being rush forward in a crouch.

She did not look at its eyes, jumping back when she heard its swing, saw it through her Echo Awareness. And she saw her ally too, his rifle discarded and his sword tearing through the small undead running past the legs of the larger monster.

Kate saw it glance between them, turning towards her when it saw her ally fighting still.

She breathed in, the time the creature took to decide enough for her to charge her battle axe once more.

*Come*, she thought, looking now at its thin red chest, blood dripping from its form.

Kate saw the two quick steps and swung her axe, up and into the clawed hand that came at her from the left. Steel dug into flesh, sound and blood magic tearing through the monster's hand. She let go of the weapon wedged deep in the flesh, crouched and rolled over the ground to avoid the swipe of the monster's other hand.

Kate came up with a stumbling step and raised her arms, the monster's kick crashing into her. She slid over the ground and felt the bruised skin and muscle of her forearms. But her bones weren't broken. She grinned, seeing the creature now, illuminated by two bright flashlights. She saw the sword of her ally, a flowing mist of gold moving over the blood covered steel. They were hunting now. And this, was their prey.

She unsheathed her hammer and charged it with sound, circling the large and groaning monster as her ally did the same.

The creature ripped out the large axe stuck in its hand, the weapon clattering to the ground before the monster roared at them, the sound reverberating through the hall.

Kate felt the vibrations, felt herself tense up, felt a deep part of her screaming. Monsters in the dark, halls belonging not to the living but home to death itself.

Kate watched the monster and her ally. She gripped her hammer and then she moved, for she did not come into the halls of death, to fear.

Kate shouted, stepping closer to get the monster's attention. And it worked. She watched it close the distance, Kate raising her hammer length wise and with both hands to block the claws, the impact pushing her back, the bloodied claws scraping into the steel. She heard her ally roar, his blade flashing up with golden light before it slashed into the left leg of the monster. The weapon cut deep but not quite through.

Kate heard the monster screech.

It took back its claw, striking around itself with both its mangled hand and its working one, Kate ducking low. She saw her ally block a wild strike with his sword, the weapon out again. The monster staggered back, nearly losing its footing with the gashing wound on its left leg.

Kate followed, swinging her hammer at the knee of its right leg, her magic surging through the bone and she heard something shatter, nearly losing her grip against the exuded force of her strike.

She couldn't react in time to dodge the strike of its injured arm, the weight and strength of the monster crashing into her shoulder.

Kate went down to one knee, seeing her ally's sword flashing up again with golden light. He did not intercept the clawed hand of the monster coming his way but instead halted his weapon mid strike and crouched low, slashing upwards with a roar, and through the arm, this time all the way.

Kate stood up, looking at the creature's back before she swung, her hammer aimed at the same knee she had struck before. Again, her steel hit with all her strength and blood magic alike, this time breaking through. She watched the monster fall, its half cut leg unstable as it caught itself with its one remaining mangled arm. Kate stepped aside when she heard her ally charge, the tip of his greatsword punched into the head of the monster. He held on when she swung her hammer at the back of the monster's head with a shout, driving its skull deeper onto the blade. She swung again, seeing the blade punch out from the back of its skull with a tearing sound.

Its arm fell to the bloodied floor, limp and lifeless.

Her ally set the monster down onto its back before he set his armored boot down on its head, and ripped out the large blade of his weapon.

Monsters in the dark, halls belonging not to the living but home to death itself.

And they were here, to hunt.