

## Chapter 85 Once more into the fray

The rest of the afternoon and evening passed quickly, filled with food, music, and card games. But Kate could feel that the general atmosphere was one of foreboding. The games were played with little real enjoyment, the music heard but not felt. The activities were meant to pass the time, to distract, to take their minds off of the next day.

Sleep didn't come easy for Kate that night, and she could hear that she wasn't the only one, people turning in their sleeping bags, some of them whispering to one another.

She slept close to Logan, at some point moving a little closer so that her back touched his arms.

"Can't sleep?" he asked in a tired whisper.

Kate turned around to face him. She gently reached out and touched his hand, then held onto it.

He shifted slightly and moved his arm to touch hers, holding her hand in his. "Focus on your breaths."

She could feel the warmth he exuded. It felt good, grounding.

"Big day tomorrow. But now you're just here," he said. "You can hear everyone around, trying to sleep, or already asleep."

She did, focusing on the sounds of everyone else, all of them people who had faced the undead, who had fought together, who had survived.

"Now go closer. You can feel my hands, and you can feel your own," he said.

Kate did. And she yawned, then sighed. She couldn't see him in the dark but she was glad he was there. She was glad that they were fighting together. That they both had found the castle.

"Thank you," she said. "For fighting with me."

"Don't say that like I'll die tomorrow," Logan said.

She smiled and held his hand a little closer. "Just don't fuck up," she said, feeling warmer now, and tired.

"I won't." She wasn't sure if he said those words, slowly drifting off to sleep.

They woke up early in the morning, Kate's clock suggesting that dawn hadn't even broken. She could hear the snoring sounds of several people, the dozens of fighters of the Union sleeping away while a few of them stood guard.

She made sure not to wake up Logan.

Getting up, she quietly put on her armor, grabbed her pack and weapons, and left the large basement of the villa that the Union had redesigned into an impromptu sleeping hall.

The air down there was terrible but she really didn't feel like complaining about that after all the battles in the previous weeks.

She soon stepped out into the garden, greeting the few people she saw on guard duty.

The air was fresh and crisp, Kate's breath leaving a mist in the air as she stretched out in the open. The sky was still overcast and gray. Faint music played from a nearby radio that someone had set up.

"Kate, right?" one of the guards said, a woman who looked like she was a few years younger than Kate. Pale skin, brown eyes and hair of the same color, braided. She wore a black jacket that neither looked reinforced nor otherwise modified. Just a warm winter jacket, skiing pants and hiking boots.

"Yes," Kate said.

The woman smiled and walked up to her, offering her hand. She had an assault rifle on her back and a pistol on her belt but no other weapons as far as Kate could tell. "I'm Sophie. We haven't met."

Kate shook her hand. "Good to meet you, Sophie."

The woman kept shaking her hand, moving her face a little closer before she glanced behind herself and back to Kate. She spoke in a whisper. "Some of the others said that you're fucking crazy. Like, properly mad. Out of control. A Berserker and maniac." She looked into Kate's eyes. "Is that true?"

Her gaze felt intense but Kate held it. "Yeah. I'm nuts. Thinking about ripping off your head right now, actually," she said in the driest voice she could manage.

Sophie still shook her hand.

"That's a joke," Kate added.

Sophie breathed out. "Oh thank god. I was just thinking that maybe asking the supposed madwoman if she's mad might've not been the best idea after all."

"Maybe not," Kate said and smiled.

Sophie let go of her hand now and stretched. "Shit weather still, huh?" She looked up and then back to Kate. "Someone said you carried one of those large machine guns? And just used it like a normal rifle?"

"The benefits of leveling up Strength," Kate said.

Sophie grinned. "You didn't deny it, nice. Would've loved to see that. And yeah, it's a bummer I have to be reasonable and invest into magical shit stats." She sighed. "I wish I was a fighter or something, big hammer maybe. But then, magic is cool too, or a bow. Ah, I just can't decide still. It's good that there are Classes with a restricted amount of skills you know? Otherwise I'd have like fifty level one abilities." She laughed.

Kate smiled at that and stretched again. She liked Sophie. The conversation made the weight she'd felt about today lighten ever so slightly. "I wonder how effective fifty level one skills would be."

"I mean maybe if they synergized, like, really well? But then they'd all probably require resources too," Sophie said and nodded to herself. "Ready for the dungeon then? Gonna carry one of those machine guns?"

Kate smiled. "Yeah, I'm ready. Not sure on the machine gun part. I'm sure Valery has plans for how we do things."

“She is one of those, yes,” Sophie said and rolled her eyes.

Kate raised a brow.

“A planner,” Sophie said, making a retching gesture.

Kate smiled. “Plans do have their use but yeah, I get it, doing things without one can be pretty fun and freeing.”

“Exactly! You get me,” Sophie said and hugged her, then took a quick step back. “Sorry, maybe hugging the mad berserker is not a great idea either,” she said and laughed again. “Shit.” She looked to the gate of the garden. “I’m kind of on guard duty.” She gave Kate a set of thumbs ups. “Well, was good talking. Counting on you and your friend today! We’ll smash it.”

Kate nodded and watched as the woman rushed over to the wall before she jumped up and looked out from the grated section on top, murmuring something about binoculars before she found them on her belt.

She would’ve liked to feel the same optimism about their prospects as Sophie did. But no matter what, she would do what she could do. Thinking back on the first Emissary that she saw, Kate breathed in deep, feeling her blood pulse. Then she breathed out. *Let’s get ready then.*

The other combatants woke in the following hours, the atmosphere solemn as they made their last preparations to go out there again. Everyone carried extra ammo, explosives, tinctures of life, spare food, climbing equipment, headlamps, and whatever else they personally needed for their Class abilities or thought otherwise important.

The stronger combatants were tasked with carrying three of the heavy machine guns they’d recovered from city hall, with a reasonable amount of ammo for them. Space was the main issue as the group required to be more mobile than in the battle on the previous day. They took no artillery equipment due to the underground nature of the dungeon, but they did take grenades and experimental explosives from Theodor and potentially other crafters that Kate didn’t know. Certainly a risk but plenty of them had been used in the previous week and none of them blew up prematurely. She hoped the trend would continue to stay that way.

Kate herself had her pack and armor ready, her Glock holstered, and her axe and mace strapped to her pack. She checked her tinctures of life, then reached down and raised the loaded fifty caliber machine gun assigned to her. The same one she’d used before.

“No tripod,” Logan said as he joined her out in the garden of the villa, a few of the others glancing her way and murmuring about the weight of their loadout. Logan carried his usual weapons, an impressive jangle on top of his already broad set of enchanted armor.

“Yeah, I ripped it off while using my magic. Felt like it was in the way,” she said.

He grunted, then chuckled. “I can see that, yeah. If you use it like that, it very well might be in the way. Just make sure to aim well.”

“I thought the entire point of a machine gun with this caliber was that you didn’t have to aim at all,” Kate said.

“With well, I meant in the direction of our enemies and not our allies,” he said and checked his shotgun.

“I’ll manage that much,” Kate said with a smile, very aware of the people around them who listened to their conversation. “Still got shells for that?”

Logan checked the chamber and patted one of the pouches on his belt. “Not many. None in the police station or military storage but I might as well use them now. It’s a good gun in those corridors.”

“It sure is,” Kate said, looking down at her own massively oversized weapon.

“Are we ready then?” Valery asked as she stepped out into the open, the woman covered in enchanted armor, spear and shield on her back, assault rifle in her hands. She raised her radio. “Dispatch, count?”

*“All teams ready and confirmed connection. Gunners and radio relay teams are ready. Operation Dungeon is good to go, Dispatch out.”*

“You heard her,” Valery said and started towards the villa gates. “Let’s go kill some undead.”

Kate glanced at Logan as they started to move out. She could feel the weight of her weapons, felt the quiet resolve of the people around her, all of them geared up and ready to fight. She felt some pride as they made their way through the snow covered and overcast city. Pride in what they’d all accomplished, alone and together. They were just one group of many, she was sure of it. Humans fighting back against the darkness that had swallowed their homes. She didn’t know what was waiting for them in the dungeon below Falstadt but it was time to push back, and she trusted everyone here to stand, and fight, against the undead, and all manner of monsters that may be lurking in the depths.

She watched on as two teams took the lead, checking the alleys and streets leading to the dungeon entrance they’d previously used to travel into the city. To avoid Wyverns or larger groups of undead. Now they didn’t fear the fliers, and they were informed by scouts, cameras, and radios about the location of hordes.

*“Around three dozen undead below the entrance, two ogres, otherwise normal undead,”* someone informed through the radio.

Kate grasped her gun.

*“Union Saw and Hammer, get high ground on the surrounding buildings. Wait for my signal before deploying explosives into the group.”* Valery’s voice came from the radio.

Kate and Logan waited with several other groups in an otherwise empty street as the instructed combatants moved out.

Around ten minutes later, a set of dulled explosions resounded in the distance.

*“Explosives detonated. Taking out stragglers, you’re clear to move in, the ogres are down,”* Lewis reported.

Kate followed the others in their brisk walk, rifles and magic at the ready as they entered the street leading to the elevated dungeon entrance. A last set of gunshots echoed out as the last undead were shot down, the street blood covered, bits and pieces of flesh strewn about.

It looked like a massacre but after what Kate had seen the previous day, the thirty or so corpses were hardly worth a mention.

*“Exterminators and anyone with vertical movement skills, to the front,”* Valery said.

Kate joined a few others and glanced at them, then up to the broken in wall of a large office building, the dungeon merged with the lower sections of the structure. “Lots of undead in there, waiting,” she said.

“What’s your assessment?” Valery asked.

“They’ll probably rush us as soon as we’re up there,” Kate said and readied her gun. “I only hear weaker variants so far.” She flicked on her headlamp and walked closer to the wall. “I’ll take the lead.”

“You heard her,” Valery said and stepped aside.

Kate checked the height and activated her Reaper Jump, power flooding her legs before she surged up and landed in the opening with a slight crouch. Her weapons jangled slightly before she straightened up, the light from her headlamp flooding the dark hall and corridor leading deeper into the dungeon. She raised her machine gun, looking at the tightly packed undead raising their hands against the sudden light, the first groans and screeches sounding out before they started charging her way.

She fired, drowning out their sounds as her gun roared to life and tore into the charging mass of undead.

Bits and pieces of flesh and sprays of blood flashed in the light of her headlamp and the muzzle flare of her gun. She fired until she couldn’t see any more movement. Silence returned to the dark hall, the last bits of undead falling, a few injured ones on the edges groaning as they pulled themselves closer with their remaining limbs. Kate glimpsed the head of a dead Emissary among the downed monsters, the other combatants stepping past her as they shot at the surviving creatures with their assault rifles on single-fire.

Kate lowered her gun, then set it down and turned around, stepping closer to the edge before she grabbed one of the ropes the others had brought up. She threw it down and held fast as the Union fighters started climbing. She noted that neither the machine gun fire nor the close proximity assault rifle shots had injured her ears in the slightest, either due to her high Vitality or her resistance against sound. Probably a bit of both, she thought, helping up the first of the combatants with her free hand, the others stepping up to help the rest of the Union teams.

A few of them, she saw, were already setting up a small radio relay, to hopefully make sure they’d have a connection to Dispatch even as they delved deeper into the dungeon. She hoped they’d brought enough of them.

Valery stepped up next to them, Logan as well joining her side.

“They didn’t rush out once they heard the first explosions,” he said.

“They’re getting more cautious,” Valery said.

“Or they want us to go farther inside,” Alexander said as he joined them.

“Possibly,” Valery said.

“Do we delay?” Alexander asked.

Valery glanced at the others, then shook her head. “No. We came here to wipe out the undead. We move on.”

Alexander nodded, a few others motioning to their teams.

“How’s your ammo looking?” Logan asked.

Kate glanced at her gun on the ground. “Probably good for another few of those groups.”

They got everyone up, a few people remaining on the surface to act as scouts and to make sure the most exposed relays wouldn’t be damaged and kept running.

The rest moved on with Kate and Logan now taking the lead, their levels, and mainly their Vitality, armor, and resistances still a large step above most everyone else. With the size of the corridors, they could fight most efficiently with around six people firing rifles next to each other, or one Kate wielding her heavy weapons.

It didn’t take long until they reached the stairwell down into the lower section of the dungeon. Kate didn’t hesitate, listening to her surroundings as she stepped down, her headlamp turned off now, the dim red light of the red glowing vein like marks illuminating the broad and blood covered stone steps. She reached the bottom and stepped into another hallway, the air a little heavier, the mostly white walls and floor a little more bloody.

She heard the groans of undead, and walked onward.

They took out a few more large groups of monsters before Kate had to reload, two of the combatants moving up to do that for her.

All the while, the Union mapped out the corridors.

They soon found one of the Celeavir, a flesh growth growing against one of the walls. A type of creature that Kate and Logan had fought and killed before.

This time, they were more prepared.

Logan threw one of their explosives close to the creature, the loud detonation ripping through the corridors, eliciting distant screeches.

Kate could feel the vibrations, walking up to the dead monster still clinging to the wall, bits of fire dancing on its body. “We’ve got incoming, sounds like more than a hundred,” she said and pointed to the hallway ahead.

“Gunners, set up!” Valery said, two teams rushing past her with the heavy machine guns before they set them down, a floodlight added between the two and ready to be turned on.

Kate watched from the side as the undead charged down the corridor.

Their weapons were effective. But she itched to get in closer. To fight not with machines but with steel, blood, and magic.

Logan waited next to her when the floodlight turned on, the screeching sounds of several hundred undead drowned out by rattling machine gun fire, the creatures wiped out in controlled bursts several seconds long, none of them left standing less than a minute later, their group ready to move on.

“It feels too easy,” Kate said after a while, Logan and her having taken the lead again.

He glanced her way, the two of them coming up on another set of stairs that led down.

“I agree,” he said. “I suspect these groups were just meant to wear us down. Stay focused.”