

## Chapter 44 Shoveling

The board game ended with Melusine winning, Bert grumbling to himself but seeming more impressed than annoyed.

Kate had lost interest after a while, most of the game simply a matter of random chance.

*A way to pass the time*, she thought, finishing her cup of coffee to the sounds of smooth jazz. “What’s the plan?” she asked.

“We should discuss that when everyone is awake and here,” Melusine said.

Kate stood up and joined Logan. “Mind if I help?”

“Not at all,” he said and quickly showed her the fastest way to fill up the Glock magazines.

The bullets were small compared to the bigger ones she saw. They soon moved on to the larger magazines for the rifles and finally to the eight biggest ones for the two sniper rifles. Kate had forgotten the various names already but feeling the weight of one of the bullets compared to the ones for the pistols, she could only imagine the kind of damage they could do.

She hoped they would never find a use for them but at the same time, she was glad they had them around. And more importantly, that Logan knew how to handle the weapons.

They were close to done when the others joined from the ground floor, Jon having put away his reading glasses, Ethan and Grey with a steaming mug in their hands each, the former with a blanket around his shoulders.

“That’s a lot of bullets,” Ethan said as he looked at the magazines.

“Gone faster than one might think,” Logan said before he looked up to meet the young man’s eyes.

Jon sat down on one of the chairs and cleared his throat. “Good morning everyone,” he said and looked at each of them. “Quite a week we’ve had. I wanted to discuss a few priorities before everyone gets to share individual concerns and ideas. Does that sound acceptable?”

Nobody complained as he waited.

“Thank you. Now that we’re nearly snowed in, far too early in the year, coupled with the continued existence of monsters and magic, and the continued absence of the military, I think it’s best that we planned for a longer term stay in this castle. Again, same as last time we talked about our situation, everyone is free to leave and share their wishes and concerns. So far, we’ve managed to survive because of all of you. Those of us who fought the monsters, those of us who went out there and gathered whatever we could need, and those of us who stayed here, cooking, healing, sorting loot, and preparing whatever we can.

“Melusine’s healing and Eloise’s heat manipulation abilities have changed our situation. Coupled of course with all of the fighting abilities and magic you four have unlocked,” he said and looked at Kate, Logan, Ethan, and Grey. “I got my Class as well, late last night. It’s called Keeper, and it’s supposed to help me manage... well, a keep, so to say. A home. A base, or something along those lines. Grey, you can go over the skills so far later, I have documented everything. Only three skills so far, an active one that lets me infuse a projectile of a weapon I’m about to fire with magic, and

two passive skills, one which increases my ability to learn and retain knowledge, as well as recall it more easily, and the second one increases my defense against physical and magical attacks while inside or in the vicinity of the keep I guard.

“The skills are at a low level still but I feel like they’re helping me already. The Class specific stat is called Accuracy, related somewhat to my Intelligence stat and helping me keep things accurate. Be it shooting a crossbow, or recalling how many bolts we have left.” He took in a deep breath and sighed.

“Now. This week has been hectic. A lot of change has been forced into our lives. I wanted to say thank you. Everyone. For everything you have done so far, everything you have endured.” He smiled. “We have managed to survive for an entire week. And I plan to keep that streak going. Besides our personal wishes, there are a few things I think are imperative.

“First. The walls of this castle coupled with the armory and everything we have managed to gather so far is a major advantage and I believe we should focus on improving our standing here, with both defenses and resources. We should also familiarize ourselves with the surrounding forests and the castle itself. This is our home ground now, no matter where you four might strike next, no matter what or who attacks us. I think it’s best if we make our stand here. Thoughts?”

Kate didn’t disagree. They had worked hard for what they already had here. The valley had been bombed and they had no idea as to the state of anything beyond the mountain ranges bordering it. Traveling even just through the forest brought the risk of monster attacks with it and finding better shelter, then gaining a foothold even close to what they had in Keilberg Castle presented a ridiculous risk.

“It’s a good place to stay,” she said.

“We have food and weapons, water and shelter. Heat from Eloise, and fire from Ethan. We have skills and tools to defend ourselves, medicine and healing magic to recover our injuries. I agree, compared to the chaos when this all started, I feel more confident in our survival,” Logan said.

“Don’t forget my important skills,” Allison said. She still had wyvern parts in her hand but had stopped her work to listen.

“We will incorporate everyone, and future survivors we may find,” Jon continued. “And we will find out what they can reasonably contribute.” He paused. “The second thing we have learned is the importance and the power of our newfound Classes and the abilities and changes that come with it all. No matter what, I think it’s important that we keep working on those skills and Classes, both to level up our stats but just as much to increase our available tools to both defend ourselves, and to make life in this castle more comfortable.” He paused when Celeste walked over to him and sat down, grabbing onto his arm. Jon smiled and brushed her hair before his expression returned to the serious look from before.

“Now, I know that most of those who have unlocked their Classes have abilities related to combat. You have already confirmed your wish to continue fighting, I just want to reiterate that there is always the option to stay here. Right now, only defending is necessary for our survival. Going out there and gathering both information and resources, as well as levels from combat itself, is highly beneficial but not strictly required.”

“We don’t know what else is out there,” Logan said. “I will keep fighting until we know we’re safe.”

“Same,” Ethan said with a grin.

Kate smiled as she looked at him. She agreed with them but didn't feel the need to say it.

"M... me too," Grey said.

"You too, buddy," Ethan said and lightly punched his arm.

"The third thing I wanted to mention is our current active situation. Both the snow, and everything we have gathered so far. A lot is going on out there. A lot has been... lost. I know that you may feel angry or overwhelmed. But now that we have shelter and resources, I believe that we should plan our moves well, and that we should prepare every strike as well as we can. We have a foothold here, and compared to most of the monsters we've encountered so far, we have the ability to think and plan. So we shall think and plan.

"The early snowfall is strange and suggests possible changes to our weather and the climate itself. However it seems the snow is just snow. We have heat from Eloise but we should set up the wood stove to not rely fully on her abilities. Next is our snowed in castle. We have a shovel in the cellar and Logan informed me there is another one in the trailer hooked up to the truck. We should clear paths to the barracks, Bert's home, and the watchtower closest to the gate. From the battlements, we'll be able to get a better picture of the situation outside. First, we should set up the stove and clear a way to the trailer to get what you have gathered, Eloise and myself can start documenting and storing everything away by then. We will continue to check the radios for transmissions but until the blizzard has settled, I think it's best that we remain in the castle. That's it for me. Feel free to share your thoughts."

"That's a long ass speech, man," Ethan said. "I could just burn the snow."

"We'll figure something out without flooding the basement," Logan said. "This place has an attic, right? We could at least check the surroundings better before opening the door. Any windows?"

Bert grunted. "No windows," he said. "But a hatch that opens up. It's been stuck for a while but you young folks are strong. Some more weapons up there too, not nice looking enough for the glass cases."

"How do we get up there?" Logan asked.

"Up there," Kate said and pointed at the ceiling where a small square section looked different. Nearly three meters up and it didn't look like it was large enough to have a ladder. "I could jump up."

"I'll help Grey up," Logan said.

"I'll start cooking soon. A veggie broth, infused with mana," Eloise said and smiled.

"Mana broth," Grey murmured and smiled.

"I'll get the shovel, let's see how things look from up there. Floor won't collapse, old man?" Kate asked.

He grumbled something incoherent.

"Grey and Ethan," Logan said and smiled. "I'll put away the magazines. Let's get to work."

Melusine crossed her arms in front of her. "One thing I wanted to say as well. Jon talked about us now having the ability to plan and prepare things but just as much, we now have the resources to take our time to relax and recover, to process everything that has happened so far. This is not a

suggestion, but healer's orders. I'm sure there will be more fights to come, if you run towards them or not, so take your time to relax and recover. Eloise, when is dinner?"

"Seven alright for everyone?" the girl asked.

Nobody complained.

"Seven it is. After that, no more work. At least for today," Melusine said. "Agreed?"

"What about skill training?" Grey asked.

"The monster attacks so far have all happened at night, and we will be more effective with our resources available," Logan said.

"Only necessary work," Kate agreed. They had the basics here already. As much as she wanted to rush out there to find survivors and to kill every monster that walked in their valley, she had learned her lesson time and time again in the past. Taking it slow when she could was required. To push past her limits when she had to. As frustrating as that often was.

"No other concerns?" Melusine asked.

"Clear the path to the barracks first," Allison said. "And can you get the stove working before you start exploring the attic? I'm cold."

*No Class yet*, Kate thought. She didn't find it to be particularly warm nor cold inside the armory. "Ethan, let's check it out quickly," she said.

"You want my fire magic?" he asked, raising his brows.

"With supervision," Kate added but smiled, leading the way down. She heard Logan suggest they clear the path to the truck first so that the others could start putting away everything.

Kate quickly cleared out the wood stove of any debris that remained in it and started chucking in wood. When she had a small pile, she stuffed in a bit of paper and let Ethan work his magic.

A flame appeared above his palm.

She raised her brows when she saw him hover the flickering fire towards the pile around a meter away and inside the massive built in stove.

Ethan placed the flame and closed his eyes, the light burning a little brighter for a while, singeing the wood and setting the paper alight. It took a few minutes but they soon had a fire going.

Kate kept watching to make sure the air flow was working, closing the small metal door when she was satisfied. "It will take a while to heat up with that size. Just check and throw in wood to adjust it."

"Oh I will do that," Allison said, herself watching from the nearby couch and covered in several blankets. "Wish it had a glass door to see the flames."

*I disagree*, Kate thought but she knew that opinion was biased.

Kate watched as Logan raised Grey towards the hatch of the attic, the young man easily staying balanced coupled with Logan's help before he opened the entrance, grabbed on, and pulled himself up.

*That looked damn near fluid*, she thought and walked up to Logan. "Now me."

He raised a brow at her but went down to one knee, both hands linked together to provide a foothold.

Kate refrained from any knight comparisons and focused on staying balanced instead. A moment later, she held on to the open ceiling, pulling herself up with one hand. Just because she could.

*Would love for Maurice to see me now*, she thought, the grin quickly fading. *The now.*

She still tuned out the sounds of the strong winds and rushing river from beyond their sturdy stone home but in the attic covered by the low wooden roof, she could hear the noise get louder. Considerably so. Floorboards creaked as she walked in a crouch and entire sections of the old roof were rattling. Kate gave the cramped attic a quick glance before she turned and crouched down above the hatch. She unsheathed her hammer and lowered it down towards Ethan and Logan, seeing Jon hand the large man a shovel. Behind her, she could hear the click of a headlamp, Grey taking a closer look around.

"You want to pull him up?" Logan asked.

"You know who you're talking to, right?" Ethan asked and reached up his hand to grab onto the hammer.

Kate pulled, slowly, to make sure he wouldn't hit his head. She got him close enough for him to hold onto the floor before she offered her hand and pulled him up the rest of the way. She could see Ethan's eyes go wide and his cheeks slightly flushed when he was close to her, the man shaking his head and stepping aside. She smiled to herself but didn't comment.

She crouched down again and looked at Logan. "Want to have a look too?"

"Should I?" he asked.

"Why not?" Kate said and dangled the hammer towards the heavily built man. "Come on, big one. Hold on to the hammer."

Logan looked at her, then to the shovel before he set down the tool and then grabbed on.

This time, Kate had to use both her hands and legs, making sure the wood was solid enough before she pulled.

She rolled her shoulders when Logan was up in the attic and smiled. "Not as heavy as the trailer."

"We get it, you're strong," Ethan said. "Ma'am," he added.

Kate raised a brow at the look Logan gave her. "What? Inspired?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. I just... imagined what kind of weapons you could wield."

Kate smiled. "That wording doesn't exactly help."

"You know what I meant," he said in a serious tone.

"I honestly don't," Kate said and turned on her headlamp.

"I don't know how useful much of this equipment will be," Grey said. "Most of it is rusty."

"Old man can't take care of the shit up here," Ethan said. "How would he get up?"

Kate thought of a ladder but then she wouldn't advise Bert to use one either. She supposed that Ethan had a point. Looking through the equipment, she quickly agreed with Grey as well. She supposed the rusted equipment could still be presented as historical artifacts but they could certainly not be used in the same way their other gear could.

"Found the hatch," Logan said, wood groaning slightly as he pushed against a section of the roof.

Kate joined him but didn't find an angle to help.

He pushed the hatch open a moment later, a brunt of cold wind entering the attic, twirling snow flakes illuminated by their headlamps with the outside gray and barely visible.

"Close the hatch!" Jon called out from below.

Grey rushed over and did just that, leaving the attic closed off.

Ethan shuddered. "The walls help more than I thought."

"Not super well insulated but they're thick," Kate said as she walked up to the open window.

"Can't see a thing," Logan said.

She clicked her tongue. "Me neither. But I can't hear any monsters. Can you all quiet down for a moment?"

She listened for a while, soon hearing Grey step next to her, likely doing the same with his wind magic.

"Nothing either. There's just the storm," Grey said.

"Agreed. Leave the attic stuff for the others to sort out once we have a ladder?" she suggested.

Logan gave her a nod. "Let's get to shoveling."

"I start," Kate said.

They closed the window and hatch before they made space next to the armory entrance. Opening the door greeted Kate with more wind and snow, and weight pushing against the heavy wood. The snow reached damn near to her head already and more was falling above. "Hold the door for me and open slowly at my command," she said and angled the shovel through the thin gap as soon as the others put their weight against the door.

A few minutes later, Kate had removed the top half of the snow in front of the door and they could open it fully. She first cleared the tiny avalanche that entered their new home and moved onward from there.

She kept her enhanced hearing up and used her echo location every so often to make sure there were no nasty surprises waiting below or on top of the snow. But it was just that. Snow.

Kate gripped the shovel and smashed the front bit into the white powder, raised it up, and sent it flying to the left and over. Again. And again, taking more with each pull as she felt she could lift more. *Fresh and powdery*, she thought with a smile, barely feeling the cold all around her as she got into a groove.

“Kate? Are you alright?” Logan called out.

She turned and saw him standing in the doorway, an open corridor leading through the snow towards him, the slightly frozen over cobblestone below visible. She blinked her eyes. *Did I?*

Several meters had been cleared, the walls of snow on either side reaching her shoulders. Looking down at her hands, she saw the tool. *No way. All of that? In a few minutes?*

*I’m not even winded.*

She had just focused and had gotten to work. Walking back with raised brows, she looked at the man, dim candle and torchlight illuminating the room behind him, the cracks of burning wood audible. “Did I get lost or something? Activate my skills? How long have I been out here?”

“Just a few minutes,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve seen anyone move that much snow before without some kind of plow. Didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“Well, you did anyway,” she said.

“No monsters?” he asked.

“Not so far,” she said.

“Grey will stand guard, I’ll eat and take over once you’re spent. If there’s anything left for me to do,” Logan said.

Kate grinned, turned around, and started whistling a tune.

She found the task to be fun. Meditative and fulfilling at the same time, at least now that it was useful to shovel. *And the worst I can find are just monsters.*