

Chapter 70 Apocalypse Meetings

“That’s some impressive magic,” Logan said after they had walked past the fence. “If not for you, she could’ve shot me several times before I would’ve even noticed she was there.”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “It’s good she’s on our side. At least for the time being.”

“I’m more thinking on potential counter measures. Because her being able to do those things, there’s a chance of monsters being able to do the same,” he said.

Or people that are not on our side, Kate thought.

She checked around a corner and saw the large office structure they’d first found the group of human survivors in. She motioned to Logan that the way was clear.

Someone opened the door when they were halfway there and waved. Bastian, Kate realized, the tall former police officer equipped with his blue riot gear and axe.

“Good to see you two,” he said when they were drawing close. “No issues on the way?”

“None,” Logan said.

Kate nodded to Aisha who was standing a few meters farther back, the black haired woman nodding towards Kate with a confident look in her eyes.

“Welcome back. Good to see you alive,” Aisha said. “The others are waiting.”

Kate could hear them talk, several conversations coming from the office they’d used as a temporary shelter, the various conversations suggesting there were at least five people in there. Her eyes went wide when she recognized one of their voices. Her breath caught in her throat as she rushed past and pushed open the door, the conversations dying as she looked around the room. She could feel the tension rise, the people glancing at her with apprehension but she instead focused on Lewis.

He looked the same as he always did, a casual smile, kind eyes, and massive eyebrows to counter the lack of hair on his scalp. His firefighter gear was replaced with a black biker jacket, jeans with knee pads, wandering boots, and fingerless gloves. He stood up when he saw her, laughing as he spread out his massive arms, his height and width damn near the same, the former just below Kate’s.

“By fuck’s sake, it really is you!” he walked over and grabbed her in a hug.

And Kate hugged him back, tears coming to her eyes.

“Gotten stronger too, I see! Impressive,” he said and laughed again, letting go. Lewis wiped at his eye. “Damn dust,” he said. “So glad to see you made it. When I’d heard, I knew I’d had to come and see, to make sure it was you.”

“It’s me,” Kate said, still touching his shoulder. She smiled from ear to ear, ignoring the others in the room for now. She was elated to know that one of her crew had survived. Then she gulped and stared at him.

He stared back. “Fred is with the Union. Got hurt badly a few days back, nearly knocked out a few healers when he heard you were out there. Sorry to say that Maurice didn’t make it. Ogre got him a

few weeks back but he fought that damn thing near toe to toe, wouldn't be here without him. Veronica made it out, she's with the Union too, resumed her work like nothing happened. No word on Brian, Lenny, or anyone else."

Or anyone else. Kate felt her smile wavering. All the people she had worked with, brave men and women all of them. She could hear a ringing noise coming to her right ear, then steadied herself. Fred had made it, and so had Lewis, and Veronica. Maurice had fought. Had died. She breathed again and focused. There would be time for grief, time to work through all this but that time was not now. "Thank you, Lewis," she said and hugged him again. "It's really good to see you."

He patted her back. "Girl, it's good to see you too. All that dust in here, can hardly breathe!" He laughed again and slightly pushed at her.

Kate let go and smiled, moving her attention from Lewis to the other present people, one of them approaching with a professional smile.

A woman taller than Kate, dressed in nondescript gray and black winter clothing. She carried a metal spear in her left hand, its broad tip blackened with dried blood. A shield was fastened onto her back, round and slightly bent. Neither looked like mere makeshift weapons but tools made for war, much like Kate's own axe and hammer. The woman looked at Kate with sharp eyes, her brown hair up in an orderly bun. She waited until Kate and Lewis had separated somewhat to interject with her hand stretched out. "Valery Lang, representing the Falstadt Union in this meeting, it's good to make your acquaintance."

Kate shook her hand. "Kate Lindgren."

Valery gave her a look and a nod, then moved on to Logan before she took a step back again. "I've heard quite the story about you two. Thank you, in the name of the Union, for stepping in and helping out Bastian's team when they were here. Have you eaten? Coffee, water?"

"We ate, nothing for me," Logan said.

"I'll take the coffee," Kate said. "Black, no sugar."

"I'll get that," one of them said, a woman in her thirties with blue eyes and blonde, near silver hair. She smiled at Kate with a warm and calm expression that did not at all fit what was going on outside of these walls.

"Thank you, Latia," Valery said and gestured to the table. "I think it's best we don't delay much further, if you don't have any pressing matters, I'd like to start with a short set of introductions."

"Quite a few pressing matters," Logan said. "But that's why we're here."

Valery smiled and set aside her spear and shield, sitting down at the head of the table before a man in similarly nondescript winter clothes handed her a set of papers. She gestured for the others to sit down, Latia setting up a gas cooker and a coffee filter.

Kate set her axe against the wall, choosing a chair to the side to let Logan take the seat opposite Valery.

Logan set down his helmet on the table and opened his pack to get out a notebook and a pen. "I'm Logan Westering. Military experience. Social worker. Past level twenty on my main Class, Sacred Exterminator, started as Paladin. I don't suppose hobbies matter much in this meeting?"

Valery took a few notes. "Thank you." She glanced at the man who had handed her the papers.

He looked at Kate and Logan. “Alexander Brecht. Certified nurse. Past level twenty, healer and lightning mage.”

Lightning, Kate thought and looked at him. She couldn't quite place if she felt intimidated by him. She locked eyes with him and they looked at each other for a few seconds until the next person talked, both of them glancing instead at the woman. Annika, another healer, that and some kind of metal manipulation with needles and wires. Not yet level twenty supposedly. She talked in a calm manner, not sharing more information than the others had. Next came Lewis, at level twenty with a Class favoring different tools and brute force, not surprising to Kate. He did share his hobbies, those being fishing, kayaking, snowboarding, wandering, and wine collecting, though he did make sure to inform them that he was happy to pick up more in the future.

After that, a middle aged tall and thin man, introduced himself as Theodor, a former chemist at the very plant they'd met at. A crafter, likely brought due to the territory. He looked and sounded nervous and jumpy. Kate wasn't sure if it was due to the proximity to potential undead or because of the present people.

Bastian and Aisha followed, neither yet at level twenty.

Three healers already, Kate noted, though she also noted that all of them had some alternative abilities that would give them at least some ability to defend themselves.

“Does anybody else want a cup of coffee?” Latia asked when it was her turn to introduce herself.

“One please,” Valery said, with Aisha and Annika confirming as well.

“Coming riiight up,” Latia said and smiled at Kate and Logan. “I'm a bard, level sixteen with different ways to disorient and damage monsters, and with ways to empower my allies. Funnily enough, I use my flute for all that... practical but I would've preferred my harp. The thought is quite beautiful, don't you think? Ridding the world of evil, with the magic of a harp.” She glanced around at the various people and smiled, then poured the first cup of coffee.

“Thank you,” Valery said. “Have you two heard one of the radio messages I have shared?”

“We have,” Logan said.

“Good. I'm Valery. Past level twenty. While I appreciate the introductions not taking up too much time, I want to recognize the importance of skills gained in any kinds of hobbies to the situation we've found ourselves in. We have a wide variety of knowledge at the Union and we've started categorizing anything that could be useful.” She glanced at Kate.

“Are you the leader of the Union?” Logan asked.

Kate watched Valery closely.

“No,” Valery said simply. “We're preparing legislation based on the Austrian law, including democratic values based on voting and representation. There have been plenty of discussions but there will be more on specifics. Our current goal is that every member of the Union gets a say, with issues prioritized and dealt with.”

Valery sighed slightly, then moved a hand through her hair.

“The state of shock has shifted towards grief and anger but as a silver lining, the undead and other monsters provide a great way to direct those frustrations outwards. It will be difficult to build a sustainable base line for a government with the existence of essentially superpowers in the hands of everyone. Concentrating executive power will likely be an impossibility in the long term and we

want to avoid tyrannical rule or the emergence of gangs and thugs ruling by force alone, which means a stronger social bond and a set of social policies is required. It'll be a difficult challenge but one I'm sure we can face."

Logan nodded. "I appreciate the clarifications."

She's already thinking about building a new government. And it looks like she's excited for the challenge.

She might not call herself the leader of the Union, but if anyone had that title, it was her.

Latia walked over and handed a cup to Kate.

"Thanks," she said.

Kate could smell the coffee and gave it a glance. She wondered for a short moment if she could trust it but she trusted Lewis, and by extension she should've trusted the rest of the people here. She also saw that the others were already sipping from their cups. Kate sighed, a little annoyed at the fact that she was thinking this way. A part of her told her she was being paranoid but another was telling her that there would likely be Classes related to poisons now, and with people fighting to survive, there was no telling what they'd be willing to do.

She smelled the coffee, and set the cup down again without drinking, seeing Valery and the others now looking at her. "I'm Kate," she said and glanced at Logan.

He gave her a nod.

"Level thirty, started with the Berserker Class," she said and saw the glances that some of the others exchanged.

Lewis laughed out loud. "Thirty!"

Kate noted that the general reactions were surprise and elation, rather than apprehension. Even Alexander sighed and nodded to himself.

"I was a firefighter before all this started, in the same team as Lewis," she added.

"Thank you," Valery said. "Now that the introductions are done, we can start. I understand that you have a group of survivors at Keilberg Castle, you two being part of that group. We could provide security through numbers and could integrate your group into our existing and evolving structure. Is that something you'd be interested in?"

Kate glanced at Logan.

"We appreciate the offer," Logan said. "After discussing the possibility with the others, we've found that we'd like to remain independent for the time being. Our goal is to destroy monster populations in the region, to explore the magic we've been given, and to find a way to provide security to both ourselves and other survivors, you included. And with the team and experience we've established, I think we can move faster and more freely if we're not part of a larger organization."

Valery took a few notes again. "That sounds agreeable. Our goals are evolving still but we are aligned in our wish to fight back against the creatures that have decimated and now threaten humanity itself. We think that there is no need to establish territories for the time being," she said and glanced at Logan with the unsaid question.

“We remain at Keilberg Castle. And if resources become scarce, I’m sure we can arrange for trade between our groups,” Logan said.

“Agreed and we’re happy to discuss details. Other than our own store rooms, everything remains unclaimed. For now, the threat of the undead is looming and Falstadt is our highest priority. I understand that you two went into the supposed dungeon entrance?”

Logan nodded and quickly explained what they’d found. He shared details on the various undead variants, the glowing veins, the stairwell down, the way into the inner city, and the horde they’d seen in the city.

Valery took notes all the while, Bastian and Theodor doing the same.

“You really are exterminators,” Alexander said when Logan was done. He glanced at Kate. “We didn’t poison the coffee.”

Kate smiled at him. “I’m almost sure you’re not lying.”

He smiled ever so slightly.

“Give it here if you don’t want it,” Latia said. “Before it cools off entirely.”

Kate handed it over to Bastian who passed it along. She felt bad about the whole thing but still maintained that the minuscule risk wasn’t worth it. She should’ve just declined at the start. “Sorry about that.”

“No matter,” Latia said. “I like brewing coffee.”

“With all that,” Valery said. “It opens quite a few doors. Recognizing that you remain not part of the Union, how much cooperation are you willing to engage in?”

“As you said before, our goals align,” Logan said. “And while I think we’ll need some time to trust each other,” he glanced at Kate. “We’re willing to cooperate to get rid of any threats to the survivors in the Maar Valley.” He turned to another page in his notebook. “We will share the unfinished map of the undead dungeon below Falstadt, information on magic, Classes, requirements, all monster species and undead variants we’ve encountered. And we will accompany you through the corridors of the dungeon to reach the inner city. However, me and Kate are not willing to join any combat groups for any extended fighting beyond escorting you into the city. Not without an established plan and specified limited duration.”

Kate saw a few brows rise at that.

“Securing any military, gun shop, and police resources in the city that haven’t burnt down or been looted already is one of our main priorities right now, and dealing with that horde,” Logan said. “I don’t know about your current situation on supplies but while much of the city has been destroyed, there is sure to be a lot remaining.”

“Agreed,” Valery said. “The same back to you, in regards to supplies. And we’re happy to accept what you have offered, noting everything down for future repayment in a trade that would be agreeable to both of our factions. This is the first trade of such a kind for the Union, so it will take some consideration but the undead and Falstadt take precedence.”

“Agreed,” Logan said.

“Then we start with the map and the way into the city, the undead variants, and ways to face them. One of our teams is available to come with you by tomorrow morning, if you are willing to enter the city again so soon,” Valery said. “After those plans are set, we can discuss everything else.”

“Sounds good,” Logan said and got out the map.

They first poured over the map and undead, Valery and her group discussing who would join Kate and Logan and what they’d prioritize. They then went on to exchange the radio frequencies of Union communication, neither group using any kind of encryption on their devices for the time being. Finding potential survivors was a higher priority than the potential danger of sharing information with dangerous third parties.

With priorities and plans set for the next day, the conversation relaxed somewhat. Around half of the Union group would join Kate and Logan, the rest remaining at the chemical plant for at least an entire day.

“If we’re lucky, we’ll be able to get some mid range radio equipment at the police headquarters,” Bastian said. “It should be enough for us to establish a permanent radio connection with your castle.”

“Will depend on energy usage too,” Logan said. “We’re using a few small generators.”

“You won’t need much,” Bastian said and wrote down a few notes. “I just hope the building wasn’t hit directly.”

Valery looked up from the list that Logan had given her. The list that Jon had prepared. “We have cooks as well, healers, and a variety of crafters who can use their magic to help along conventional processes. We only have a few people who have gotten an alchemy Class but they haven’t been able to create anything magical yet. Enchanting is unfamiliar to us as of yet. Most of our people are non-combatants and they’ve had little to no combat exposure. It will take time to set up production, to learn and have people level up but this will help.”

Kate looked at the list they’d gotten in return. Class names and requirements, different specialized crafting Classes and magical abilities ranging from dog training and communication to glass making and carpentry. There was a prominent absence of modern technologies like computer science and vehicle manufacturing but there were Classes related to chemistry and metalworking, which would surely open a lot of magical shortcuts.

She could see the potential, if only they could keep this thing going. If they could keep people safe and supplied.

“With enchantments, we’ll have to rethink the kind of weapons we’ll want to use and manufacture,” Valery said.

Kate set the list down. She saw that Valery was deep in thought, the woman taking notes every so often. The same was true for everyone else.

She smiled to herself, crossing her arms in front of her before she closed her eyes. Whatever had caused all this, whatever had brought these monsters into their world, humanity wouldn’t go down without a fight. And here, she could feel it, was a start. *Something new*. And she knew in her heart that this was just one small part of the whole picture. She knew that there were hundreds if not tens

of thousands of other groups in distant regions doing the same, organizing, sharing information, preparing and growing, learning more about these new tools that they had gotten.

Tomorrow, they'd bring the first group of the Union through the uppermost layer of the undead dungeon and into the city of Falstadt. It was one small step in reclaiming what they'd built, what was theirs.

And Kate felt ready. For whatever was to come.