

Chapter 1 Network unreachable

Autumn winds brushed past yellow leaves, a cool breeze flowing through the Maar valley. The afternoon sun reflected off the distant rivers and creeks, forests of red, brown, and yellow spreading down the slope and up again towards the faraway mountains on the other side of the vale.

Kate sighed, smiling to herself as she relaxed on her favorite bench so far removed from the bustling life of the city. She shivered, taking a sip from her hot canteen, steam rising to her face as she tasted the sweet flavor of black sugarless coffee. The heat and caffeine went straight into her blood as far as she was concerned, her eyes closed as she took a moment to enjoy the taste.

She brushed away the red hair flowing into her face, closing the canteen as she listened to the birds and crickets. Most of the valley would be covered in snow in just a few months, the serene quiet that would descend over the landscape something she very much looked forward to. *Spring is good too, she thought. And then autumn. Fuck summer.*

The climb had taken her about three hours, her rented apartment in Keilberg specifically chosen for the surrounding routes and scenery. There were so many rivers, hills, and mountains further up, she'd be busy for years just trying to see it all. Some of the peaks she saw from down here were already covered in snow. She was glad the area wasn't particularly well known among tourists, or her team would have a lot more work on their hands up in the mountains.

Most of the locals at least had reasonable gear, good shoes, and maybe even a first aid kit with them when they walked the more challenging routes. She had an early shift the next day, which meant she wouldn't be going farther than this. Checking her pack, she grabbed the sandwiches she had prepared and started eating.

A flock of birds took flight from a set of trees farther down the valley, their calls traveling far.

Kate watched them fly down towards Falstadt, only a small part of the bordering Weywater lake visible from here, the curve in the valley just managing to hide the city. *Perfectly chosen after all, she thought, a smirk on her face as she watched the birds. She blinked her eyes, looking down at a butterfly that seemed to have a trail of blue light following its tiny form. Kate tried to focus on the little insect, the blue streak vanishing within a set of trees.*

She glanced at the canteen before she rubbed her eyes. *Too much coffee. Too little sleep, she thought, accounting the phenomenon to some weird trick of the light coupled with neglected bodily needs. Maybe some kind of rare species?* she wondered, taking out her phone to google shining blue butterflies.

There were plenty of blue butterflies, and some illustrative art depicting fantastic made up creatures. She felt a little weird, seeing as the fantasy ones were the closest to what she had seen. *Really fucking difficult differentiating what's real and what's made up when you have no academic background in butterfly science.*

She tapped on one of the pictures, the background colors incredibly well done. The website didn't load however, a message written in black informing her about an apparent server timeout. She went back and tapped on another one. *This one too, she thought, checking her connection. Everything seemed in order, but she checked youtube just to be sure. No connection. Hmm, guess they have an issue with the mobile network.*

Kate put her phone away and finished her sandwiches, another breeze flowing through. She rubbed her hands together, standing up before she packed her things. *Already getting cold*, she thought, deciding to make another stop on the way down, once her body had warmed up again from walking. Shouldering her pack, she turned away from the bench to go back when she heard a loud rumbling noise move through the entire valley.

She thought of a helicopter at first but the sound only got louder, and it wasn't exactly the same. Kate went back up to get a better view, seeing two gray military jets pass the mountain peaks. They were gone in seconds, the sound still thundering through the vicinity as birds took flight.

Training exercise? she wondered, pretty sure she hadn't heard any in the few years she had lived here. Of course she knew the country had them, and the air force would surely find a way to train over the alps of all places, but she assumed they had designated areas to do so. *Can't be good for all the animals.*

She followed the narrow and neglected dirt path down, climbing over shrubberies and branches that tried to reclaim what had been taken by the local populace. When she came out onto a clearing, her eyes narrowed. Kate used her hand to cover her eyes against the sun. "Shit," she cursed, seeing the distant white smoke rising from the direction of Keilberg. *Why now?* she thought, changing her course to a more direct approach as she jogged lightly down the mountain side. It wouldn't help anyone if she stumbled and broke her ankle on the way down. But she had to hurry.

She opened her pack and got her phone, dialing the Falstadt fire brigade. A little ironic perhaps, her being one of their employees, but she couldn't exactly take on a fire by herself, with nothing but a bunch of buckets. What she could do, was get people out, and assess the situation. One hand holding the phone to her ear, she turned up the sound, to hear something over her own breathing, her quick steps, and snapping twigs below her heavy boots.

Kate heard the busy signal resound. *That should never happen*, she thought, remembering their phone guy talking about the backup systems and redirects they had implemented. If nobody at the fire brigade picked up, the call would get redirected to the police, then the regional emergency services, and so on.

She kept on jogging, the phone back in her pack that she now secured around both shoulders, tightening the straps for it to not get in the way. She got a hair tie out of her pockets and quickly tamed her hair. *Don't run into a tree*, she thought, slowing down as she reached a steep slope. She slid down, glad to have worn her work pants. When she arrived at the bottom, she saw movement next to a few of the nearby trees.

Kate assumed the noise had startled a deer or rabbit but what she found staring at her was instead a one meter tall green skinned leather armor wearing creature with pointed ears and yellow eyes. She kept on moving, her brain unsure what to do with the information her eyes relayed.

The creature didn't seem quite as confused as she was, pulling back on the bow string of its medieval weapon, an iron tipped arrow whistling past the trees and bushes, only missing the jogging form by a hair's breadth.

Still unsure about what she had seen, Kate switched gears, changing into a full on sprint through the forest. *An arrow?* she realized, a moment later, forcing herself to not run in a straight line, moving past trees and bushes in an angle to avoid the being. *A goblin? Or some child in cosplay shooting a real fucking arrow at me?!*

She yelped when another arrow flew past, the aim far worse this time around. And still it sunk into a nearby tree with a dull thud. *Am I being hunted?* she wondered, coming out of the thicket and onto a dirt road. Kate crouched and looked to both sides, seeing a few small creatures cross the road upwards about a hundred meters away. *Shit.*

One of the creatures bellowed something towards her, the others jumping up and running towards her with small but quick steps.

She didn't wait to find out what exactly they were or what they wanted, instead jumping into the forest ahead and continuing her run. Kate decided to put a lot of questions on hold, instead trusting her instincts and her body to do what her mind still failed to truly process. She was being hunted. The creatures were small, meaning they'd be slower than her. They had bows and arrows, which meant she had to get as many trees behind herself as she could, never running straight down.

A part of her was reminded of the games she used to play when she was a child, running away or hiding from her friends. She laughed, forcing herself to stop a few strides later, the absurdity of the situation slowly catching up with her. For several minutes she ran, unsure of what to do. Reaching Keilberg would take at least an hour. She couldn't exactly run all the way, and sooner or later she'd hit a tree or rock.

Kate forced herself to slow down again, stopping behind a large oak tree before she glanced behind, trying to spot the creatures. *Nothing*, she thought, turning away and pressing her back against the tree as she took hasty breaths, calming herself down. *Need shelter, somewhere to hide. A weapon?*

She smiled at the idea. *What is this? Some kind of fantasy rpg?* she thought and shook her head. There was no time to consider the why or whats. *Priorities.* She checked again to see if she was being followed and continued running, not downwards but along the slope. Kate had spent quite a bit of time in this forest and she knew there was a hunter's hut about a ten minute walk down the road she had just been on. She was pretty sure it wasn't in use anymore or at least not well maintained, which made her hope it wasn't locked.

She slowed down when she saw the silhouette of the hut through the thicket, checking behind herself again before she made sure there weren't any other creatures in the vicinity. When she didn't find anything, she rushed to the hut, grabbed the handle and opened it. She was relieved to find it unlocked. No key was stuck on the other side.

A single table with a few chairs stood in the middle of the small room, two dirty windows letting in faint sunlight from outside. A tiny kitchen with a few utensils stood in one corner, an old bedroll in another. Behind the table she saw a simple oven and a few stacks of firewood. Kate slid down to the ground with her back against the wooden door, her breaths quick as she tried to calm down. She grabbed her phone and tried to call the police. Another busy signal. She tried to check the news on google but nothing loaded.

What the hell is happening?

She slowly stood up and looked around the room, her eyes locking onto a small radio. She checked it quickly, turning it around before she found the on button. A small red light turned on, sound instantly coming from the small boxes.

"... st on all other public radio frequencies. Please remain calm and stay at home. If you are outside, seek shelter. Lock your doors and turn off all lights. We repeat, there have been sightings of wild animals and unknown creatures throughout the Falstadt region. Emergency services and the military are resolving the situation. Do not engage the creatures or any animals under any

circumstances, they are aggressive and dangerous. For further instructions listen at 102.6. This message is being broadcast on all other public radio frequencies. Please remain calm and stay at home. If you are outside, seek shelter. Lock your doors...

Kate could feel her heartbeat increase, her trembling hand turning the a knob on the radio only to find the volume going up. She grabbed the other one and turned, changing the frequency to 102.6 before she checked behind herself.

Aggressive and dangerous. Throughout the Falstadt region? We're nowhere near the city!

She opened all the cupboards and drawers, finding old cutlery, a few plates, mugs, towels, and a lousy first aid kit. *Outside, there was a box*, she thought, ignoring the talking people on the radio for now as she made the thing more quiet, opening the door slowly to check if the creatures had followed. Kate rushed out quickly and found a toolbox sitting on the ground at the side of the hut. It had a combination lock.

"Fuck," she cursed, looking around to see if she could find anything useful. A large rock was the closest thing she could find. She grabbed the thing and started smashing it against the lock. Both the chest and the lock looked incredibly old, which made her hope this attempt would work. She had gotten stronger looking things open with less brute force. Small locks like these were often made as a deterrent more so than to actually withstand a determined break in.

With the tenth strike, the thing broke, not the combination lock but the hinge itself. She threw the rock aside and opened the box, finding a large set of gardening shears, a simple hammer, a pair of old boots, and a crowbar. She took the crowbar, the weighty steel in her hands something to cling to in the chaos of her mind.

Back inside, she put the crowbar aside and started shoving the wooden table against the entrance. Sitting down in one of the corners and away from the windows, she held her improvised weapon and the radio, sipping some hot coffee from her canteen as she made the radio louder again.

"... beasts the likes of trolls and dragons. It's unclear what has caused the sudden appearance of these monsters but they're here and they are hostile. Conventional weaponry is effective, so if you have any guns or know someone who might own a firearm, it may be advised to seek them out. However for now it's best to remain home behind locked doors and wait until the military has brought more clarity to the situation. We are informed that the event is not a local occurrence only, the neighboring countries dealing with similar inexplicable appearances. Mobile towers and network infrastructure has been damaged, such devices not guaranteed to work. Under any circumstance, do not panic. Do what you can to prepare. Many of the monsters have been seen wielding medieval weaponry. To protect yourself and the people close to you, layer clothing, preferably winter clothes with padding. Ski helmets, and sticks may be helpful too if you have any..."

The connection broke off, the small light on the radio flashing.

Kate checked the batteries before she simply turned it off. She had heard enough. *In the neighboring countries too? This isn't some random event. This is the bloody fucking day of reckoning.*

She started giggling to herself, bursting out in laughter as she clutched the crowbar. Laughing was how she sometimes reacted in incredibly high stress situations. Her team knew about it and they all had their own ways of dealing with things. The brain was a curious thing after all but Kate didn't

think it particularly weird. Sometimes the world was just so fucked up, all you could do was laugh straight back.

Medieval fantasy creatures. I did see that butterfly. Which means those little buggers were goblins or something. At least I didn't run into a dragon right at the start of this thing.

She didn't know how extensive this was but if there were monsters near Keilberg, there were monsters fucking everywhere. All emergency lines were fucked, the internet was down, and the radio broadcast was doing damage control. If the state warned people about going outside, the situation wasn't enormously promising.

Leaving the hut was a gamble. But she could imagine the little buggers armed with bows had some ability in tracking and hunting. She could make a run for it and go to Keilberg, but there was smoke rising from there already. She could imagine that any settlements would be targeted first, if the creatures were attacking humans. And according to both her own experience and the radio broadcast, they very much were. If the military was fighting back, they'd clear out Keilberg last, if at all.

Any medieval technology monster should get absolutely destroyed by modern weaponry though, she thought, hoping her assumption was right. The butterfly looked pretty magical now that she thought about it, and as soon as magic entered the playing field, the rules changed entirely.

She took a deep breath and slowly stood up, looking out the windows and checking the glass. She assumed they could take an arrow or two before breaking, but she had no real reference. Again, she searched through the drawers, her crowbar always close by. There were a few old cans of beans and ravioli, expired but likely still edible. She put them into her backpack, adding some of the cutlery. She grabbed the first aid kit too. The one she already had with her was more modern and definitely more sterile but she didn't know how long she would be stuck out here and she could use whatever she could find.

Should get the hammer and shears too, she thought. What a ridiculous fucking day.

Kate found a set of batteries, sitting back down before she switched them out with the ones in the radio. The frequency she had listened on only sent static. She turned to another and the same initial broadcast resumed. *Not promising, she thought. I hope you made it, radio man.*

She turned it off and put it into her pack as well, quickly dialing a few of her friends' numbers, trying to call her dad as well, none of the calls going through. For now she was glad he was on vacation and not in Falstadt. Her eyes went to the small stand next to the door, old brochures showing the nearby mountains. *Non digital maps would be useful, she thought, grabbing all of them and putting them into her pack before she paused, looking at the picture of a place she had visited years ago. A castle overlooking a glistening river with a horrifically designed lettering inviting tourists to Keilberg castle.*

Kate nearly jumped when something impacted and shattered the window to her left. She went into the corner near the door and clutched her bar of solid steel, still looking at the brochure depicting the stone walls of the decrepit old castle. *Medieval problems... require medieval solutions.*

A grin came to her face as she heard an unfamiliar language from outside, malicious laughter of hunters who had just cornered their prey. She stared at the steel in her hands before she dropped the marketing material. Kate closed her eyes and took a deep breath.