

Chapter 55 Burning

Kate left the parents with the difficult task of showing all of this carnage to Celeste. She didn't know if they were making the right decision but either way, she understood it was not an easy one to make. She was just glad she didn't have a kid herself to take care of.

But you have them, she thought, nodding to herself. They did feel close to her, that much was true. Closer perhaps than even her team had felt. Logan himself felt the same as Lewis or Maurice, someone that fought by her side, someone she could trust to have her back. She found that making comparisons to before all of this shit happened didn't really bring a satisfying result. She was here now, that she knew. And she knew that she cared for the people she had met here, in Keilberg castle.

Slamming down her axe, she felled another tree, then started to work the wood down into logs. Not to fuel the heater but to burn the undead. There were dozens now, littering the small field to the east of the castle. They didn't stand up again so far but they wanted to make sure, especially if Kate and Logan planned to go farther away in the coming days.

She finished up and went to the hole Logan was digging in the snow, piling up the logs. "Think that's enough?"

Logan looked up. "Probably, we'll just add more if it's not."

Kate was glad for Eloise's food and the additional Endurance it provided. Adjusting her face mask, she started collecting corpses and undead bits.

It took them the better part of the evening, both to clear the field to the east but also collecting all the other corpses that remained in the vicinity of the castle. They had found that other predators weren't in the area or they simply didn't care to touch the undead.

They added a few fire starters and set it all aflame. She knew it would take a while for everything to burn down. They might even have to restock the wood and start another fire when this one burnt down.

Kate sighed, watching the flames slowly take hold on the many logs and trunks she had cut down and added.

"Jon wants to repair the stakes. Think we can let this burn?" Logan said.

Kate nodded and followed him, the two soon escorting Jon through the trench around the castle and past the tightly packed stakes.

"Another one," Jon murmured, touching the broken and blood covered stake before a flowing mist of blueish light moved from his arms to envelop the wood.

Kate watched as for several seconds, splinters and pieces of wood from the ground floated up to rejoin the stake, until it was whole again. He had gotten the skill a few days prior but it still freaked her out whenever she actually saw it. *As if time was reversed.*

A way to mend his keep. But instead of skill and labor, he simply had to expend mana. Certainly a trade off, considering how limited they still were in terms of the resource, and knowing he could vastly improve any bullets he fired at the undead with a skill using that same source of power.

Kate could've cut new stakes but this way, he could level up his skills, and it seemed like the second tier benefits to abilities could range quite far in terms of usefulness.

They continued for a while, soon reaching the most damaged section at the eastern part of the wall, the bonfire set into the dug out hole in the snow still burning, dark smoking rising upwards. The sky had darkened too, they had another half hour of light perhaps.

They returned inside when Jon was done with his work, Kate closing the large castle gate behind herself and slotting in the heavy wooden bar before she joined the others in the armory.

Eloise had cooked already, a spicy smell wafting through the dimly lit room. Kate glanced at Melusine, a small sphere of light floating above the woman's palm, brightening before it vanished. It reappeared a moment later, Celeste giggling next to her.

Seems like the talk went well, Kate thought, setting down her many weapons when Allison walked over.

"Let me check on the hammer and axe," she said.

"Got something new as well?" Kate asked.

Allison grinned and took the weapons before she walked off towards the stairs.

Kate sighed. Looking down at herself, she could see the splatters of dried blood but she felt too tired to go for a shower today. Maybe if it was warm but it wasn't. Instead, she followed Allison up the stairs, ignoring Melusine's magic tricks she had unlocked at the start of the week.

She found Allison sitting above an old metal box, Kate's axe lying on top of it. The Crafter held a hammer in hand and bit her lip, sweat dripping from her brow before she set down the tool and grabbed an old sword. She angled it against the axe blade and slowly slid it across its curved length.

Kate furrowed her brows, leaning against the wall as she crossed her arms in front of her. She watched for a few more minutes before she spoke up. "I don't think that's going to do a lot. That's not a whetstone. It's an old sword."

Allison hissed and looked up. Only for a moment before she focused again.

Kate opened her mouth when sparks flew from the blade. *What?*

She didn't miss the grin on Allison's face. Kate shook her head and sighed, returning downstairs to get some dinner. *Weird fucking magic shit.*

She was glad of course, glad that their new abilities brought more possibilities than just killing.

"Leave your coat with me as well," Allison called after her.

Kate obliged. It was holding up well enough now that she wasn't getting hit quite as much by the familiar undead but there were still a few tears and cuts, maybe Allison could magic up some repairs as well.

They're all getting more mana too, she thought, wondering for a moment what kinds of abilities everyone could develop given enough time and work put into them. Melusine had her new light manipulation. Not just that, she had gotten a skill to cure poisons as well. Eloise on the other hand had unlocked an ability that let her pickle things faster as well as cure meats more easily.

And with all of their magic spells, the same rules seemed to apply as those that Allison had discovered. The better the real process was prepared, the more potent and faster the benefits from

their spells. Kate supposed that's how Allison could sharpen her axe with an old blade at all. If she had a whetstone or a grinding wheel, Kate assumed the results would be more than a little impressive with mana and a skill added to the mix.

For a short moment, she felt excited again, to go out with Logan and to find useful tools that the others could use to make this place safer and better equipped. In the same way that Grey had been excited whenever they had found out something new about their magic.

She breathed in and smiled to herself. *He would've been foaming at the mouth at this point, with all the shit we unlocked. Hey, you might even be watching. With all of this magic stuff, souls and gods could be real as well, who the fuck knows.*

The thought didn't quite manage to quench the tight feeling in her chest that she felt whenever she thought of the others. It hurt still. But with every passing day, the feeling lost a little bit of its edge.

At the same time, she felt like with every passing day, it became clearer what she wanted to do. What she felt like she had to do. Of course they had to find out more about the undead to make their constant attacks stop, of course there was some reason to go to Falstadt, to find other survivors, to fight the undead, and to fight any other monsters that would hunt and kill humans. Kate had heard all of those arguments, she had agreed with them, had agreed with the others concerning their next steps and what was needed but while it made sense to her, she felt far more plain.

Even if she was the only human left in this entire world. She would hunt them down. She would fight until she could no longer move, until the last drop of her blood and mana was used up to rip apart another one of those monsters.

She felt her blood pulse and blinked her eyes, relaxing her jaw and taking in a deep breath.

Kate found that the thought didn't scare her. She remembered how it had felt, to use her magic the first few times, to look at herself in the bathroom mirror of his medieval castle. In a weird way, she felt much more calm now, much more focused.

Dinner first, she thought and sat down on the couch, leaning back and allowing herself to relax as she reached for a blanket.

Jon and Logan seemed done with their talk on morse code, the former turning on the radio to hear the newest information from the one and only Maximilian Reiter.

Kate was not a fan but he was the only source of any information outside of their own group.

"... massive ass crocodile like creatures with jaws as big as... I don't know, big. One scout reported hearing singing from the lake before we lost contact with him. I suggest you don't get close to the Weywater lake. Tourist paradise no more. Just like everywhere else I guess.

"In other news, the price of eggs has fallen dramatically. They're free now. Because our economy doesn't exist anymore. Reminder not to engage any Eratur and to avoid Kloster Buchneit and the surrounding areas in general. Still no Wyvern sightings but I have something else for you. From the dusty bins of old age technology, we got some CDs. Remember those? Let me see... if I can... get this... yeah... no, not this one..."

Music started playing, halting abruptly.

"This one. Sorry about that everyone. I know I suck at this but this is the apocalypse and you're stuck with me. Radio Max. I have to work on that nickname. But here you go, a song for all of you out there, surviving in the cold. And even if nobody's listening, I do feel kind of cool for blasting this

track through a monster infested valley in the apocalypse. I'm not exactly big on the institution that is religion but I like this one regardless. The man comes around, by the late Johnny Cash."

The radio crackled before Kate heard another voice speak, the recorded words of the song flowing through the cold room of the old armory. She closed her eyes and listened, smiling when she felt the goosebumps mentioned in the song. And when it ended, she knew what Radio Max or whatever the fuck he wanted to call himself had meant. She couldn't help but like the track as well.

Maybe this really was the apocalypse but she neither wished for nor expected anyone to come down from the heavens to save or judge them. The idea just felt a little too passive to her if nothing else. She had her axe and she had her hammer, and she knew there were monsters in the valley. And if there were no angels coming down to smite the creatures lurking in the dark, they would just have to do it themselves.