

Chapter 78 Momentum

Aathi checked another corner before she signaled to the large team making their way into the city. More civilians today than on the days prior. *Ready to salvage this cursed fucking city.* She was slightly on edge, knowing that many of them would not be able to stand even against a single of the undead humans or goblins.

And she was worried about the mission of their allies. Kate and Logan had stayed the night. Her mood for today would very much depend on how things went with them. She'd seen them fight but killing a bunch of nightmare butterflies and surviving a night in an undead infested city were different things altogether.

When they reached the villa, she heard Alexander speak into his radio.

"Union Spear, we're entering the villa. Logan, do you copy?"

Aathi held her breath as they waited, Lewis and Bastian closing in on the shut gates before the radio crackled.

"*We copy.*" She heard Logan's voice speak through the radio and watched as the others opened the gate. Stepping inside, Aathi checked the gardens before she signaled the all clear.

On the stairs leading to the villa, she saw the two humans sit, their armor, dark scales and medieval plate, covered in dried blood and gore, scrapes all over.

Kate stood up and stretched. "Took you long enough."

Lewis laughed and advanced. "You look like you've been through hell."

"You should see the undead," Kate said, her eyes suggesting she was smiling when Lewis stopped a meter in front of her.

"You smell like you've been through hell too," he added.

Aathi noted the glances of the civilians and the other fighters. Most of them had at least seen the two but they hadn't seen them fight and she knew that few would stay the night in Falstadt by choice. Now, at least they knew it was possible.

"Happy to take a bath when you can take over security," Kate said.

Alexander went up to them to check for injuries, Valery joining to get the report from Logan.

Aathi just smiled as she holstered her pistol. At least the start to her day wouldn't be absolutely shit.

Kate took a bath in the master bathroom of the villa. She thanked the young man who'd heated up the water in the tub with his magic. He took her armor too, promising to clean it as best he could.

They'd set up bedrolls in the cellar of the villa, Kate already asleep before Logan even joined her.

She woke up some hours later, slightly disoriented in the dark before she touched the axe lying on the floor next to her. *Right. The villa. Fought through the night.* She sighed and checked the time. Four hours of sleep, and yet she felt rested. Reasonably so. She still felt that she'd been fighting all through the night but it felt good, in the same way you felt a good workout on the day prior.

She sat up, quietly leaving to not wake up Logan.

Her armor was stacked next to the exit. Cleaned but she still smelled it a little. Not a surprise. She assumed she'd have to use something insanely strong to clean it fully. *Doesn't make sense in the first place, if I just use it again.*

She looked at the horned helmet and started getting dressed for the day.

Next on the list, was of course coffee.

She smiled, seeing the glances when she entered the large remodeled living room, many of the people pausing for a moment to look her way, giving her a nod or avoiding eye contact again quickly.

"She's already up again? Didn't they fight through the night?" one of them whispered to another as Kate went to the food station, greeting one of the cooks who prepared lunch, magically enhanced for the combatants.

"She's got some stat that makes her need less sleep," someone else whispered.

"And she can hear everything you're saying," Alexander said as he passed by them.

"Morning Kate. Let me know when Logan is up so we can discuss the next steps."

"Morning, Alexander," Kate said, closing her eyes when she sipped from the coffee. She glanced at the two men who had talked about her, both avoiding her gaze. She smiled, taking in the busy living room, more akin now to the makeshift headquarters of a military unit or crisis response team. Radios, weapons, armor, they even had craftspeople here and she knew two rooms on the ground floor had been repurposed as medical stations.

Logan joined her a few hours later, his own Vigor having leveled a reasonable amount as well.

They left the city through the dungeon corridors, back towards Keilberg Castle. No undead stood in their way, the outskirts of the city clear this afternoon.

Eloise resupplied their tinctures, Allison repaired what damage their enchanted armors had taken, and Celeste offered them some much needed orange juice.

They were out again a few hours later, Allison traveling with them for once. They knew how many non combatants were already in the city but Kate was more confident taking Allison mainly due to her and Logan's level and skill increases, that and their increasingly effective equipment.

They led Allison to the dead Overakar they'd fought the previous night, the woman getting to work after a few comments on the monster's size, and of course the damage they'd done to its head and scales.

Some of the Union people helped them transport the pieces Allison had cut away. Damn near every single piece of scale and much of the skeleton below, Allison looking even bloodier than Kate and Logan had in the morning.

"Enough shit to work with for a while," she said, brushing away the sweat on her brow. "You didn't happen to kill another?"

"Not yet," Kate said.

"Let me know when you do, before those second-hand crafters of the Union get to it," Allison grumbled.

Kate raised a brow.

Allison snickered. "I'm kidding. I like the persona of the disgruntled old smith, though maybe I could get inspired. Come on, you're the only one walking around with a savage looking set of enchanted scale armor."

"True enough," Logan said.

"They'll catch up soon," Allison said. "Gotta stay on the ball. And while we're working in unison right now, pun intended, it's just a matter of time until we start to trade and haggle for materials and gear. Better to prepare now."

"We're here to kill monsters, not to get a leg up on other groups of people," Kate said.

"I know," Allison said, giving her a meaningful look. "Just trying to look out for the people I care about."

Kate nodded. "Want to have a look at the Wyvern I killed?"

"Far inferior to the Overakar scales," Allison said.

"It flew off with me and I grounded it again, was pretty crazy," Kate said.

Allison smiled. "I'm sure, monster killer, but these materials are better, so there you are."

Kate sighed. "We'll make sure to hunt more of them then."

"Do that," Allison said. "You have time to help me get everything back? Jon and Eloise should be done with their current shipment of enchantments and potions for the Union too."

"Glorified postal service," Kate murmured.

Logan chuckled.

"I'll get the sled ready then," Allison said.

Kate rolled her eyes. "Sure. Let's get this over with."

They got help preparing their gear at the villa. The materials they'd collected from the Overakar including a few other monster bits Allison was interested in. Glassware, more roses, and non magical ingredients for Eloise, seeds for Melusine, a little more ammo for their rifles. And a few crates of gear to be enchanted for the Union.

Kate had another coffee while a group of non combatants prepared their sled. To be pulled of course, by Kate.

She heard Maximilian's voice through a nearby radio.

"... and now with the weather. Gray, mist, and light snowfall. Still the same, so make sure to dress for the occasion. Except of course you've become some superhuman creature by now that neither feels cold nor fear. Speaking of which, I've just received the report that the Exterminators of Keilberg have survived their night in Falstadt. And not just that but oh boy, they've slaughtered through the undead like it was a mere roach infestation. Not that I'd want to deal with a roach infestation, disgusting creatures, though I hear they're quite important for the planet, eating dead animals and plants. Maybe they'll be the ones taking care of all those former undead corpses left behind, or they'll turn into monsters themselves. Who really knows at this point. Fact is, we have living proof of people able to fight back against the monsters in our valley, and we've got more of them fighting hard to reach those same heights of power and capability. I'll be interested to hear what happens in the next few nights. If you're out there, fighting, holding out, preparing for the next battle, know that you are not alone. This is the Union Herald, and I'll be back with more news and stories after a few tracks. First one from Worakls. I still hope that no copyright lawyers survived this apocalypse. Just kidding of course, I'm sure there are some maniacs out there with a law degree. Keep on killing."

And the music picked up right after.

Kate smiled to herself. He'd gotten more comfortable with his role it seemed. And he wasn't the only one.

"Your sled is ready to go," Lewis said. "Need help getting it up and into those corridors?"

"Think we can handle it," she said and smiled, her former colleague mimicking the gesture.

The afternoon was mostly spent on moving supplies from Falstadt to Keilberg Castle and back again, Jon still the only known person to be able to enchant gear. With how much even the basic enchantment increased a weapon's effectiveness, his services were accordingly sought after.

And once again, Kate and Logan sat atop a balcony in Falstadt, watching as the gray sky slowly became darker. Light snow was falling, the air crisp as they prepared for the night to come, no longer the only people in the city. While they had their own undead to hunt, they'd agreed to be available to support any other combat group that required help. All of them were battle tested, at least level fifteen, well equipped, and working with a balanced team they knew well. And still, fighting undead at night was quite a bit more dangerous than the first few battles against orcs and goblins that Kate had experienced.

She drank from her canteen filled with now cold black coffee, watching the dimly lit street below. Her armor now felt comfortable, the weight of her weapons barely registered. She itched for the next fight, the next slaughter, to take out more of the undead, reduce their numbers, one by one, until none of them remained.

"Dispatch here, starting for the night on frequency 100 zero zero. Reminder to keep your radios off when close to any undead. The sun is setting in seventeen minutes. Check your ammo, weapons, location, tinctures, food buffs, and any specialized equipment you might have. Once the sun is set, you'll have to rely on safe houses. Please call in on your designated frequencies now to test the radio equipment and relays, some spots in the city might still be dark. Dispatch out."

Kate smiled, hearing the familiar voice. She'd worked with Veronica and her team for years. She wasn't just glad that someone else she'd known had survived, she was glad that they hadn't lost her capabilities.

"Logan here, calling in on 100.01," Logan spoke into his radio.

"Hearing you crystal clear Exterminators," another voice replied, one Kate wasn't yet familiar with. *"I'm Mehmet, and I'll be your support tonight, not that I expect much trouble from your team. I'll let you know about emergencies through this frequency, so keep it open however often you can. General information, sightings of dangerous undead or larger groups will be informed on through the main dispatch frequency on one hundred zero zero but if you want that information directly, just ask me and I'll be happy to send it out again. I have your gps and will inform you if anything relevant comes up. That's it from me for now, dispatch out."*

"Thanks Mehmet, we'll call in if we need anything," Logan said. "Over."

"Copy, over," Mehmet replied.

Kate leaned against the wall of the large balcony. "They set all of that up in a few days."

"It was a lot of work," Logan said. "Lots of capable people at the Union."

Kate agreed and she knew that this situation pushed people to their limits, in a lot of different ways. She herself had experienced it, everyone at the castle had. They had magic, and now they had the resources of an entire city, at least what they could salvage, to help them fight against the monsters that had appeared in their homes.

"The sun is setting in two minutes. Ready yourselves fighters, and remember not to take any unnecessary risks. Stay calm, methodical. You face monsters tonight, but this is our valley, our city, our Earth. Show them what we can do. Dispatch out."

Kate grabbed her axe and stood up, rolling her shoulders before she nodded to Logan.

"Ready for another night," he said, shouldering his blade.

Jasia heard the groans of the undead as they rushed up the stairs of the museum. Her breathing was erratic but she kept running, following Bastian as he led them to the safe room. She glanced back and stopped, watching the moving lights of their headlamps. Niklas was injured, Aisha supporting him but they were too slow.

"Mateo!" Jasia shouted, shining her light down the stairwell before she focused on her magic, cold air gathering around her hands before she whipped them both forward, a floating crystal of ice flying down into the throng of undead, exploding a moment later with a shattering sound. The undead closest to the spell were frozen solid, impeding the way up as Mateo stood on the railing to Jasia's right, shooting down the few undead who's already been past the now frozen section of the stairwell.

"Thanks," Aisha said as she moved past with the groaning Niklas.

"Move in behind them," Mateo said, "I'll catch up."

Jasia didn't wait for him, grabbing on to Niklas' other side before they rushed towards Bastian standing next to a set of heavy wooden double doors, his shield at the ready.

They were past him a moment later, Mateo floating into the room barely a second later, Bastian shutting the heavy doors with a single smooth motion, slamming in a metal bar that had been prepared beforehand.

"Shit," Jasia murmured, helping Niklas down to the ground as Mateo found the tinctures of life that had been left in every safe house. He handed one to Niklas a moment later as Aisha got to work on his leg. Jasia didn't look, instead finding a nearby wall and collapsing against it.

"Slow breaths, Jasia." She heard Aisha say. She hated it. Hated that she couldn't keep her shit together and she knew that she just had to let it go, just had to not be so hard on herself and she'd relax. But she couldn't.

"Breathe," Aisha repeated.

And this time, she caught herself, focused fully on her breathing and slowly calmed herself down as best she could.

“Union Shield, calling in from the Zoological Museum safe room,” Bastian spoke into his radio. A crash rattled the double doors a moment later. “We have a large number of undead on our trail, trying to break in at the moment, one injured getting treated. Should we stand by or go through the escape route?”

His radio crackled a moment later. *“Copy Union Shield. Move on to the second room and shut yourselves in as soon as you can safely move the injured. If there are no large undead, the door should hold for a few minutes at least. Checking with nearby teams to see if anyone is available.”*

Jasia could now look around the room again, her adrenaline and subsequent tunnel vision having lessened a little. She found a few candles nearby and lit one, then turned off her headlamp to preserve some of the battery charge. “Mana is sitting at a medium level,” she informed the others. “I will meditate in the second room.”

“Understood,” Bastian said as she made her way there.

“Union Shield, we have confirmation of two teams moving to your location. No need for the escape route if you can hold out for another two minutes.”

Jasia let out a breath. They weren’t alone out here. She felt more steady now, ready to face the monsters out there again.

The others now joined her as well, in the back section of the safe house. An exhibition of extinct animals. She didn’t want to die here.

Bastian shut the door and locked it before he grabbed his radio again. “Union Shield here. Injured is stabilized and recovering. Should we engage the undead once they’re distracted by the other teams?”

“Union Shield, stay put. You’ve got the Exterminators and Union Saw coming your way.”

A dulled explosion shook the floor a moment later, as if their dispatcher had summoned the other fighters into their vicinity.

“That’s Lewis’ group and Kate,” Bastian said.

“It will be a slaughter,” Mateo confirmed.

They waited, hearing more dulled explosions and gunshots, and then nothing.

“Union Saw here. You can open the gates, Shield.” They heard Lewis’ voice from the radio.

At least we didn’t get Kate breaking down our doors, Jasia thought with a sigh. She twitched when she heard a dulled shout, taking in a deep breath. *Keep breathing. You’ll survive the night, Jasia. No wait, don’t jinx it. The night will be what the night will be.*