

## Chapter 64 Leg

Kate and Logan cleared and mapped four more corridors, normal undead only, quickly taken out without alerting more.

When they reached yet another fork, Kate found something strange in the distance. Strange at least, for the place they were in.

There was faint light. And it wasn't in a reddish hue for once. "You can see that too, right?"

Logan stepped past her before he got out his binoculars and looked through them. "Yeah. Another way out maybe?"

"Or some kind of trap," Kate suggested.

"One way to find out," he said.

She smiled, turning the handle of her axe. *I was just about to say that.*

She listened and occasionally used her echo awareness to check for anything that could be hidden. There were no undead left in this corridor, and the source of light was getting stronger with every step she walked. At the end of the tunnel, they reached another hall of stone, large and broad, roses on the walls glowing with faint red light, corpses and blood on the ground, neither able to push back against the gray light of day and the cool fresh air coming in from the collapsed left side of the chamber.

The crumbled and charred rock made way to a street beyond, parts of it blackened. Past it, Kate saw the familiar sight of an apartment building, reaching higher than the chamber wall allowed for her to see. She saw shattered windows and burnt doors, charred and bent street signs, and snow covered husks of cars hollowed out by fire. They were deep in Falstadt.

"You recognize the street?" Logan asked.

"Think so," Kate said. "And I think we just found a way into the inner city." She raised her fist when she heard a noise from outside and below. "Something big coming," she whispered and prepared.

Logan took a few steps back and set down his pack, shouldering his sniper rifle.

Kate took a few silent steps forward, to make some distance between herself and Logan. She gripped her battle axe when she saw a large clawed arm reach into the broken section of the hall, as large as her torso, covered in jagged dark green scales.

The creature pulled itself up, another clawed arm reaching in just as its reptilian like head emerged. It looked like a mix between crocodile and what Kate thought of as a dragon, the massive thing covered head to tail in the same jagged scales as it moved inside the hall with heavy and uneven steps, its eyes a dull white, dead, like everything else they had fought near the city. Broader, heavier, and all around bigger than a Wyvern, the only solace the fact that it had no wings on its back.

Kate felt small when she saw the creature. She felt fear bubbling up in her stomach and chest. She gulped, feeling herself want to run. But she stood. This was just one of the monsters standing in

their way. There were others like it, all of them infesting the city she had once called home. The city she knew, the city she worked in.

She could feel her blood pulse, the terror she felt brushed away as she watched the undead monstrosity.

Was this not her home? Was this not the city she knew?

Kate felt the weight of her axe, she could feel the magic in her veins. She smelled the blood in the hall, and she knew the path they had taken to come all this way.

*This is the city I know. Our city. Infested*, she narrowed her eyes and breathed in, watching the large creature as it took lumbering steps, its milky eyes turning their way. They hadn't moved.

It was a risk. Of course it was. They didn't know how strong the creature was, what kind of magic it possessed. If there was a guide on common monstrosities, Kate would've fallen back to read the entry on this creature. But there wasn't. Not yet. Could she face it and survive? She didn't know.

But she found herself wanting to find out.

Falstadt was one of the reasons. Grey and Ethan were another. But there was more to it. A part of her that she was beginning to accept. This thing, was just one step on the way. She knew that she could die if she faced it but she found that the thought didn't push her back. No. It pushed her forward.

She didn't speak. Neither her nor Logan said a word. She didn't activate her magic and rush forward either. They were here together, a team, and she didn't want to take a risk that Logan was not willing to share.

A heartbeat.

Then she heard him raise his sniper rifle, the safety undone.

A moment had passed.

The monster opened its long jaws, two rows of massive teeth visible when it roared towards them, blood and spittle sent flying. Primal rage and hunger, unthinking, undead, then it turned and moved into a run, an armored tank the size of an SUV, barreling down towards the two lone humans.

Kate smiled, and met it, breaking into a run of her own, blood and adrenaline pulsing through her as her magic activated, her world narrowing, sound flowing into her weapon as her entire being focused on the single minded task. She closed the distance quickly, power surging through her legs before she jumped. Kate heard the roar of her ally's weapon, the golden flash flying past and striking deep into the monster's open mouth, ignoring its scales and tearing flesh asunder. She raised her axe but found the creature pushing itself up from the ground, no reaction to her roar or the bullet as it snapped its jaws shut around her right thigh. She heard the bone protecting her leg splinter and crack, dull pain reaching her mind as her skin and muscle was torn.

Kate's momentum was stopped short. She clung onto her axe as the creature brought her down with it. She moved her jaw down to her chest and reached up her hands to hold her head as the monster slammed her down into the blood covered stone floor. The impact was dull, punching all the air out of her lungs. She tasted blood in her mouth, her vision blurred. Then she was slammed to the side, blinding pain radiating out from her shoulder and back. Then to the other side. Her leg snapped, leaving her hanging sideways when the monster brought her back up to slam her down.

She could barely see but heard another thunderous roar, flesh torn from the bullet impact. Her ally shouted, a pulse coming with it.

She could feel the jaws clinging to her twisted leg loosen, her focus returning with a pulse of blood magic. She was dangling in the air, still holding on to her axe, its blade vibrating with her charge. She saw the unarmored underside of the creature's jaw and swung, feeling her leg jerk to the side with the movement. She felt the strike go through her arms, the blade cutting into the monster with little resistance, cutting through its jaw and lodging itself deep inside of its head.

It made a strange noise in return, Kate spitting up blood as she let go of the weapon. The monster fell and she came down with it, hearing the long handle of her axe hitting the floor, wedged so deep it pushed the struggling monster to the side. She screamed and reached up, grabbing the creature's jaws and pulling with all of her strength. She felt the monster struggling to get back up, every move twisting the blade-like teeth still deep in her flesh. Kate's fingers slipped on the blood but she grabbed on again and with another pull, she ripped out the teeth and pulled herself free, deep wounds torn into her thigh.

She fell and groaned, crawling back when she saw the figure of her armored ally, golden mist following his form, his blade shrouded in sacred light before he slashed his weapon into the half exposed underbelly of the large monstrosity.

Kate crawled farther away, grabbing for something, anything to wrap around her leg. She found her belt and pulled it out. With blood covered and slightly shaking hands, she wrapped it around her thigh, just above the broad and gaping wounds. The pain was still dulled, the adrenaline and her magic in full effect. She pulled, all her strength put into the effort to cut off any circulation into her leg, fresh blood already pooling below it.

She couldn't move it anymore, exposed muscles twitching, her leg twisted at the knee, her thigh bone cracked. She looked up, her sight blurry as she heard the groans of the large monster. She watched it struggle, innards spilling out from the gashing wound in its belly, its head twitching. She watched her ally stagger back before he found his rifle. He walked up to the creature and aimed, from one meter away into its entirely unfocused gaze. Thunder resounded, the golden shining bullet flashing past its armor, through the eye and into its skull.

The creature gurgled, slowly reaching one of its arms towards her ally.

He reloaded, standing calm before he shot the other eye.

Its arm fell limply to the ground, a last gurgling noise escaping the creature before it lay still.

Kate felt a rush then, gritting her teeth against the hot feeling flooding through her, into her leg. Wounds were forced shut, arteries regrown, muscle rejoined. The belt now felt tight and in the way, so she grabbed at it and undid it, no more blood leaking out but the wounds had not fully healed, muscle and bone still lying exposed, veins visible but no longer bleeding. She could feel the dull pain and knew full well that if her magic waned, she would scream, likely pass out.

Her ally rushed towards her, hands glowing with golden light before she stopped him. She grit her teeth but couldn't speak.

He nodded, rushing instead towards his pack before he returned.

Kate's vision blurred. She moaned when she felt her magic leave her. Then she cried out. She saw Logan's blurry form as he injected her leg with a syringe.

"Breathe. Breathe," he said. "Stay with me."

Kate screamed, her breathing erratic when she saw him dump liquid into the open wounds. Then his hands started glowing again and this time, she passed out.

And came too again with fast breaths, her head swimming but she saw Logan wrap her leg with bandages. The pain was there somehow, but it didn't matter. She smiled, looking at him, then looking at the massive aligator dragon thing, its insides spilled out onto the bloody floor.

"Horrific scene, huh?" she murmured. Her throat felt dry. "Diwe do thad?" she asked, her words not coming out quite right. Was she drunk? The thought was funny to her, so she laughed.

"I gave you morphine, and we need to get out of here before more monsters come," Logan said.

"Whaddayamean? I feel great," Kate said. She did and tried to focus. Morphine. Yeah. That was bad. Wasn't it? It didn't feel bad. On the contrary. And still, somewhere deep below, she felt terror. Felt like everything was wrong. But it didn't quite manage to reach her. So she chuckled to herself as Logan helped her up.

"Try to lean on me, your right leg is heavily injured," he said.

"Right, right. No need to handle me like a chiiild!" she groaned and pushed him aside. "Woow, I'm strong," she murmured and looked down at her leg. "Wrapped up," she thought and set it down on the ground. It felt okay. Not quite right but okay.

"We have to get back to Melusine, you need a healer," Logan said.

"Or..." she said and closed her eyes, focusing hard on the stray thought she couldn't quite grasp. She wanted to eat strawberries but then wasn't it winter? She sighed. Another eight months or whatever until strawberries were in season again. That was a bummer, a real bummer. What was she thinking about?

*Healing? My leg? Right.*

"Hear me out," she said, pushing his arm aside again. "And stop... just stop with the... the knight shit. I'm fine. You gave me morphine, right? I get it. I get it. My body is fucked, my mind feels like a cloud," she murmured, touching her blood covered and greasy hair with her hands. It was sticky. Were clouds sticky? Cotton candy was, and that was like clouds you could eat. "I need," she started and sighed, then shook her head. "Not strawberries. I need zombies," she laughed, the stern look on Logan's face making the whole situation even more funny. It was hard to calm down, but she did it anyway. "Youknowit'sfunnybecause ththey eat brains. But now I need to eat their brains."

Logan raised his brows, grabbed her arm, and pulled her over towards the massive dead creature.

*Blood. Right.*

He helped her down towards the creature's neck, pulling at the axe but not quite managing to get it out.

"Lodged deep, huh?" she asked, sitting next to him. "Need a strong man to help you out?"

"If you don't move your leg, then yes," Logan said.

Kate smiled. A bright smile, she could tell. Helping out the big strong man, yeah, that was fun. She grabbed the handle near the blade, held her hand against the absolutely enormous skull of the dead creature, and tore out the lodged weapon with a slow pull. She grinned, letting the thing fall to the ground. "Now who can't be a firefighter?"

“Drink the blood,” Logan said.

“Oh,” she said with utter surprise. “That’s a good idea, Logan. I can heal with that,” she said, the thought leaving her happy. She turned to the large wound where blood now dripped out and started drinking. It tasted pretty vile but she’d had worse. At least she thought she’d had. She could also taste the life in there, the energy that it returned to her body. A strange feeling, like a good night’s rest but in a thick smoothie that tasted like iron. Maybe some strawberries would improve it after all.

Slowly, her head started to clear. She felt tired to the bone. A sigh left her, the smile no longer on her face as she reached out to Logan. “Help me up.”

He did.

“Your sword,” she said, closing her eyes for a short moment before she felt the handle set into her hand. “Think you can turn that thing around a bit more?”

“You want its heart?” Logan asked.

“Yeah,” Kate said and watched him grab on and push with a groan, slipping once before he stabilized himself and turned around the large creature. “You’re getting stronger too,” she said with a slight smile.

He sighed and pointed at its exposed belly. “Yeah.”

Kate walked up to it. Her leg felt sore, which was wrong. Logan had given her morphine. She was not supposed to feel any of this, but she did anyway. *Vitality? Healing? The blood I’m drinking?* Either way, she had to make the best of it. That she knew. Before the drug’s effects were gone entirely. She cut down, the blade digging deep into the thick skin of the large undead creature. Sure, she wasn’t cutting through the scales but she was still surprised at how easy it all felt, as if she was gutting a small fish with a kitchen knife. She jammed in her axe as well and pulled the monster’s chest open, exposing the organs within. “There it is,” she said and nodded.

“You want me to go in there?” Logan asked with a sigh.

Kate rolled her eyes. “Just hold these,” she said, waiting until he took over the weapons before she quite literally stepped into the dead creature’s chest. “Don’t mind if I do,” she murmured, trying to ignore the overwhelming scents of iron, sour acids, and rot. *Why do they all have to be undead.*

“What kind of viruses do you think this shit is giving me?” she murmured, having cut out the massive heart as big as her head before she raised it up, feeling the blood sloshing inside. Turning it to the side, she opened her mouth and drank deeply, nearly retching but the warmth of life itself returning back to her overwhelmed the taste itself. It was necessary, she could feel it with all that she was, even though everything in her past told her that she was probably going insane.

She sighed, closing her eyes as she felt the warm energy radiating from her leg, her shoulders, her back. “God, I needed that.” She glanced up at Logan in a slight panic, embarrassed for a split second before she narrowed her eyes. “You better keep that to yourself.”

She could see a twinkle in his eyes, cracks showing on his stoic front.

“What was better? The morphine or the blood?” he asked, his tone entirely dry, a normal question for sure.

“The blood,” Kate said immediately. “Opiates feel wrong, like a blanket of lies. This,” she said and looked at the heart. “This feels right, as strange as that is.” She felt vulnerable saying it. Kate knew

it wasn't just the drinking of blood that felt right. It was everything. The fighting, the killing, the anger, the danger, all of it. She had sometimes felt similarly but never quite at this height, never quite for so long. She touched her leg and felt skin below the bandages. Fresh skin she had just conjured up by drinking blood. She should've died just now, should've died ten times over since this whole thing started but she was still here, getting more resilient if anything.

"I know what it feels like," Logan said, his voice soft, quiet.

She looked up at him, from within the dead creature's chest cavity. His armor was blood covered from all the battles they had fought. There were dents and scratches.

"Just try to stay focused," he said. "Remember why we're here."

Kate took in a shuddering breath. The carnage around her no longer felt comforting and familiar. It felt disgusting. She felt disgusting. Greasy, sore, and tired.

"Sorry, I just..." Kate murmured, then saw Logan reaching down his hand, the gash closing a little when he let go of her axe.

"Don't be sorry. You survived," he said. "Don't suppress what you feel. If you want to charge into battle like a bloodthirsty monster, do that, but do it by choice."

Kate grabbed his hand. She smiled and collected her axe, then stepped down, carefully putting some weight on her leg. It was still a little fucked but much better. She wanted to acknowledge his words but the first thing that came to her mind was a joke. This time, it didn't feel right. "Thanks," she said. She opened her mouth, then closed it. "All of this. It's new. It feels right and wrong at the same time." She looked at the large carcass.

"Terrifying, isn't it?" he asked.

She glanced up at him as he descended down from the large creature.

"I tried to run away," he said and paused, then shook his head. "Tried to run away from that feeling. Tried to drown it, mask it." He pushed some air out of his nose. "A blanket of lies. I like that. It's there. It's terrifying, and I had to face it. Have to face it. Every time."

"Doesn't get easier, does it?"

He shook his head, then considered. "Easier to ignore it all, to drown it out, disconnect. But it's there, it's there, somewhere deep, and it leaves its toll either way. If you face it or not, but either way, I want to make that choice myself."

Kate nodded.

"I trust you," Logan said. "And if you need to talk, I'm here. We're in this together," he said and grabbed her shoulder.

Kate nodded and grabbed his. "Right back at you, big man." Her voice cracked a tiny bit.

He looked away, then took in a shuddering breath and walked a few steps. "Right. Didn't plan to get emotional today."

Kate grunted.

"Feels harder than killing this thing," he said. "It is easier with monsters, I gotta say. At least there's no guilt."

Kate didn't say anything to that but she walked up to him and touched his hand, then tapped his armored chest. "See if we can rip out some of those scales for Allison? She'd be pissed if we don't bring some of them back. And after that, we can find a few more undead to heal me back up. Sound good?"

"You just want a new set of armor," he said.

"That too. It tore right through my pants," she said, in an almost whimsical tone, surprising herself slightly. *How many levels do you think this fight will give us? Was that what he said to Grey? Before he died?*

Kate sighed, thinking back to the moment when she dangled in the air with her twisted leg between the creature's jaws. She shuddered and shook her head. *Fucked up.*

"Let's get to work then. Might be able to check out the city as well, if you feel up for that," Logan said.

Kate unsheathed one of her combat knives and stepped over to the large monster. The monster they had killed together. *He did most of the work this time but at least I was a prime distraction.*

She felt good and found herself almost wanting to whistle. Was it still the morphine? It didn't feel that way. Her head felt clear, except for the level up messages blinking in the corner of her vision.

Kate touched one of the large scales and pulled, angling her knife before she pushed it into the skin below.

*We're still alive, Grey. And every day, we're getting better at this.*