

## Chapter 43 Snow

“It’s snowing,” Ethan said as he stepped up to Kate.

“It’s early, isn’t it?” Grey said.

“Very,” Kate answered. “We should keep moving. Wyverns?”

“Both sky and ground are clear. For now,” Logan said. “Let’s move.”

Kate felt the cold flakes landing on her face and in her hair. *Winter is supposed to be months away.* She focused. *Do what you can do.* She pulled, the trailer soon standing in front of the farmhouse before the group started to fill it up with jars, cans, pillows, blankets, dried fruit, spirits, a few kitchen appliances, and the bags they had filled up in Kahrsdorf.

The sky had darkened considerably by the time they were done, a cold wind moving through the valley. Grey and Ethan had donned winter hats but Kate found the temperatures manageable. Similar to her realization during their return from the cavern, she felt the cold simply affected her less than it should have.

*Strange weather, and strange magic.*

She still donned a hat, knowing that extended exposure could change things fast.

“Should we wait out the snow?” Grey asked.

“We’ve left the others alone for long enough,” Kate said.

“Agreed. And if this gets worse, we don’t want to be stuck here,” Logan said.

They left at nightfall, all of them wearing second layers and winter hats, none of them wearing gloves, to make sure they could still wield their weapons and magic without issue.

Having plotted out the route beforehand, Kate pulled the packed and tarp covered trailer through the mud and the thin layer of snow on the ground, more still falling. She was glad for her sturdy boots and clothing, the cold wind not getting through her jacket or pants.

They soon reached the first field, having decided not to use the roads to stay better hidden, both Kate’s strength coupled with the off-road wheels allowing for the maneuver. It would take longer for them to move the trailer but they deemed the slightly more stealthy approach safer.

A few bumps here and there made Kate stumble, the snow interfering with her echo location ability and still she didn’t feel entirely blind, the others holding on to the sides of the trailer and helping her pull.

They soon passed Kahrsdorf, at least according to the time they had traveled. The visibility around them worsened with every passing minute, the winds now so loud and the flakes of snow so dense that neither Kate’s hearing nor her echo location helped much in the weather. She started to feel the cold too, her sole focus now on the ropes she pulled, hoping that any monsters in the surrounding landscape would be as blind as they were.

A hand on her shoulder made her turn. She couldn't see far but found Grey's face, a finger in front of his mouth. She only saw his eyes, the skiing mask and his hat covering the rest.

He moved closer to her ear. "Stop. Quiet. Monsters."

She stopped, seeing barely a meter in front of her by now. Slowly letting go of the ropes as she set down the front part of the trailer, Kate grabbed her hammer and strained her hearing. She tried to listen, Grey gone from her side again as she waited. The snow and wind pushed against her jacket, her cheeks cold as she felt snot drip down from her nose. She felt the muscles in her arms and legs strain, now that she had stopped. *Perseverance*, she raised her brows.

A minute passed, then two. She couldn't hear a thing.

Grey appeared by her side once more. "We can move again."

She gave him a nod, breathed in, and pulled. Kate was glad for his strange magical awareness ability that he had gotten from his subclass. A fight in this weather would've been a nightmare.

The rest of the way back to the truck passed without further interruptions, the group occasionally stopping as Grey went out to scout and check for the road, to make sure they didn't get lost in the blizzard.

Kate heard the snow crunch when her echo location informed her of the gap in the ground before her. *Nearly there*. She turned and pulled the trailer around the large section of destroyed road until she found Lars' truck waiting for them, a thick layer of snow already covering the vehicle as far as she could see. She set down the trailer and rested against the truck.

"How are you holding up?" Logan asked.

"Just need a moment. The cold is manageable," Kate said. She could feel it now, seeping into her.

"I'm fine," Grey said.

"Can I make some fire?" Ethan asked.

"Not if you're not dying," Logan said. "Go into the car and turn it on. Get ready to drive while we hook up the trailer."

Ethan grumbled before he opened the door and got in.

Kate sighed and rolled her shoulders. She felt exhausted, knowing that the time had come to find shelter.

"Think you can take being outside? I'll be on the back too," Logan said.

"Sure. Grey, you're fine?" Kate asked.

"N... not fine, but it's alright," the man replied.

"You go sit next to Ethan," Logan said.

She heard the car rumble to life, the bright headlights illuminating the dense snowfall.

Ethan turned the truck before they attached the trailer.

Kate lifted herself up onto the back of the truck, glad they had taken Lars' car instead of Jon's. Driving through this storm wouldn't be safe with either but she knew which she preferred.

They checked the load, the radio fixed to her jacket coming to life.

“Ready to drive, over,” Ethan’s voice sounded out.

“Ready, over,” Kate spoke into hers, holding onto the truck and looking towards the armored knight sitting opposite her, his broad sword touching the head of her hammer as they drove off into the snow covered night.

She could tell that Ethan drove slowly, the headlights improving their visibility but not by much. Herself and Logan remained silent, the exhaustion of their return coupled with the cold weather weighing on them. She was glad to know they weren’t a long drive away from the castle.

Kate gripped her hammer, ready to fight when the car came to a halt.

“We’re in front of the gate. Can someone open up?” Ethan’s voice came from the radio.

Kate relaxed and put her hammer through the leather strap on her belt. Her hands were cold, damn near frozen. *I should move.*

Kate tapped her radio and spoke into it. “I’ll get it.” Jumping off the back, she moved through the snow until she came up on the wall. Looking up, Kate activated her Reaper Jump, feeling her legs tense up as her arms flailed. She came to a hard stop when she caught herself on the battlements and pulled herself up.

“No injured but we’re cold,” Logan’s voice resounded from her radio, muffled in the storm but audible thanks to Kate’s enhanced hearing.

The radio cracked again and she heard Jon speak this time. “We’re on our way.”

Kate looked over the other side and used her echo location, just barely getting an idea of where the ground was. She couldn’t see it with her eyes but got over the edge and let herself fall, landing with a roll she barely felt before she went towards the gates.

Jon reached her when she had already opened up one of the heavy doors.

“I’m glad to see you. You look cold,” he said, nearly shouting over the winds, himself covered in winter gear as he helped her.

She gave him a nod and stepped aside. “Come on in,” she spoke into the radio, watching the truck pass with the trailer behind.

*We made it back.*

She looked out into the blizzard and shut the right side of the gate, setting in the same wooden bar that had been snapped a few nights prior, its length reduced but still long enough to fit and close the entrance. They hoped no more ogres would try to break through anytime soon.

The winds were less present, now that they were behind the high and thick stone walls of Keilberg Castle. Kate heard the crunching snow below her boots as she walked over to the car, the headlights turning off and the rumbling of the motor gone a moment later.

Melusine rushed through the snowfall and towards the car. “Nobody injured you said?”

“The cold might’ve done some damage but nothing we know as of yet,” Logan said to her.

“We will unload tomorrow. Get inside and get warm,” Jon shouted as he gestured for them to join them.

Kate focused on their surroundings one last time but heard nothing but the strong winds and the crunching of snow below heavy boots and armor, already high enough to reach her calves. She went into the armory, the noise reduced once again when the heavy wooden door shut behind them. It was still cool inside, a few lit candles set onto the former dinner table now on the ground floor of the armory.

Melusine pointed to the couch. “Drop your wet clothes to the floor and sit on the couch, huddle together. Blankets here. Eloise!”

“I’m here!” the girl shouted back as she walked down the stairs, holding four hot water bottles.

Kate got rid of her backpack and jacket. She patted away the snow sticking to her pants and boots before she moved over to the couch and sat down, receiving one of the bottles and instantly feeling the heat it exuded. She smiled when Melusine covered her in a blanket and added a second one right before she moved on to Grey.

Her hands burned as the warmth flooded her. She felt her heart beating. Kate shivered, pulling the blankets closer. Her stomach rumbled.

“Food is on the way,” Eloise said, handing off her last hot water bottle before she stepped over to the table, raising her hand over a pot.

Kate saw faint lines of glowing warm light exude from the girl’s open palm. She closed her eyes, shivering again as she felt the deep rooted cold slowly removed from her body.

*That could’ve ended badly.* And still, she was glad they had decided to move. With how high the snow already stacked atop the battlements, she knew it would’ve been impossible to drive back in the morning.

*The snow.*

*Why is it snowing? And this much?*

She shook her head, focusing back on the now. They made it back, she would have time to think about the storm and the implications. First, she wanted food, and something warm to drink.

Jon handed her a steaming mug in that moment. “Mint tea. Thought you wouldn’t want the caffeine with your late arrival.”

Kate moved the blankets and grabbed the mug, moving it close to her face to both smell it and feel the warmth. She covered herself again in the blankets and sighed, a smile coming to her face. She could hear the others shift and drink, could hear their heartbeats, their breathing. She could hear snoring from above, either Allison or Bert.

The ground floor of the armory was rather cramped now. Wood near the unlit stove, furniture and boxes littering the space near the couch, the table set against the opposite wall just next to the stairwell leading up. It had no windows.

“Did you lock the door?” Jon asked and checked again, moving towards the table and Eloise when he was satisfied.

*The candles aren't bright enough*, Kate thought as she watched the flickering lights, feeling warmer now, and tired. The blankets felt nice. She finished her tea and nearly dozed off when Melusine handed her a plate of steaming chili.

*Nice.*

She shoveled the food in silence, everyone quiet as they ate.

“No injuries and they weren't in the cold long enough for any issues to occur, that or it's part of the Vitality stat,” Melusine said.

“Anything major we should talk about right now? Otherwise I suggest you sleep. We have a guard schedule set up already, excluding the four of you,” Jon said.

“Nothing major. Undead attacking Kahrsdorf. We had to wait on a farm because of wyverns flying above, snow started falling as we left,” Logan reported.

“We should talk about the snow but I don't think there's anything we can really do, so let's do that tomorrow,” Jon added.

Kate felt the warmth of the chili in her stomach. She felt the hot water bottle and shifted it away, snuggling into the blankets before she turned, her back to Grey. Closing her eyes, she fell asleep.

Kate pulled the blankets closer. She felt warm. Pulling the blankets closer, she started hearing everything around her. The snoring right next to her, Eloise carefully cutting something on the table, Jon turning the page of a book as he adjusted himself in the leather armchair Bert liked to sit in. She heard whispered talking and faint music from the first floor. And she heard both the howling winds and river outside. Both were rushing and loud, quickly tuned out as she opened her eyes and sat up.

She stretched and shivered, seeing the hot water bottle on the floor. *Must've gotten rid of that whilst sleeping.*

“Good morning,” she said with a quiet voice, turning to see both Grey and Ethan still on the couch and still asleep.

Jon lowered the book, reading glasses on his nose as he looked at her. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Eloise said without looking up. An assortment of vegetables were laid out before her, likely the last of Bert's stock of perishables.

Kate didn't like the idea of soon no longer having any fresh ingredients in their food. She supposed it was a consequence of this whole monster apocalypse thing. Not the worst one by any stretch of her imagination but it still sucked.

*We'll have to plant it ourselves.*

She raised her brows. *If the snow ever stops falling.*

The thought hadn't occurred to her in the last night but this much snow, this early in the year? There had to be some kind of magical fuckery going on with the weather. And if there was magical fuckery with the weather, then who knew how exactly things would change.

*Please don't be eternal winter.*

She decided not to dwell on the thought. Only time would tell, and she would do what she could either way.

“You could sleep a bit longer if you want,” Jon said. “We’re snowed in.”

“Snowed in?” Kate asked. She took in a deep breath and sighed. “Well now I’m not going to sleep anyway.”

She got up and stretched, seeing Jon get back to his book. Kate found her hammer on the floor next to the couch and sheathed it into the leather strap on her pants. She felt the cool air and put on her jacket. “Aren’t you cold?” she asked Jon.

He showed her one of the hot water bottles and smiled. “Eloise and her magic.”

Kate heard the girl stop her cutting before she continued a second later. She walked past her and towards the stairs. “Thanks, Eloise. I was freezing when we came back.”

The girl glanced back and smiled. “N... no problem. I mean, I’m happy to help... I’m glad to help.”

Kate smiled at her and made her way up the stairs, finding the door into the showcase room closed. It wasn’t locked and she went inside, closing the door again behind her. She found Allison sitting on the one bed they had moved in here, sitting above a bucket full of wyvern bits, one piece in her hand and a small knife in the other.

Her blonde hair was up in a bun, blue eyes fixated on the material she held.

Lanterns and candles were distributed throughout the room, coupled with a few propped up flashlights that shined upwards. A bit of faint light came in through the cracks in the ceiling but nowhere near enough to illuminate the room on its own.

Logan had taken off his armor, the man now sitting against one of the glass cases with a bedroll behind his back. Beside him sat the gun magazines they had gotten from Grenndorf and the ammo boxes as well. He nodded his head along the quiet jazz playing from a bluetooth speaker sitting on a glass case as he filled up the magazines with bullets.

Melusine sat with Celeste and Bert, the old man on a chair as the three of them played a board game sat atop a small coffee table. Kate saw colored marbles and cards.

“Good morning,” she said again.

“Morning!” Celeste shouted before she focused back on the game.

“Morning,” Logan said, Allison grumbling the word as well.

Melusine smiled. “Good morning, Kate. Eloise made coffee a few hours ago,” she said and pointed to the insulated bottle standing beside a set of bowls and kitchenware. “Go ask her to warm it up for you.”

“Thanks. Isn’t it taxing on her mana?”

“We level our skills the more we use them,” Melusine said with a faint smile. “I was disappointed that nobody had at least lost a limb or something last night.”

“Funny,” Kate said. She grabbed the bottle and left again.

Eloise smiled and received it, screwing the lid open before she held her hands towards the opening.

“Any clue how it works?” Kate asked, watching glowing lines appear on the girl’s open palm.

“I can target it somewhat. If I can see or feel what I want to heat up. The range is low but it’s super useful. I like the skill a lot,” Eloise said with a bright smile. “And it’s so cool for cooking. It feels intuitive. It’s already at level four as well.”

Kate grinned. “It will only get better.” She caught herself with the strange thought, watching the girl work her magic. Magic that had not existed just a week prior. Magic that would’ve changed the world if it had existed in the past. And now she was watching Eloise heat up some coffee with the power of her mind. Or the power of her soul, she didn’t know where it came from.

Kate received the bottle, said her thanks, and went back upstairs. She sat down near the board game action and filled the lid of the bottle that doubled as a cup. A moment later, she took her time to smell the coffee, the first sip burning into her throat with its eternal darkness.

She smiled and realized that she felt good. That she felt happy. *When was the last time I had a moment like this? With people I care about?*

*Maybe I just didn’t let it happen, always moving to the next thing.*

She puffed out some air from her nose. *Takes an apocalypse and being snowed in for me to be in the moment.*

Kate imagined the coffee helped too, already itching again to do something productive.