

Chapter 42 Dried Fruit

“Check your levels before you go,” Logan said.

Kate gave him a nod and quickly scanned through the messages.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Goblin Fighter]’

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Orc Warrior]’

...

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Young Bograth]’

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches 2nd lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Vengeful Charge reaches lvl 17’

‘ding’ ‘Blood for the Living reaches lvl 19’

‘ding’ ‘Fury of the Unarmored reaches lvl 19’

‘ding’ ‘Terrifying Presence reaches lvl 7’

‘ding’ ‘Silent Striker reaches lvl 10’

Serenity +1

‘ding’ ‘Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 13’

‘ding’ ‘Echo Location reaches lvl 4’

‘ding’ ‘Echo Location reaches lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Hushed Presence reaches lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Hushed Presence reaches lvl 3’

“No new skills or stats on my end, other than one point in Serenity,” she said.

“I’m at level nine now,” Ethan said. “One away from my support Class... got a dodge skill or something like that. Burning retreat, like your charge thing I guess, but to get away? Leaves a trail of fire too.”

“Slightly problematic,” Logan said.

“I’ll only use it if I have to,” Ethan said and rolled his eyes.

“Did you get something too?” Kate asked, looking at the armored man.

“I did. A shield spell but I don’t want to test it right now as it will use magical energy. I’ll need that to heal. And I got to level ten,” he said.

“What are the options? You got a support Class right?” Grey asked, stepping closer.

“I will read through it. We decide when you’re back. I want to know if this place is clear first,” he said.

“What about you?” Kate asked, looking at Grey.

He smiled. “I got something called minor wind manipulation from my support class.”

“So you’re a mage too?” Ethan asked. “Nice one.”

“I think it’s more for being stealthy, but it’s just at level one, so barely useful,” Grey answered. “Stats into Endurance after all this.” He looked a little embarrassed.

“Same,” Ethan sighed.

“We’ll be back then,” Kate said and nodded to Grey.

She tapped her hammer against the open door leading into the kitchen, listening with Grey a few steps behind and to the side. They checked through every room of the large farming home, finding neither monsters nor corpses. Some of the pictures were on the floor, cuts and dents on some of the walls, and large patches of blood in the upstairs shower and on the stairwell, dried up already.

“Upstairs, second bedroom, clear, over,” she reported through the radio. Stepping back out into the hallway. She looked at the ceiling and the attic entrance, currently shut.

“D... do we have to?” Grey whispered behind her.

“Scared?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“You’ll be less scared next time,” she answered and reached up to hook her hammer into the latch. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Grey said.

There were no monsters in the attic, just a copious amount of dust covered furniture, bags of dried fruit and seeds, bottle racks full of spirits and wines, dusty old coats and blankets, and the odd spider, though none brave or magical enough to bother them.

They reported to Logan and returned soon after. “Should we lock the doors?”

“You kicked it in,” Ethan said. They had put a chair in front of the entrance and had relocated into the spacious living room, Logan leaning against a wall close to the windows, Ethan sitting on the brown couch.

“Right,” Kate said. “Seemed reasonable with the wyverns around.”

“It’s fine,” Logan said. “Lock the backdoor and leave the keys in the lock. We’ll stay here in the kitchen and living room.”

Kate left with Grey before they joined back up with the others.

She found it quiet now, after Kahrsdorf and all the fighting. Now that they had searched the house, with at least some walls between them and the monsters out there, she could feel the tension leaving her body. She sighed and slumped down onto the couch.

“You smell of blood,” Ethan said.

“You smell of fire,” Kate replied.

“I can feel your stare, Grey,” Logan said. “And I’ve made my choice already. The options are Zealot Fighter, a holy magic based warrior that may ignore pain and injuries to focus on offense,” he said and nodded towards Kate. “Blight Heretic is the second option and is described as a gateway into the magics of death and blight. The third option and the one I’ll choose is called Armed Guardian. Heavy armor, weapons, and abilities to support my allies and get the attention of enemies. The specialization stat is Serenity, same as Kate’s support Class.”

Grey opened and closed his mouth.

“Should I take it?” Logan asked.

The younger man looked up, eyes going wide. He focused and was silent for a long moment before he nodded. “Yes. It should be the best balance for the team, and we don’t know enough about blight and death magic to risk it. Not with the situation as it is.”

“Good,” Logan said. He read for a while before he spoke up again. “Two skills. One active to infuse my voice and get the attention of enemies, more efficient against stupider creatures apparently. Makes sense I suppose. And a passive skill that increases my ability to block strikes with either shields or heavy two handed weapons.”

Grey sat down and grabbed his backpack, starting to note things down. “Can you share all the names and specific descriptions as well?”

Logan gave him a long look, then nodded. “Sure.”

Ethan grunted. “Congratulations on the upgrades and all but how long do we want to stay here anyway? I get waiting out the wyverns but there are other monsters out there who could find us.”

“Other monsters who don’t know that we’re here. Other monsters we could alert if we go past them now. But yes, the wyverns are the main concern,” Logan said. “Air support is tricky. We could hope they ignore us in favor of something more exciting, but I think it may be best to wait till sundown.”

“And go past all that in the dark?” Ethan said.

“Either option isn’t great but we know the terrain, most everything up to the car is burnt down, so very little option for anything to hide. Kate can hear anything around us and Grey can feel enemies through the wind, somehow. Objections?” Logan said.

“We’ll be here for a while,” Kate said.

“Plenty of time to look for anything useful,” Logan said. “But let’s rest and eat something first. Anything you found already?”

“Kitchen looked raided but there’s food in the attic,” Grey said. “I can go get it.”

“I’ll come with you,” Logan said.

"I c... can get it myself."

"We should all familiarize ourselves with the environment, in case of a fight here. Ethan, you come join us as well. Kate, take over?" Logan said, pointing at the window.

Kate gave him a nod and stood up, ignoring the groan from Ethan before she grabbed her binoculars. *Food, rest, and waiting.* She sighed, scanning the fields and skies, seeing the flapping yellow wings of the large beasts. *They look so small from here.* She jerked, thinking of the wyvern they had fought, its large eyes and the rows of teeth, the acid it could spew from its mouth. She slowed her breathing. The near panicked instinct she felt was both strange and familiar at the same time. Kate had dealt with plenty of animals in her time, dangerous and not, but there was always the knowledge that humans were at the top of the food-chain.

The familiar aspect of the feeling came due to the elements she'd had experienced. Storms, thunder, fire, and flooding. All things that could make her feel human, she supposed. Not quite small and insignificant, but mortal. And still, they'd had tools and knowledge, and they could work together to overcome most issues, with time and effort.

And now, she was looking at monsters too dangerous to engage. Monsters they didn't know nor understood yet. How smart were they? Did they have a goal besides food and survival? How did they reproduce? If they did so at all. Were they playful? Quick to anger? Could they be domesticated? Or were they being controlled by some outside force or being? All she knew right now was that the wyverns were large and dangerous, and compared to even most bears, she didn't think they feared humans in the slightest.

The others soon returned with a few bags filled with an assortment of cans, jars, and dried fruits.

"No change," Kate said. Just then, she saw one of the wyverns dive down onto a field. It landed and picked down with its large head, though she didn't see at what. She could still see its wings move slightly, the creature likely eating. "One just flew down and killed something, I think. Seems to be eating."

"That settles it then," Logan said.

"If at least the TV would fucking work," Ethan murmured as he opened up a can of olives.

Logan rubbed his hands and sighed. "That hearth looks more and more inviting too, pity for the smoke," he said and grabbed a few of the blankets. "Kate, switch in thirty?"

"Sure," she said. "Can I have some food too?"

Grey came over with one of the bags. "Olives? Dried tomatoes, dried peaches, dried apples? There are some crackers too."

She smiled. "Bit of everything, thanks."

She imagined him as some kind of merchant showing her his wares. "Wish we could take all this with us. They were pretty well stocked."

"As are we," Logan said. "But maybe we can figure something out."

"Any cars here would attract the monsters from half a kilometer away," she said.

"I'm not thinking cars, but you're pretty strong. And this is a farm. If we can find a sturdy tarp or maybe even a small trailer, we could pack it with a lot of stuff. Should look through the sheds and barn as well, for fuel and generators. Bound to be something around."

Kate huffed out some air. “And I’ll be your pack animal. Sure.”

“I’ll help,” Logan said, finally taking off his helmet to eat. His short black hair was greasy, his brow covered in sweat.

“What does that spell do by the way? When you do your little motivational speeches?” Ethan asked between bites.

Logan smiled. “The wording is a bit vague but it essentially just makes you believe in yourself more. And it makes it easier to ignore hardships like pain and exhaustion for a short duration.”

“Like a stimulant?” Kate asked.

“Essentially,” Logan said.

“Magical uppers,” Ethan said and chuckled to himself.

“What is an upper?” Grey asked.

“Not much,” Ethan said.

“I don’t get it,” Grey said.

“He doesn’t appreciate your insanely sophisticated humor, Ethan,” Kate said. “Uppers are drugs meant to make you more active and decrease feelings of fatigue et cetera.”

“Like your coffee,” Ethan said.

Kate smiled but kept her attention on the yard between the various buildings of the farm. The large silo was straight ahead, a thick oak and two small shacks next to it, untouched by the fires. About forty meters away and to the left of the farmhouse was the large barn. Above it and in the distance, Kate saw a few of the yellow winged wyverns.

She soon switched up her place at the window with Logan. Seeing Ethan try and fail to have a nap, she opted to look through some of the books in a nearby shelf but ultimately failed to focus on any literature with all the monsters out there.

“This is annoying. And boring,” Ethan murmured.

“It is,” Kate agreed.

Grey looked into the room and smiled, eyes going to the carpet immediately. “F... found cards.”

“Might as well,” Kate said. “Know any games?”

“Y... yes,” he replied.

She looked at him for a long moment, the awkward reply coupled with his body language reminding her of who he really was. Or who he had been. She could feel her heart beat. A strong pulse, going through her veins. Kate breathed in, realizing she had been clenching her jaw. She relaxed it and leaned back on the couch.

“Should we bet something?” Ethan suggested. “Otherwise it’s boring.”

"I'm not sure money makes sense," Grey said as he joined them and sat down on one of the two armchairs.

"You're right. Food maybe? But we're sharing everything now, I guess," Ethan said.

"First pick!" Grey said, almost lighting up before he looked down. "I mean. First pick."

"What's that mean?" Ethan asked.

"When we find an item... I mean, something cool that we want? Like a sword or something? And if there are several things there, the winner of the game here gets to choose first."

"Sure. Might as well. Just once?" Ethan asked.

Grey nodded. "We can p... play again. Back at the castle. T... there are lots of games from Herbert..." He opened his mouth and closed it again after having said the name.

"Sounds good. I'll play too," Kate said.

"I'll explain the r... rules," Grey said.

The hours flew by as the group continued to play various card games explained by Grey, the lookout position switched out as they watched the Wyverns and other creatures they could see with their binoculars, both from the ground and first floor. They could still spot a few bonfires in the valley, including distant orcs and ogres. In the direction of Falstadt and the Weywater lake to the east, they occasionally spotted groups and single running creatures. Likely undead based on the similar behavior.

The wyverns mainly focused on individual targets or landed where corpses had been left behind but there were some that outright crash-landed into groups of other beings.

When the shadows started to get longer, Logan decided it was time to look through the rest of the farm.

They covered the short distance to the barn with a slow crouched walk, having checked for wyverns in the vicinity. Kate and Logan positioned themselves before the slightly ajar gates before they pushed them open, dim sunlight falling into the large wooden building.

Kate gulped and nearly coughed when she smelled the burnt flesh and hair, not hearing any movement from within the barn, just the heartbeats and breaths of her companions.

Hay bales sat stacked on the right hand wall of the large structure. Farming equipment and a small tractor stood at the back, with animal pens on the left hand side.

At the center of the hall sat an ogre. Dead, eyes entirely gone, its face and chest burnt up. Around it lay corpses of orcs, humans, goblins, and pigs.

Kate was glad they were wearing their masks.

"Inside, and close the gates," Logan said in a quiet tone.

They went inside, Kate flicking on her headlamp when the gates were shut. The windows were small and high up.

“Let’s look for anything useful,” Logan said. “We move as a group, just in case.”

They did just that, methodically moving through the large building. None of the bodies rose up, nor were there any other creatures attacking them, Kate soon relaxing as she started to focus on the various farming tools and gadgets.

“Think you could pull this thing?” Logan said, his hand on a large metal trailer with two wheels at the back. It looked a little broader than even the cargo bed of Lars’ truck and was covered by a black tarp.

The wheels looked sturdy, the tires made for off-road driving.

Kate walked up to it and grabbed the front bit made to be hooked onto the back of a car. She breathed in and tensed her body, then lifted, the steel groaning slightly as she raised the front chunk off the ground.

“Can you keep that up?” Logan asked.

“I think so,” Kate said as she looked down at the lever. She flipped it, seeing the steadying front support shift backwards, the trailer now only supported by her hand and the two wheels at the back. “Yeah. If I can get a good grip, or a harness or something to pull, but then I can’t fight efficiently.”

“We can wrap some rope around it. You’ll be able to let go immediately,” Logan said and held both hands close to his chest, standing in front of the trailer to indicate what he meant.

“Sure, that works,” Kate said. “Can you manage that?”

“I will,” Logan said before he turned to the others. “We’re filling up the trailer.”

Kate got to work as well, the group finding various gardening and farming tools, in addition to two small diesel generators and five canisters of fuel.

“We can fill this thing up with what we found in the attic as well,” Kate said.

“It might get too heavy,” Logan said.

“We can always remove things again,” she said. “And the way back to the truck is mostly flat.”

“Right,” he added. “We’ll need to move the corpses to get this thing out.”

They got to work, Kate pulling two orcs to the side when she noticed the burnt leather pieces on their chests. “Are these bullet holes?” she asked, seeing the small holes. One of the orcs had half his face missing, burns on his arm and chest.

“Same on this one,” Grey said.

“There’s a gun here,” Ethan added, pointing to one of the dead humans.

Kate moved the bodies away and joined him.

“This one had kitchen knives,” Grey said, crouched over another human.

“They fought the monsters here,” Logan said in a whisper, walking up to the gun. A small revolver. “Thirty eight. Out of bullets.”

Ethan opened his eyes wide. “The pens... the strange goo in there,” he said. “They were... it’s the same as the cave.”

Kate looked at him, then to the pens. They had found more corpses in there and burnt flesh mixed with mud. “They were making more orcs?”

“We’re not the only ones fighting back,” Logan said, crouched over one of the bodies. He looked around. “There are very few humans here.”

“You think some of them got away?” Grey asked.

“I hope so,” Logan said in a whisper.

“You’re not taking the gun?” Ethan asked.

“No bullets. Maybe there are some hidden in the farmhouse. But we have weapons already. Maybe someone else can find this place after us. We’re not taking everything from the attic either,” he said, the tone in his voice different than before.

“Another fire mage,” Ethan said and grinned.

“It doesn’t look the same,” Grey said. “Your burns look different.”

Kate agreed but she couldn’t quite figure out what about it was different. *More heat. Less targeted?* She glanced at the ground and walls, the hay bales. *Nothing else burnt up. Not in the slightest. Just the monsters.*

“We leave a note in the living room as well. Come on, let’s move,” Logan said, motioning towards Kate as he grabbed one of the dead ogre’s arms.

She moved up and helped him, the way soon cleared out for her to pull the trailer. She stepped in front of it, wrapping the sturdy rope around her arms a few times before she leaned forward, her fists in front of her chest before she pulled. Kate felt the weight of the large trailer but less than she had expected. She felt the strain on the ropes and heard the wheels on the soft earth ground as she pulled it towards the large double doors.

She stepped away to open the entrance with Logan and to check for both wyverns and monsters in the vicinity. Looking out towards the yard and the oak tree, Kate blinked her eyes at the low hanging sun barely pushing through the gray layer on the horizon.

Flakes were falling from the sky, a few landing on her face. Not ash as she first assumed, but snow.