

Chapter 49 Flames

Kate woke up several times during the night. A few times, she dreamed, with others, she didn't remember. All of it felt disjointed. Fear, grief, anger. She breathed deliberately, opened her sleeping bag when she woke up hot and sweating, and closing it when she woke up shivering.

Not the best sleep she'd had but she hadn't expected as much, glad she had found some sleep in the first place.

Eloise prepared a large pot of porridge for breakfast, honey and jam stirred into the hot dish. She added magic to the bowls served to Logan and Kate.

"Just us?" Kate asked as she received the bowl. She felt exhausted still but not quite as raw as the evening prior.

"Her magic is limited. You and Logan have high physical stats and you fight. You'll need the stamina the most," Jon said.

"Like this, you can have a bonus for around twelve hours per day," Eloise said.

"Or a likely lower one when we go out again," Logan said. "Like the sandwiches we had. To take with us."

Kate gave him a glance and started eating.

- Sweetened Porridge +10 Stamina regeneration. Duration 5 hours.

"This one only lasts five hours and there's no resistance but I don't really know why. I'm sorry," Eloise said.

"You'll figure it out in time," Kate said. "It makes a massive difference anyway, thank you." She could feel her blood pulse, as if the magic in the porridge flowed through her, gave her warmth. By now, she felt her remaining exhaustion was mainly on the mental and emotional side.

She had read through her status updates a few times already, remembering that she had gained three points in her new unique stat from her main Class.

Vigor - Vitality specialization. Reduces your required need for rest. Your heart is strengthened.

Kate wondered how much it already affected her. And if it would work for mental exhaustion as well, or just physical. After everything she had done on the day before, she would've at least expected her muscles to be sore but she hardly felt them.

"Any noises from above?" she asked.

Jon shook his head.

"I'll go check on them when I'm done eating," Kate said.

Logan glanced her way. "I'll join."

They soon got their weapons and gear ready, going up onto the ground floor with headlamps shining the way. The stale smell of blood had changed to one of cleaning products and diesel. They would have to air out the entire armory soon, the cellar luckily large enough to accommodate their

entire group.

Kate couldn't hear a noise from upstairs, gripping her hammer as she went up. She breathed in deeply, turned away her headlamp, and glanced at Logan.

He gave her a nod, one of the orc swords held in his hand, the greatsword not suitable to fight in the stairwell or the cramped room above.

She focused and knocked on the door with her hammer. She listened and did it again, harder this time.

Nothing came from the other side and Kate carefully opened the door.

She found the three bodies unmoving and covered up with cloth. Sighing, she went to check each of them in turn, trying to distance herself emotionally as she looked at their faces. Their skin had paled.

Kate looked at Grey for a long while until she covered his face again, standing up as Logan stepped next to her.

He rested a hand on her shoulder before he let go.

"The pyre?" he asked.

"We should shovel away a trench of snow around the castle," Kate said. "It would likely trap any undead or other monsters coming for the light and smoke."

"That's a lot of snow," Logan said.

"So we better start. One of us shovels, the other stands guard."

The corpses they had left in front of the castle gates remained untouched, Kate and Logan switching up as they shoveled away the high reaching snow. Just like the day before, Kate found the work distracting, her abilities aiding well with the single minded task.

Jon checked in with them from time to time and through their radios, the team otherwise silent as they worked.

The job would've required an entire group to work a day or two to finish, herself and Logan were done by noon. The stamina regeneration buff provided by Eloise's mana infused food helped tremendously with their recovery and continued work.

Jon opened up the gates to let them back inside.

The three of them cleared the battlements of snow as well, the task much easier than the snow trench they had dug below. Neither did they have to clear the watchtowers or wood covered section above the castle gates.

In the early afternoon, they joined the others who had already set up a sizable pyre where the trailer and truck had stood before, the latter moved closer to the gates as well. Kate wondered if it wouldn't have been more efficient for her to just pull the car rather than trying to get it to turn on in the cold weather.

She shivered and sighed, checking her hammer, knives, and the pistol strapped to her belt. The fire

could attract monsters. Wyverns or Undead, or something else that they hadn't seen before.

They had thrown out the other corpses but Kate wouldn't do the same to the bodies of her friends. Yes, they were dead, they would not care anymore. Neither did she consider herself religious or particularly spiritual but what mattered to her were those who remained.

What was the point of fighting and surviving, if they threw the bodies of their friends to the wolves? To be eaten or even turned undead.

The friends who had fought to protect them.

No. They would honor their deaths.

More fights were to come either way. Today, or tomorrow.

Logan and the others checked their gear as well, solemn faces. Survivors all of them. Fighters, all of them.

Allison came out of the armory with a jacket in her hands. Dark yellow scales covered its shoulders, arms, and back, large boiled leather pieces covering the chest and stomach where the scales didn't reach. "It's not my best work," she said and handed it to Kate. "I got my Class. Crafter. This is my first piece." There was no pride in her voice. Sweat covered her brow and her eyes had an intense look to them.

"I'll put it to good use," Kate said and received it, Allison helping her with the knives they had to strap to the new piece of equipment. The added Wyvern and leather pieces made it heavier but it felt sturdy to Kate and her movements were no more restricted than before. She didn't doubt Allison's words about it not being her best work but it was good work nonetheless. Tapping the scales and leather, then checking with one of her knives, she found it more than sturdy.

Kate checked her status and found that there was magic at work too.

Equipment:

Torso: Patchwork Scale Armor [Common]

- Low grade Acid Resistance

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

"As far as I can gauge with one of my new skills, the resistance only applies to the sections covered in wyvern scales, not the whole jacket or your face," Allison said as she watched Kate inspect the piece of equipment.

Kate gave her a nod and waited as the others prepared.

Jon stuffed the lower end of the pyre with paper. It consisted of a large part of their remaining wood supplies, though the cold didn't seem quite as overbearing anymore with their ability to wield magic.

And still, Kate felt bitter as she grit her teeth, knowing how easily Ethan could've set the pyre alight.

Herself and Logan went to get the bodies as soon as everyone was prepared.

Soon after, she set the body of Grey down onto the pyre, the young man still wearing his ripped and bloodied jacket. The same was true for Ethan and she knew neither would have had it any other way.

Kate thought about adding his sword but decided against it. It was a memory for them and just as much a weapon that perhaps one day, someone else could wield.

They kept Bert's shotgun too, the old man set down to burn away in the very castle he had guarded in this late part of his life. She wondered how he would've felt if he had known that he would one day give his life to protect the burg and those within.

Kate grinned to herself. He would probably have been annoyed, grumbling something about their inability to fight, whilst secretly satisfied.

I did want to find out about his life. The stories he had left to tell. And now he's gone.

With a few more stories he experienced before he died.

Kate closed her eyes, feeling herself tear up.

The others were closer now, looking at the bodies, touching their hands or jackets.

Celeste asked confused questions before she started crying, hugged close by Melusine.

That is what you saved. For another day, Kate thought as she looked at Grey, then Ethan. She breathed in a sharp breath and smiled. And I will continue to fight for that. I won't forget what you did. And now you can rest.

She touched each of their hands and stepped back, joining Melusine before she grabbed her hand.

They waited as the others said their goodbyes, whispered or silent.

"They were brave boys, weren't they?" Melusine said.

Kate didn't speak as Jon lit the paper. It took a few tries but soon the fires took hold and spread, fighting against the cold air until they reached the wood and started to consume it.

Kate heard some of the others cry, the crackling of burning wood soon drowning out the sounds.

They stood in the cold for a long while, Kate adding wood to the pyre as time went on. There was no magic that she saw. No sparkles of light that flew away nor any cosmic power that scooped up the souls of the dead. Three men had fought and died. The universe did not care for them and in time, they would be forgotten.

But not now.

Not in this moment.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she watched and remembered.

"Grey," she spoke, her voice shaking as she raised her hammer. "A boy turned warrior."

Logan raised his sword. "Ethan. An annoying piece of shit. So much work and he just didn't want to listen. Suppose, you did in the end. And you fought well."

"Bert, I will guard your castle as you have guarded it," Jon spoke.

"I need a drink," Allison said.

Kate breathed in, smelling burnt wood and fire. She agreed but would not drink in case of monsters.

“We did get a few bottles from the farm. Courtesy of the dead,” she said.

The fire soon settled.

“You should go inside and find those bottles,” Kate said. “I’ll be out for a moment longer.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Logan said.

Melusine whispered something to Jon before they left with Eloise and Celeste.

“You’re not coming?” Allison asked before she looked at the ash. Her brows rose. “The bones. Right.” She sighed and left.

“How do we do this?” Logan asked.

“The old fashioned way,” Kate said and gripped her hammer. “Should we get jars or something for a bit of ash?”

“Yes. We can think about where to scatter them,” Logan said.

They soon joined the others, the group now on the ground floor again, everyone but Celeste with a cup in their hands. It was cold still, each of them covered in blankets.

Kate closed the entrance and secured it with the orc swords. Logan climbed down to the cellar to place the ash containers they had taken from Bert’s home.

Kate joined Allison, Melusine, Eloise, and Celeste on the couch, setting down her hammer before she leaned back and closed her eyes. It smelled of smoke, their clothes permeated by the wood pyre.

Logan came up from the cellar, glanced at the bottle, and then sighed. He walked past the table and sat down on the staircase.

A cracking noise resounded when Jon turned on one of the radios they had, static coming from the small device as he searched through the available frequencies. He looked focused, turning off the radio before he opened one of his notebooks and wrote something down. “Still nothing,” he said. “I will have to figure out if we can send something on our own. Beyond the short range radios we have.”

“Were there no books on that from Herbert’s store?” Logan asked.

Jon shook his head, then sighed. He covered his face with both hands and took in a sharp breath. “The library in Falstadt, maybe. Or from the internet if there is a connection that still works somewhere. And even then, we’ll need equipment too.”

Kate looked at him, then to the group around her. Solemn faces, all of them sitting in the cold armory of the ancient castle. She leaned forward and grabbed her hammer. “Logan, do you feel ready to go out?”

He gave her a long look. Then nodded.

“Already?” Jon asked.

Kate looked at her weapon. “I don’t want to sit here and wait. Another attack could happen at any

time. We know that now.” She raised her head and looked at Jon. “I’d rather choose to fight. On our terms. Logan, where do we start?”

Logan took in a deep breath. His helmet was gone, too dented to still use. His short black hair was greasy, his green eyes focused. “We secure the perimeter. The castle, then go from there. We stay in range of the radios in case the burg itself gets attacked.”

Everyone was quiet for a short while.

“We should prepare,” Logan said.

Eloise stood up. “I will cook another meal before you go,” she said and went down to the hatch.

“I got a skill called identify, to look at magical items. I should have regained enough mana now to use it again,” Allison said and went to the hatch as well.

The red gem we found, Kate remembered. Grey had suggested they don’t try out any magical items in case they were cursed or had other adverse magical effects.

“What’s your level now, Kate?” Logan asked as he checked his rifle.

“Eighteen. I already invested all points into Strength and Endurance,” she said. “Got an upgrade for Blood Frenzy, it now ruptures the insides of enemies, with blood magic I assume. My absorption skill also reached the second stage. It allows me to... drink blood from those I have killed to get life force.”

She heard Jon gulp.

“Fascinating,” Melusine murmured.

Kate informed them about the other upgrades to her skills before she mentioned Aura of Silence. “It says it will remove all sound in the range of half a meter, centered on me. I haven’t tried it out yet.”

“All sound?” Logan asked.

She nodded.

“We will test it out once we’re outside. I also gained three levels in my Paladin Class and new abilities with it. Shroud of Fury increases my damage and infuses my strikes with the same magic I get from Retribution, the one where my sword glows. Sacred magic apparently. It increases my defenses as well but it uses mana. I invested four of my new points into Wisdom to increase how much I can heal and use those abilities. The rest I put into Vitality,” Logan said.

Kate nodded.

“I won’t put too much focus into my magic but I think it should at least be balanced. I’ll be able to heal in case either of us gets injured. And we will get injured,” he said. “I also got my last passive ability. It’s called Meditation. I can apparently sit down and meditate or pray to recover my mana at a faster rate.”

“That would be useful to have for all of us,” Melusine murmured.

Allison came back from the cellar. She held the bone necklace they had taken from one of the goblins. “This is the only one that will be useful. It provides a low grade resistance against fear,” she said and looked between Logan and Kate.

“I don’t think I need that with my abilities,” Kate said.

“I’ll wear it, sure,” Logan said and took the trinket. He put it on and paused for a moment. “Bone Necklace of Courage, common, low grade fear resistance.”

“How does that work, Allison? You said my acid resistance only works where the scales cover me,” Kate said.

“I think it depends on the item type. The necklace is a trinket so the resistance will affect Logan as a whole,” she said. “The red gem has the ability to store a single fire spell but-” she trailed off, then sighed. “The small wooden staff is magical too but I can’t figure out in what way exactly. There are no effects on it but I’ll run a few tests with it later, maybe I can figure something out.”

Kate waited as Logan went to grab more weapons. He handed a rifle to Jon, the man already equipped with a handgun, same as Allison and Melusine.

“You should all be able to use one, so listen,” Logan said to the group as he went over the parts of the weapon again and how to use it.

It wasn’t overly complex in theory and much of what he said was the same as when he had first showed them, though this time it felt different to Kate. These were no longer mere words of warning, they were instructions.

“You’ll only really get a feel for it once you’ve fired it a few times. Kate, you should probably take a rifle with you as well. They have scopes and far better penetration power than our handguns. You can just drop it if any monsters get too close,” Logan said.

Kate ground her teeth but nodded anyway. If they could get a few hits in from a distance, it would be more than worth it, even if she would be a bad shot. At first at least.

Logan tested the radios as they rechecked their packs and prepared to leave.

Eloise brought up two bowls of vegetable stew which provided another six hours of ten additional stamina regeneration.

“We will report every ten to twenty minutes,” Logan said. “Don’t contact us except when absolutely necessary.” He put on a jacket over the bits of armor that still fit, added a winter hat, and got on his pack. Logan checked his handgun, his rifle, and his shotgun, the latter two slung around his shoulder and hanging next to his pack. He wore a belt with more than a few magazines and finally shouldered his greatsword.

“Sure you can even walk with all that?” Allison asked while looking at him.

“The added Strength helps a lot,” Logan said. “And we’ll only get more.”

Kate had her hammer, knives, handgun, her pack, and now the rifle. She didn’t mind the new addition, not planning to hold on to it if they got into a fight. Other than her hammer, she felt that the rest of her gear was disposable.

Logan went to the door and removed the orc swords, then stepped outside.

“Good luck,” Jon said as he looked at Kate.

She just gave him a nod and followed Logan. Glancing back, she saw the others closing up the door once more.

A quick radio check, and they were ready.

Out in the cold once more.

Just her this time, and Logan.

“What’s the plan?” she asked.

“The plan is to find monsters,” Logan said. “And then kill them.”