

Chapter 1 Network unreachable

Autumn winds brushed past yellow leaves, a cool breeze flowing through the Maar valley. The afternoon sun reflected off the distant rivers and creeks, forests of red, brown, and yellow spreading down the slope and up again towards the faraway mountains on the other side of the vale.

Kate sighed, smiling to herself as she relaxed on her favorite bench so far removed from the bustling life of the city. She shivered, taking a sip from her hot canteen, steam rising to her face as she tasted the sweet flavor of black sugarless coffee. The heat and caffeine went straight into her blood as far as she was concerned, her eyes closed as she took a moment to enjoy the taste.

She brushed away the red hair flowing into her face, closing the canteen as she listened to the birds and crickets. Most of the valley would be covered in snow in just a few months, the serene quiet that would descend over the landscape something she very much looked forward to. *Spring is good too*, she thought. *And then autumn. Fuck summer.*

The climb had taken her about three hours, her rented apartment in Keilberg specifically chosen for the surrounding routes and scenery. There were so many rivers, hills, and mountains further up, she'd be busy for years just trying to see it all. Some of the peaks she saw from down here were already covered in snow. She was glad the area wasn't particularly well known among tourists, or her team would have a lot more work on their hands up in the mountains.

Most of the locals at least had reasonable gear, good shoes, and maybe even a first aid kit with them when they walked the more challenging routes. She had an early shift the next day, which meant she wouldn't be going farther than this. Checking her pack, she grabbed the sandwiches she had prepared and started eating.

A flock of birds took flight from a set of trees farther down the valley, their calls traveling far.

Kate watched them fly down towards Falstadt, only a small part of the bordering Weywater lake visible from here, the curve in the valley just managing to hide the city. *Perfectly chosen after all*, she thought, a smirk on her face as she watched the birds. She blinked her eyes, looking down at a butterfly that seemed to have a trail of blue light following its tiny form. Kate tried to focus on the little insect, the blue streak vanishing within a set of trees.

She glanced at the canteen before she rubbed her eyes. *Too much coffee. Too little sleep*, she thought, accounting the phenomenon to some weird trick of the light coupled with neglected bodily needs. *Maybe some kind of rare species?* she wondered, taking out her phone to google shining blue butterflies.

There were plenty of blue butterflies, and some illustrative art depicting fantastic made up creatures. She felt a little weird, seeing as the fantasy ones were the closest to what she had seen. *Really fucking difficult differentiating what's real and what's made up when you have no academic background in butterfly science.*

She tapped on one of the pictures, the background colors incredibly well done. The website didn't load however, a message written in black informing her about an apparent server timeout. She went back and tapped on another one. *This one too*, she thought, checking her connection. Everything seemed in order, but she checked youtube just to be sure. *No connection. Hmm, guess they have an issue with the mobile network.*

Kate put her phone away and finished her sandwiches, another breeze flowing through. She rubbed her hands together, standing up before she packed her things. *Already getting cold*, she thought, deciding to make another stop on the way down, once her body had warmed up again from walking. Shouldering her pack, she turned away from the bench to go back when she heard a loud rumbling noise move through the entire valley.

She thought of a helicopter at first but the sound only got louder, and it wasn't exactly the same. Kate went back up to get a better view, seeing two gray military jets pass the mountain peaks. They were gone in seconds, the sound still thundering through the vicinity as birds took flight.

Training exercise? she wondered, pretty sure she hadn't heard any in the few years she had lived here. Of course she knew the country had them, and the air force would surely find a way to train over the alps of all places, but she assumed they had designated areas to do so. *Can't be good for all the animals.*

She followed the narrow and neglected dirt path down, climbing over shrubberies and branches that tried to reclaim what had been taken by the local populace. When she came out onto a clearing, her eyes narrowed. Kate used her hand to cover her eyes against the sun. "Shit," she cursed, seeing the distant plume of smoke rising from the direction of Keilberg. *Why now?* she thought, changing her course to a more direct approach as she jogged lightly down the mountain side. It wouldn't help anyone if she stumbled and broke her ankle on the way down. But she had to hurry.

She opened her pack and got her phone, dialing the Falstadt fire brigade. A little ironic perhaps, her being one of their employees, but she couldn't exactly take on a fire by herself, with nothing but a bunch of buckets. What she could do, was get people out, and assess the situation. One hand holding the phone to her ear, she turned up the sound, to hear something over her own breathing, her quick steps, and snapping twigs below her heavy boots.

Kate heard the busy signal resound. *That should never happen*, she thought, remembering their phone guy talking about the backup systems and redirects they had implemented. If nobody at the fire brigade picked up, the call would get redirected to the police, then the regional emergency services, and so on.

She kept on jogging, the phone back in her pack that she now secured around both shoulders, tightening the straps for it to not get in the way. She got a hair tie out of her pockets and quickly tamed her hair. *Don't run into a tree*, she thought, slowing down as she reached a steep slope. She slid down, glad to have worn her work pants. When she arrived at the bottom, she saw movement next to a few of the nearby trees.

Kate assumed the noise had startled a deer or rabbit but what she found staring at her was instead a one meter tall green skinned leather armor wearing creature with pointed ears and yellow eyes. She kept on moving, her brain unsure what to do with the information her eyes relayed.

The creature didn't seem quite as confused as she was, pulling back on the bow string of its medieval weapon, an iron tipped arrow whistling past the trees and bushes, only missing the jogging form by a hair's breadth.

Still unsure about what she had seen, Kate switched gears, changing into a full on sprint through the forest. *An arrow?* she realized, a moment later, forcing herself to not run in a straight line, moving past trees and bushes in an angle to avoid the being. *A goblin? Or some child in cosplay shooting a real fucking arrow at me?!*

She yelped when another arrow flew past, the aim far worse this time around. And still it sunk into a nearby tree with a dull thud. *Am I being hunted?* she wondered, coming out of the thicket and onto a dirt road. Kate crouched and looked to both sides, seeing a few small creatures cross the road upwards about a hundred meters away. *Shit.*

One of the creatures bellowed something towards her, the others jumping up and running towards her with small but quick steps.

She didn't wait to find out what exactly they were or what they wanted, instead jumping into the forest ahead and continuing her run. Kate decided to put a lot of questions on hold, instead trusting her instincts and her body to do what her mind still failed to truly process. She was being hunted. The creatures were small, meaning they'd be slower than her. They had bows and arrows, which meant she had to get as many trees behind herself as she could, never running straight down.

A part of her was reminded of the games she used to play when she was a child, running away or hiding from her friends. She laughed, forcing herself to stop a few strides later, the absurdity of the situation slowly catching up with her. For several minutes she ran, unsure of what to do. Reaching Keilberg would take at least an hour. She couldn't exactly run all the way, and sooner or later she'd hit a tree or rock.

Kate forced herself to slow down again, stopping behind a large oak tree before she glanced behind, trying to spot the creatures. *Nothing*, she thought, turning away and pressing her back against the tree as she took hasty breaths, calming herself down. *Need shelter, somewhere to hide. A weapon?*

She smiled at the idea. *What is this? Some kind of fantasy rpg?* she thought and shook her head. There was no time to consider the why or whats. *Priorities.* She checked again to see if she was being followed and continued running, not downwards but along the slope. Kate had spent quite a bit of time in this forest and she knew there was a hunter's hut about a ten minute walk down the road she had just been on. She was pretty sure it wasn't in use anymore or at least not well maintained, which made her hope it wasn't locked.

She slowed down when she saw the silhouette of the hut through the thicket, checking behind herself again before she made sure there weren't any other creatures in the vicinity. When she didn't find anything, she rushed to the hut, grabbed the handle and opened it. She was relieved to find it unlocked. No key was stuck on the other side.

A single table with a few chairs stood in the middle of the small room, two dirty windows letting in faint sunlight from outside. A tiny kitchen with a few utensils stood in one corner, an old bedroll in another. Behind the table she saw a simple oven and a few stacks of firewood. Kate slid down to the ground with her back against the wooden door, her breaths quick as she tried to calm down. She grabbed her phone and tried to call the police. Another busy signal. She tried to check the news on google but nothing loaded.

What the hell is happening?

She slowly stood up and looked around the room, her eyes locking onto a small radio. She checked it quickly, turning it around before she found the on button. A small red light turned on, sound instantly coming from the small boxes.

"... st on all other public radio frequencies. Please remain calm and stay at home. If you are outside, seek shelter. Lock your doors and turn off all lights. We repeat, there have been sightings of wild animals and unknown creatures throughout the Falstadt region. Emergency services and the military are resolving the situation. Do not engage the creatures or any animals under any

circumstances, they are aggressive and dangerous. For further instructions listen at 102.6. This message is being broadcast on all other public radio frequencies. Please remain calm and stay at home. If you are outside, seek shelter. Lock your doors...

Kate could feel her heartbeat increase, her trembling hand turning the a knob on the radio only to find the volume going up. She grabbed the other one and turned, changing the frequency to 102.6 before she checked behind herself.

Aggressive and dangerous. Throughout the Falstadt region? We're nowhere near the city!

She opened all the cupboards and drawers, finding old cutlery, a few plates, mugs, towels, and a lousy first aid kit. *Outside, there was a box*, she thought, ignoring the talking people on the radio for now as she made the thing more quiet, opening the door slowly to check if the creatures had followed. Kate rushed out quickly and found a toolbox sitting on the ground at the side of the hut. It had a combination lock.

"Fuck," she cursed, looking around to see if she could find anything useful. A large rock was the closest thing she could find. She grabbed the thing and started smashing it against the lock. Both the chest and the lock looked incredibly old, which made her hope this attempt would work. She had gotten stronger looking things open with less brute force. Small locks like these were often made as a deterrent more so than to actually withstand a determined break in.

With the tenth strike, the thing broke, not the combination lock but the hinge itself. She threw the rock aside and opened the box, finding a large set of gardening shears, a simple hammer, a pair of old boots, and a crowbar. She took the crowbar, the weighty steel in her hands something to cling to in the chaos of her mind.

Back inside, she put the crowbar aside and started shoving the wooden table against the entrance. Sitting down in one of the corners and away from the windows, she held her improvised weapon and the radio, sipping some hot coffee from her canteen as she made the radio louder again.

"... beasts the likes of trolls and dragons. It's unclear what has caused the sudden appearance of these monsters but they're here and they are hostile. Conventional weaponry is effective, so if you have any guns or know someone who might own a firearm, it may be advised to seek them out. However for now it's best to remain home behind locked doors and wait until the military has brought more clarity to the situation. We are informed that the event is not a local occurrence only, the neighboring countries dealing with similar inexplicable appearances. Mobile towers and network infrastructure has been damaged, such devices not guaranteed to work. Under any circumstance, do not panic. Do what you can to prepare. Many of the monsters have been seen wielding medieval weaponry. To protect yourself and the people close to you, layer clothing, preferably winter clothes with padding. Ski helmets, and sticks may be helpful too if you have any..."

The connection broke off, the small light on the radio flashing.

Kate checked the batteries before she simply turned it off. She had heard enough. *In the neighboring countries too? This isn't some random event. This is the bloody fucking day of reckoning.*

She started giggling to herself, bursting out in laughter as she clutched the crowbar. Laughing was how she sometimes reacted in incredibly high stress situations. Her team knew about it and they all had their own ways of dealing with things. The brain was a curious thing after all but Kate didn't

think it particularly weird. Sometimes the world was just so fucked up, all you could do was laugh straight back.

Medieval fantasy creatures. I did see that butterfly. Which means those little buggers were goblins or something. At least I didn't run into a dragon right at the start of this thing.

She didn't know how extensive this was but if there were monsters near Keilberg, there were monsters fucking everywhere. All emergency lines were fucked, the internet was down, and the radio broadcast was doing damage control. If the state warned people about going outside, the situation wasn't enormously promising.

Leaving the hut was a gamble. But she could imagine the little buggers armed with bows had some ability in tracking and hunting. She could make a run for it and go to Keilberg, but there was smoke rising from there already. She could imagine that any settlements would be targeted first, if the creatures were attacking humans. And according to both her own experience and the radio broadcast, they very much were. If the military was fighting back, they'd clear out Keilberg last, if at all.

Any medieval technology monster should get absolutely destroyed by modern weaponry though, she thought, hoping her assumption was right. The butterfly looked pretty magical now that she thought about it, and as soon as magic entered the playing field, the rules changed entirely.

She took in a deep breath and slowly stood up, looking out the windows and checking the glass. She assumed they could take an arrow or two before breaking, but she had no real reference. Again, she searched through the drawers, her crowbar always close by. There were a few old cans of beans and ravioli, expired but likely still edible. She put them into her backpack, adding some of the cutlery. She grabbed the first aid kit too. The one she already had with her was more modern and definitely more sterile but she didn't know how long she would be stuck out here and she could use whatever she could find.

Should get the hammer and shears too, she thought. *What a ridiculous fucking day.*

Kate found a set of batteries, sitting back down before she switched them out with the ones in the radio. The frequency she had listened on only sent static. She turned to another and the same initial broadcast resumed. *Not promising,* she thought. *I hope you made it, radio man.*

She turned it off and put it into her pack as well, quickly dialing a few of her friends' numbers, trying to call her dad as well, none of the calls going through. For now she was glad he was on vacation and not in Falstadt. Her eyes went to the small stand next to the door, old brochures showing the nearby mountains. *Non digital maps would be useful,* she thought, grabbing all of them and putting them into her pack before she paused, looking at the picture of a place she had visited years ago. A castle overlooking a glistening river with a horrifically designed lettering inviting tourists to Keilberg castle.

Kate nearly jumped when something impacted and shattered the window to her left. She went into the corner near the door and clutched her bar of solid steel, still looking at the brochure depicting the stone walls of the decrepit old castle. *Medieval problems... require medieval solutions.*

She heard an unfamiliar language from outside, malicious laughter of hunters who had just cornered their prey. Kate grit her teeth and stared at the steel in her hands before she dropped the marketing material. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

Chapter 2 Human

Another arrow came through the window, more hitting the wooden wall.

I get it, I get it, Kate thought, her hands shaking despite her firm grip on the crowbar. She had been in plenty of dangerous situations, but none of her training or experiences could have prepared her for this moment. The occasional games she had played a few years back were the closest thing really.

“It’s self defense...” she muttered to herself. *They’re monsters. They’re monsters. Focus on that. You can think of the consequences later. For now, you have to survive. Whatever they are, they’re trying to kill you.*

The door rattled, the table pushed back slightly.

“I’m a living, thinking being you pieces of shit! Fuck off!” she shouted. Kate knew the sound would give away her position, but right now she simply didn’t care. A small part of her knew she had to try, knowing what would follow.

The creatures didn’t stop, hitting the door as another arrow whistled in through the open window.

Kate locked eyes with one of the beings when the door was pushed back further, a small blade in its hand as it looked at her with a grin, sharp teeth showing in its mouth.

It’s so small, she thought, focusing as much as she could. *They have bows. Why are they pushing inside? They should just wait for me to come out and shoot me.*

Her eyes opened wide. She realized how confident the creatures were in their hunt, even now two of them pushing against the door, barely able to move the table. *Monsters. They’re monsters. Actual, real life goblins. Fuck.*

And if they realize how dangerous a human is, they’ll wait me out or set this hut ablaze.

She tightened the straps of her backpack and gripped her crowbar. *Forget it all. Don’t think*, she thought, preparing herself much like she did whenever she rushed into the flames. Her boot came to rest on the side of the rattling door, and then she pushed.

The table slid away, the door opening with two of the small green creatures falling forward.

Kate hesitated for just a moment, her body tensing as she brought down the crowbar. She had trained to use an axe to both cut down doors and other obstacles, but she had never thought that she’d ever seriously attack a living creature. A dull sound came from the impact, the goblin going down with its eyes rolling back. The second one looked up, its smile turning to confusion as it looked at the much larger human, its head ripping to the side when the heavy chunk of steel hit it with enough force to send it flying.

Kate didn’t look back, running out of the hut in a zigzag, finding two more goblins staring at her, one more to the side with a bow. An arrow whistled past as she stepped sideways, reaching the small creature with three steps before her knee slammed into its chest.

The being was flung backwards, its companions rushing her with their small blades.

Kate used her weapon to keep them at a distance, stepping over to the downed and wheezing goblin before she brought the iron down, imagining a log she would split for firewood. Or a tent peg to slam down into the ground.

Something bit into her leg, Kate swinging her crowbar behind herself as she turned, the force sending the goblin stumbling before her next hit connected with its overly large head. Teeth were flung to the side as blood splattered onto grass. She swung again, the wet impact silencing the groaning creature.

Kate stared at the last one with wide eyes, an arrow released before it struck her leg. Adrenaline and panic pushed her forward. *I'm killing these creatures*, something in her mind realized, a scream resounding as she tackled the creature, her metal bar slamming down into the struggling being, its movements stopping after the third hit. The screaming lasted until Kate noticed the wet sound of her weapon impacting the bits and pieces of torn flesh that remained of the goblin's head.

She looked down and stumbled back, doubling over before she puked up her sandwiches and coffee. Her left leg hurt. She looked around and walked away, limping on the leg without an arrow sticking out of its thigh and a cut on her calf. *You killed them. You... why did you scream, you idiot. Everyone heard that. Everyone!* she thought, her mind swimming as she brushed tears from her eyes.

Kate faintly noticed distant sounds of fireworks and screams much like the one she had just heard so very close by. *That was you*, she reminded herself, stumbling down the slope and back into the forest. She stopped a few meters into the underbrush behind the remains of a fallen tree, crouching down as she got her pack. *Wounds*, she thought and got out her first aid kit.

She fiddled with the opening latch before it sprung open, all the contents luckily strapped down to prevent them from spilling out. Finally, she looked at her leg, seeing an actual real life arrow sticking out of it. *Like some kind of larping accident*, she thought to herself, and ripped open her pants a little more to see the wound. Blood had already seeped into the fabric. *Artery and I'm dead*, she thought, feeling herself getting lightheaded. *Just leave it in.*

Infection will fuck me too, she thought, and checked the wound. There was blood, yes, but she didn't think it had hit anything major. She knew what that looked like. Kate grabbed a nearby branch and bit down on it. She closed her eyes while stabilizing the wooden stick as best she could, focusing before she broke off the part of the arrow sticking out. She winced, making as little noise as possible. More blood flowed out before she pressed a bandage onto the wound and around the remaining piece of the arrow. She groaned in pain, using one hand to look for the disinfection spray. *Don't pass out now, Kate.*

Sitting as still as possible, she cleaned away all the blood she could manage before she liberally sprayed the area with the antibacterial mixture. Another layer of pain. She pressed down a second, clean bandage, wrapping it around her leg and the arrow before she pulled hard. Screaming into her branch as the wood partially gave in against her teeth, she wrapped her leg once more. Kate made a practiced knot, nearly passing out with her eyes going black for a second before she came to once more.

She carefully moved her leg to check the cut on her calf. It was deep, but had missed any major blood vessels. She doused it with the spray too, trying a few times until she got the angle right without moving her leg too much.

God, what a shit day, she thought with a sigh and spat out the piece of mangled wood. She noticed the earthy taste, glad her mind bothered to inform her about it. She might actually survive this. And then the world turned black.

Kate woke up with a sore throat. She coughed a few times before she winced, the pain from her calf reminding her of what had happened. It was evening, she noticed, the sunlight only faint. She didn't know if a full day had passed or only a few hours.

Meds, she thought and checked the first aid kit again. *Ibuprofen... blood thinner. Fuck. Should I? The pain will be distracting, and I don't think it will get better anytime soon.*

She decided the risk was worth it and downed two pills, gulping before she grabbed a sealing band aid. She sprayed the wound on her calf once more and covered it. Most of the pain remained but at least she didn't feel like she was going to die any moment now.

I fought. And killed, she thought, gulping as she shoved the memories away. Instead she checked her pack, finding a bloodied bandage spread on the ground. The canteen was there, the smell of incredibly strong coffee waking her from her doused and pained state. She took a sip and found it still warm. *Same day*, she thought, just now noticing something in the corner of her vision. She focused on it and found it expanding. Letters, written in English, inside of her eyes like some kind of digital lenses.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Scout]

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Scout]

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Scout]

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Scout]

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Scout]

What

The

Fuck

This isn't like some kind of rpg, it literally fucking is one, she thought, resting her head against the fallen tree behind her. *What kind of wicked shitehead of a Norse god thought up this masterpiece of misery?* she asked herself, checking if she could summon a fireball or lightning. Her hand remained painfully covered in dried blood. Her own blood, perhaps some from the goblins.

She wiped them off on the grass and checked her phone. No new messages or calls, still a connection but nothing loaded and another quick call brought her only the same lack of answer. Her weapon lay bloodied next to her, Kate grabbing the chunk of steel just in case. She sighed, lifting herself up a little with a moan before she glanced towards the hut. There was no movement. Nor were there any unusual noises.

Should I check the radio again? she wondered, deciding to do so later, just in case the sound would attract more monsters. *Monsters. Actual fucking monsters here to kill me.*

Her stomach grumbled. *There's too much going on*, she thought. What had happened to her friends, her dad? What had happened to the world? What did the messages in her vision mean? Was she a murderer now? Were there more creatures hunting for her?

She slapped herself, the movement straining her leg as she hissed at the pain. *The castle*, she thought, focusing on that goal only. The longer she stayed here, the more dangerous it would become. Blood and corpses would attract predators, or worse. She packed her bag, taking the bloodied bandage with her too before she forced herself to stand up. It hurt, but that just meant the nerves were still there and working as intended.

Kate put on her backpack and grabbed her bloodied crowbar. *If anything hunts by smell, I'll be a bloody beacon.*

She grinned to herself before she winced again at the pain. The next few minutes, she searched the surrounding bit of forest for a suitable branch, finding one with a helpful angled top. Not exactly a professional crutch but it would help take some weight off her injured leg.

Kate bit down on another piece of wood, noticing the noises she made with each step. It would help her keep a grip against the pain. She knew where the castle was located, about a two hour walk southeast, a little higher up the slope and closer to the Willow river.

She walked slowly, staying off the dirt road and making as little noise as possible. Her injuries forced her to go slow, any additional fight she'd get involved in now far more dangerous and more than likely to be her last.

The sunlight sent long shadows onto the leaves covered ground, Kate struggling to move without producing noise from both her own pained groans and the twigs and leaves rustling below her boots.

She didn't encounter another creature for about half an hour, the occasional distant gunshot echoing through the valley, Kate unable to determine how far away the shooters were located. The frequency made her worry. A military unit would surely fire more regularly. *Where are the tanks and jets?* she wondered, freezing up and hiding as best she could when she saw a moving figure walking through the bushes ahead of her.

Kate sighed when she realized it was a man, medium length black hair falling onto a hoodie of the same color, something colorful depicted on its front. He seemed young, probably in his teens. She was about to call out when she hesitated, seeing the weapon he held in his hand.

Is that. A fucking katana?

The man glanced around, his eyes wide as he turned around and held the blade up with shaking hands, a random noise having startled him.

"Stay calm," Kate said finally. "I'm human. Are you from around here? Keilberg or Falstadt?" she asked, hoping to calm him down with the familiar names. It was a risk but she was damn glad to have found another human.

The man now turned towards her, finally noticing the two brown eyes staring back at him. He took a step back, his blade still raised. "W... who are you?"

"I'm Kate, from Keilberg. I'm a firefighter who worked in Falstadt, was out wandering when this thing started, whatever it is," she said, stepping out of the bush but keeping a healthy distance from his weapon. "Can you take that thing down?"

He hesitated for a moment but obliged. "This... is not... this isn't at all what I thought it'd be," he said, sobbing once.

“What’s your name? And why the ka...” she said, now seeing the gundam depicted on his hoodie. “I see,” she said. *At least it’s not some enormously voluminous anime girl.*

“I’m... Grey,” he said. “I...” he stuttered and looked at the katana, moving it away slightly as he stared at the ground.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s good that you have a weapon. I have my own, see,” Kate said and showed him the crowbar.

He looked up before his eyes opened wide. “Is that... blood?”

She hissed. “Quiet it down. We don’t want to attract any of the monsters.”

“Wait... y... you’re... injured,” he said.

“Oh no! Where?” she asked, her eyes wide open.

“Your leg,” he said in a quieter tone.

“Ah yes, I nearly didn’t notice the horrific fucking pain and blood loss. Thanks for pointing that out, Grey. Do you have a plan? Because if not, then you should come with me. There’s a castle this way, maybe we can get there before nightfall,” she said quickly, checking around them to see if any goblins had sneaked up on them. “And keep moving, the goblins had bows.”

“G... goblins?” he asked, gulping.

“So you don’t have a plan?” Kate asked, walking past him while gritting her teeth.

He shook his head slightly.

“Then come with me. Better chance to survive if we work together,” she said.

Grey followed without another word, keeping a few meters distance between them. “You’re from... here... a... aren’t you?”

“I told you, I live in Keilberg,” she said in a whisper.

“I’m from Falstadt,” he said quietly. “So it’s not an isekai,” he whispered to himself.

Kate glanced back but continued onward. “What do you mean?” she asked. “Do you have an idea of what’s happening?”

His eyes opened wide as he moved his hands into a defensive gesture, nearly stabbing a close by tree with the weapon. “I... there... stories. About... it’s fantasy,” he got out before he looked to the ground.

“Fantasy stories? I was more thinking of an rpg myself, but I’m not super versed in all that anymore,” Kate said. “There were messages before... in my eyes, as if it’s some kind of HUD.”

His eyes lit up a little. “Yes!” he said and forced himself to continue in a whisper. “Yes... in isekai people are transported into a fantasy world where they often get stats and rpg like elements, like skills and magic. What are your stats? Did you get anything else yet?”

“What do you mean stats? Like strength and intelligence?” Kate asked.

“You have to focus on your own person, I figured it out when I thought of my own name,” Grey said.

Kate tried. After her day, she wouldn’t think anything ridiculous anymore.

Kate Lindgren

Class: None

Status:

Vitality: 10

Endurance: 12

Strength: 9

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

“Awesome. Mostly hovering around ten. That Intelligence score is insulting,” she murmured. *And I’m clearly wearing clothes.*

“That’s good, I think,” he said. “Mine are seven vit, six end, seven str, eleven dex, nine int, and six wis.”

“You’re pretty comfortable with this whole thing, hmm?” Kate asked, avoiding the road as she continued to check for monsters.

“I... eh... I read and watch... stories with this... stuff,” he murmured. “D... do you... want the... sword?”

Kate glanced back. “No. I’d just hurt myself. You trained with it?”

He turned a little red. “Y... yes... b... but only... with youtube tutorials... and stuff,” he said, trailing off.

“Good, then you’re the best one we have to wield that weapon,” Kate said with a smile. “Just remember that there are monsters. If they try to kill you, go for it, or at least don’t get in the way. That acceptable?”

“Of c... yes,” he said quickly.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, Kate checking the road to both sides before she gestured to Grey. “We cross as fast as possible,” she whispered, hopping over with her injuries before they hid again on the other side. *Nothing moving*, she thought, waiting for about half a minute before she gestured to her blade wielding companion. “Up here, and then we circle back to the castle.”

She paused a little further up, carefully leaning her side against a tree, panting at the exertion. Grey seemed worse off but powered through. “Anything in your stories that could help us here?” she asked.

“I don’t... I don’t know. They’re all... a little different. It seems like... an apocalypse with some kind of game system,” he said.

“Apocalypse doesn’t sound good,” Kate mused, the radio messages sadly suggesting he wasn’t entirely wrong.

“No... b... but we have the system. Stats... w... which means...” he said, trailing off.

“There’s levels and stuff to gain. Magic to help fight whatever these creatures are,” she surmised. *But if all these stories are different, we’ll have to figure out most of it ourselves.*

Kate Lindgren

Class: None

Status:

Vitality: 10

Endurance: 12

Strength: 9

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 3 Persevere

“Any idea why my clothes don’t count as torso and legs things?” Kate asked her well read traveling companion.

“They probably need to be magical. Did y... you... kill... something?” he asked.

Kate gulped, nodding lightly.

“M... maybe... they had something,” he suggested.

She chuckled to herself and continued walking. “Sure, maybe. Didn’t think about that in my delirious state of blood loss. You kill anything yet?” she asked, more accusing than anything. His blade was still clean.

He shook his head, avoiding eye contact.

“Sorry,” she said after a few more minutes had passed. “A lot... to process.”

“Sure,” he said, his voice quiet.

Kate winced when she slipped on a loose stone, catching herself as her hand automatically went to the bandage on her leg. She cursed in a hissing tone.

“A... are you okay?” Grey asked in a careful tone, leaning away from her a little as he clutched his sword.

Are you fucking blind, she thought, gritting her teeth as she sighed. “Let’s just get to the castle. I need to lie down,” she said in a near hissing whisper, the stress and pain getting to her. *Or we’re going to get killed by even more monsters. Who knows, maybe they even came from the castle.*

The forest opened up a little by now, the slope far less steep than before. Brown leaves rustled in the wind and under their boots, crickets and birds occasionally calling out. “We should be getting close,” Kate whispered, the trees casting longer shadows by the minute. If she wanted one thing out of this day, then it was not spending the night outside. Keeping watch with two people was not something she was looking forward to either way, but to trust a random boy she met in the woods to stay awake was more than just a stretch.

Kate hoped the castle was empty, abandoned, its gates unlocked. They could surely find a cellar where they could hide. She started to question her sense of direction a few hundred meters later when she finally spotted the battlements through the thicket, flowing water audible in the distance. They had made it with the last half hour of sunlight.

She leaned against a nearby tree, giving herself a minute to take a breather. The pain remained constant, her leg throbbing but at least only from her thigh. *Burns are worse*, she thought, the knowledge not doing much in form of consolation. Pain was pain after all.

“Is that it?” Grey asked in a soft tone, keeping his distance from her and trying to stay hidden.

Kate glanced over. “No, we’re looking for the next castle three streets down the road. Their breakfast offers are...,” she said and trailed off, gritting her teeth. *The situation is dire*, she thought. *If I can’t even finish my dry remarks.*

Her companion remained silent, neither confused nor appreciative of her humor.

The situation perhaps demanded a more serious outlook but as far as Kate was concerned, she'd have stand up comedians at her own funeral.

She felt something touch her arm and looked up to find Grey much closer, a concerned look on his face.

"Y... you... c... you didn't respond," he stuttered out.

Kate rubbed her eyes, the edge of her vision a little blurry. "Let's go," she said, carefully taking one step after the other until they reached the tree line about fifteen meters away from the simple castle. She could see a car, parked in front of the high reaching old stone wall. One of the two heavy wooden gate was slightly ajar, noises coming from within. "Someth-" she started when a high pitched scream resounded from ahead.

A *kid*, she thought and ran, her teeth gritted as adrenaline took over, each step sending throbbing pain to her head. She wedged her shoulder between the two large gates and pushed them open until she could squeeze through, finding herself on a cobbled stone yard with a small run-down ticket shack on the left, followed by a small but more modern two story house with blue painted walls and a tiled roof, the wooden entrance door slightly ajar.

Past the modern house was a block-like building made of large and somewhat ill-fitting stone bricks, the wooden door thick and bulky, no windows set within the walls. On the right side of the yard, she saw a long two story building made with the same stone blocks, reminding her of military barracks, two guard towers set against each end of the structure, topped with wooden roofs. She saw a single gnarled tree at the end of the long yard, the last third not cobbled but dirt instead.

Little sunlight remained, but she could see the small forms of goblins running to the large and windowless structure on the left, the only one on that side which seemed truly part of the castle.

Kate didn't think, following the creatures with her crowbar at the ready. She knew the wounds would open but it didn't matter. She heard the people now, shouting and screaming. *Put out the fire. Get them out.*

There were corpses near her, goblins and larger bodies. She reached the entrance, slamming her crowbar into the head of a surprised green monster, its body slapping against the pavement as she already aimed for the second one. It barely managed to lift its tiny dagger when she brought the steel bar down from above, not quite managing to connect.

Kate locked eyes with the creature, its body unbalanced from the strike as she instinctively kicked forward. An impact resounded but she nearly blacked out, stumbling to the side as blinding pain shot up from her leg. She cursed, hitting the side of the building before she pushed on, dragging her leg now and using the stone wall to stay upright.

The creature had fallen from her kick, stumbling up when she brought down her weapon with a heavy two handed strike.

Kate nearly fell on top of the small goblin, balancing before she brought down her weapon one more time, a wet crunch the response before she ripped the steel out of the twitching creature. *Don't stop.*

She found the door and went inside.

Smells of fresh blood, fire too. Wood burning.

A large green man stood before her, holding a blade stuck inside of a human, his satisfied snort the next thing she heard before a beeping noise started in her left ear.

Kate forced herself forward, stumbling when she saw the creature glance back, its vicious blade still stuck inside the young man. Blonde hair, she noted, and probably dead. *Put out the fire*, she thought and rushed forward, ignoring the being's quick movement to rip the blade out of the body. She aimed for the head and swung in a horizontal arc, her crowbar going far as the man ducked, turning in the same motion.

Her arms were high when she brought the weapon back, a cold feeling spreading through her stomach. Kate could hear the steel of its sword cut into her stomach. She found the pain felt dull, as she locked eyes with the creature. It had tusks, she noted, one of its eyes blinded by a scar from a long past battle. It seemed confident, mocking even.

Kate heard another scream from above, her arms tensing before she brought the crowbar down with all the strength her body could muster.

The creature tried to catch the weapon with its arm, only managing to slow it down slightly.

The bent top of the crowbar sunk into the orc's face, its nose, working eye, and cheekbone pushed to the side in an unnatural way. Kate still heard the high pitched noise in her ears, feeling the orc's grip on her weapon weaken as she ripped it out and brought it down again, feeling the tugging in her stomach. He was doing the same to her with his blade.

Her next strike cracked his skull, the fourth one bending his head to the side, his body slackening as he stumbled backwards, hitting the large wood stove set into the building. He didn't react anymore, slowly sliding down before he came to rest half propped up by the very man he had killed before.

Kate didn't dare look down. Her body was growing weak but something pushed her forward. She couldn't hear anything, her vision limited, focused only on the small open door that led to a spiral staircase.

Put out the fire.

Get them out.

She hit the wall and pushed on, taking each step with renewed vigor. A part of her knew it was over, knew she would die. And yet she refused, anger, fear, and fire mixing in her chest and stomach, a feeling now all that made her stand. One green creature, she struck. Two, she missed, and hit. Her vision grew dark. She stood up again, metal clanging to the floor. Humans. Afraid. Corpses. One last enemy, green, scared. Her weapon struck, a dull thud resounding as she smeared its skull against the wall.

Kate turned, gripping her weapon as she looked for the next monster to kill. Were the humans here monsters? Were they enemies? A part of her considered as another wanted to move, to kill. She fell to her knees, looking down as her weapon clattered to the floor. Blood, there was so much of it. Too much. She should not be alive, a part of her knew. And then her vision went dark, her ears still ringing. *They're safe.*

Kate woke up to darkness, her eyes failing to focus as she felt the pain in her stomach and leg. It was dulled, she noted, her body and mind too tired to even groan. *Painkillers... strong ones*, she thought, her head swimming as she closed her eyes again. Everything felt sore.

“What are we gonna do?” a male voice whispered somewhere nearby.

“We wait out the night, and think about that tomorrow. You should rest, dear,” a woman said quietly, her voice sounding tired.

Kate could hear several people breathing, one snoring even. *Am I in the castle? What happened?*

“Peter died... and Chloe, that thing must’ve...,” the man whispered, his voice cracking slightly.

“It’s not your fault. There was nothing you could’ve done,” the woman said.

He paused, shifting his body in the dark. “*She* did something about it. Maybe if I had the same will... and now she will die too.”

Kate gulped.

“She’s still alive. And her fever has lessened in the last few hours. Don’t lose hope, Jon. We’ve been through worse,” the woman said.

He huffed. “No we haven’t.”

“Maybe not,” she said with a chuckle. “But we’ll get through this too, and so will she. Now sleep, the door is locked and I’m right next to you.”

“Two hours,” he said.

“Yes, yes,” the woman answered in a reassuring manner.

Kate smiled to herself. Perhaps it was the medicine, but she felt safe. *I did get them out*, she thought and fell asleep.

Three green tusked men rushed her from all sides, blood covered blades in their hands as they struck her down.

Kate saw the blades bite into her flesh, blood dripping down from the wounds as flames enveloped her surroundings. She could feel the heat and sweat as her skin melted, the monsters around her hacking their vicious swords into her unmoving form.

She woke with a start, breathing fast as she felt her heart beating. A groan escaped her as she felt the wounds, Kate forcing herself to lie still, her breathing slowing down.

“Don’t move too much, or the cuts will open again,” a woman said.

Kate opened her eyes, her sight focusing. She had survived the night, light pouring in through some cracks in the ceiling.

The woman wrung out a piece of cloth above a steel bucket filled with water, walking over before she carefully placed it on Kate’s brow. “You had a pretty bad fever. I cleaned up your wounds but honestly, you should probably be dead,” she said with a smile.

Kate looked at the middle aged woman, her brown hair bound in a simple braid. She wore jeans and a beige jumper, a brown leather jacket on top.

“Not sure if I’ve ever seen someone lose that much blood, let alone wake up again in the morning without a transfusion. But I haven’t seen sword wielding monsters before either, real ones that is. I’m Melusine. Grey told us you’re Kate,” she explained.

“I am,” Kate said in a quiet tone, her throat sore. She received a cup with water before she could even ask.

Melusine smiled and gently touched her shoulder. “You saved us, you know. Thank you. Do you need anything else?”

“Radio... my... my crowbar,” Kate said. “Just... in case.”

“It’s right there,” Melusine said, pointing next to the simple bed. “You seemed quite capable at using it. There were a few radios here too, but there’s nothing on, other than the general warning. I’ll bring you yours later, but Jonathan said it’s best to conserve the batteries. For flashlights or anything else.”

Kate glanced at the crowbar, seeing no more blood on it. Her clothes were bloodied and ripped in a few places, mainly the stomach.

“I was a certified nurse. The bandage you made is good but we’ll have to get that arrow out later today. Now rest, I’ll check on you every so often,” the woman said and stood up.

Kate got a good look at the room for the first time, the walls made of large stone rectangles layered on top of each other. The wooden floor boards creaked with each of Melusine’s steps, the woman leaving through a thick wooden door lined with steel. There were a few glass cases, medieval weapons and armor resting inside. Mattresses and bedrolls were spread out on the ground, a few plates and cups sitting between them on the boards. The simple light bulb hanging from the ceiling was off.

She laid back, closing her eyes with a deep sigh. *You survived the night.*

Kate didn’t feel like checking her injuries. She trusted the woman, based on her experience with people, especially ambulance drivers and other emergency workers. The woman gave off the same calm. *Never met her before, I’m pretty sure,* she thought. Falstadt wasn’t tiny but it was by no means a metropolis, or even a city based on some definitions.

By now she noticed the weird dot in the corner of her vision, there even with her eyes closed. It got larger when she focused on it and expanded into writing when she willed it.

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

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

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

More of those rpg messages, she thought. *Might as well look them through.*

She knew she shouldn’t be moving with the injuries she had sustained. Perhaps not at all, forever, but Kate was glad to be alive either way. *Being alive is dope.*

'ding' 'Requirements met for Class acquisition: Berserker'

Unyielding rage. You have slain five or more creatures with utmost brutality, wielding a two handed blunt weapon while not wearing armor or wielding a Class. You have fought through pain and injury to slay your enemies. You have killed a formidable adversary while being at five percent of your total health, intent to slay your remaining foes after your unlikely victory.

The Berserker wields their fury in continuous battle, pain and injury but fuel for their unstoppable frenzy. They refuse to wear anything but light, non metal armor, carrying heavy two handed weaponry to strike fear and terror into the hearts of their enemies. Savage, hungry for blood and death, they fight on as if entranced until nothing remains. Go forth, Berserker, slay all that stands in your way.

Unique stat: Perseverance

Would you like to acquire the Class: Berserker?

'ding' 'Attempting to force acquisition of Class Berserker in subconscious effort to preserve life - Will to live required – Will to live: present'

'ding' 'New Class: Berserker'

Stat points: +2

Unique stat acquired: Perseverance +1

Skill slot acquired [Berserker]: Active +5

Skill slot acquired [Berserker]: Passive +5

Support Class slot acquired: +1

Support Class requirements: Berserker lvl 10

Skills gained in Berserker:

Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 1

Tune out all but the sound of battle. Sacrifice what is not required to increase your resistance against pain, shock, and trauma from both injuries and enemy attacks by 5.5%. Auto activates when at 10% health (set value).

Active: Furious Dance – lvl 1

Give in to your coldest fury and become one with the blood and pain of battle. You strike harder, increasing your damage with melee weapons by 5.5%, using 5.5% more stamina for each attack. Your senses are focused on battle alone, making you into the very embodiment of bloodlust until all of your enemies are slain. Each creature you kill while Furious Dance is active returns 2.75% of your damage dealt as stamina.

Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 1

You rush forward with a sudden burst of speed. Choose a distance between 1 and 3.25 meters, each use requiring 20% of your total stamina. None shall flee the field of battle.

Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 1

Your anger knows no bounds. When you slay an enemy, you absorb 2.75% of their total health. Find and kill them, all.

Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 1

Your body is a tool for war, forged in battle. While you are not wearing armor made of metal or above 25% of your body weight, your skin, muscles, and bones are 5.5% more resilient to both physical and magical damage.

Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 1

You have chosen to forego both shields and subtlety. While wielding a weapon with both hands, you deal 5.5% more damage.

Didn't get a choice with that one eh? Well it did save my life. No wonder the blood loss didn't do me in, she thought, smiling to herself. It felt weird. To know that magic was a thing now, at least in some capacity. Kate didn't question these weird messages for a second, she knew all of it was true. How any of those percentages were calculated was beyond her, but if all that somehow helped her stay alive for a few more days, weeks, or months, she'd be happy to have it.

What a fucking day, she thought and closed her eyes.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 2

Class: Berserker – lvl 1

- Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 1

- Active: Furious Dance – lvl 1

- Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 1

- Active:

- Active:

- Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 1

- Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 1

- Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 1

- Passive:

- Passive:

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 10

Endurance: 12

Perseverance: 1

Strength: 9

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 4 Pain

Kate woke up with her stomach rumbling, the pain of her injuries already less pronounced. She turned her head to find the familiar face of Melusine smiling back at her.

“You’re still alive,” the woman noted.

“Well observed, now I know you really are a nurse,” Kate answered.

Melusine raised her hand and giggled. “You’re lovely, Kate. Here, Eloise made some broth. I hope it doesn’t just flow out into the bandage, but you should be fine.”

“Very reassuring,” Kate said, moving her arm before she winced, hissing at the pain.

“I can feed you,” the woman said.

“Thanks, but I’m a little too old for that,” Kate replied and moved slower, going for the spoon.

Melusine looked at her with a curious expression, her eyebrows quirking up before she cleared her throat. “It wasn’t a suggestion. Your wounds shouldn’t even allow you to move, let alone... please lie down,” she said.

“It doesn’t feel like I’m doing as bad as you think I am,” Kate said, lifting her sweater and shirt to show the expertly made bandage.

“The painkillers should’ve worn off... you should be screaming,” Melusine said.

Kate glanced at her. “Should I? I can scream pretty loudly. Jokes aside, I agree. I mean I should’ve died yesterday night... wait, how many goblins did I kill when I came up here?” she asked, ignoring the queasy feeling in her stomach.

“Three, I believe,” Melusine said.

“I got... a Class, I don’t know if you figured out how to see your status already,” Kate said.

“The nice boy that came with you, Grey was it, he showed everyone and keeps talking about skills and potential combinations and stat efficiency. To be honest, I’d probably refer him to a psychiatrist if I didn’t see a status myself. I didn’t quite understand what this all means, but it seems to be something like a game?” she said. “How is that relevant to your injury?”

“I got a Class through the things I did, fighting and killing those... monsters. The Class gave me skills too, like... special abilities, think something like a magic spell. To make light, or fire. One of them lets me get back health from enemies I killed,” Kate explained.

Melusine gave her a puzzled look before she focused on the plate of broth. “So you absorb a part of their soul...” she murmured. “That’s pretty scary,” she said and gave her a bright smile.

Kate blinked her eyes. “Yes, yes I suppose it is. Not quite as scary as the monsters now walking through this forest. How are things outside?”

Melusine got up and moved the chair near Kate’s torso. “I suppose you really can eat by yourself. But don’t overexert yourself and check the bandages. I don’t want to see you bleed out, even with the screaming remains of monster souls inside of you.”

Kate ignored the remark and started eating, expecting a plain oat broth but instead tasting a creamy mix of flavorful vegetables and oats. She sighed, smiling as she forced herself to move and eat slowly.

“The others are doing... as well as can be expected, considering the circumstances,” Melusine said, her expression more serious now. “We closed and locked the gates but Jonathan is still arguing with Bert. Ah you don’t know them. Jonathan is my husband, we were on vacation in Keilberg with our daughters Eloise and Celeste. The latter was allowed to choose a destination yesterday, and Keilberg castle was her choice.”

“Vacation in Keilberg, not the usual destination,” Kate said with a smile.

“Exactly, but I’ve been to Falstadt before and knew how beautiful the area was. Not very touristy either,” Melusine said. “You’re from here then?”

“I am... or was, a firefighter in Falstadt. I lived in Keilberg, was hiking when this thing started,” she said.

Melusine sighed. “A travesty it is, and the weather was so nice. Now the kids have to work through all that horror. I’m glad to have you here then, and again, thank you for saving our lives.”

“It’s part of the job,” Kate said, smiling lightly. “And I was too late to save everyone.”

Melusine looked up at the ceiling. “One step at a time. Always forward.”

They both remained silent for a few seconds, sitting with their own thoughts and memories.

“So who’s Bert?” Kate asked, taking another spoon full of broth.

“A grumpy old man, and the caretaker of this castle. We had to argue for nearly an hour to even get in here yesterday, despite the radio messages, military planes, gunshots, and screams,” Melusine said. “He has also complained about us moving everything into the armory. Jonathan thinks none of the things here are insured, hence the concern.”

Kate couldn’t help but laugh, wincing again at her stomach tensing up. “I think we have more pressing concerns than insurance companies.”

“Says the firefighter,” Melusine murmured with a smile as she stood up. “I will go talk to the others again, let me have a last look at your wounds. When you feel a little stronger, I’ll have a look at that arrow.”

Kate’s smile dropped. “I don’t suppose you have some morphine?”

“Oh, darling. I wouldn’t waste it on that. You’re a tough one, you’ll be just fine,” she said, checking the bandages before she grabbed the empty plate and left.

God, I’m glad she’s here, Kate thought. And I’ll have to thank Eloise for that broth.

Left to her own devices, Kate fiddled around with the information at the edge of her vision, checking the status to see if she could gain any more than the obvious.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 2

Class: Berserker – lvl 1

- **Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 1**
- **Active: Furious Dance – lvl 1**
- **Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 1**
- **Active:**
- **Active:**
- **Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 1**
- **Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 1**
- **Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 1**
- **Passive:**
- **Passive:**

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 10

Endurance: 12

Perseverance: 1

Strength: 9

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Berserker. That doesn't sound like me, she thought but found herself enjoying the title regardless. It had helped her survive, and allowed her to protect the people now taking care of her. The abilities had all sounded terribly game like. She wouldn't try them out here in her bed, especially in such a wounded state.

The tunnel vision and focus on battle seem a little questionable. Was that what helped me yesterday? After I killed that monster?

Kate found herself not regretting that one in the slightest, reminded of the dead human. If she could change anything about it, she would've come in and killed the orc before he even attacked.

Adrenaline and stress often brought her into a state similar to what she had experienced, but never quite as pronounced. She could still think, mostly. *Could've also been the blood loss. And pain. Though I don't remember being in much pain... just being... angry.*

She grinned to herself, shaking her head in a slow manner as she considered the implications. Some kind of magical Class that now influenced her behavior in profound ways. *A survival instinct in a way, she thought, comparing the effects to performance drugs, or enhanced coffee.*

Thinking of which, she mused and looked around, finding her backpack below the bed. Her canteen was still inside, the coffee now obviously cold but still better than no coffee at all. It lacked the same punch but she knew the caffeine was still there. It would suffice. For now.

Mindless Ferocity is some kind of defensive thing? Sacrifice what is not required... well that could be a lot depending on interpretation. Guess I'll have to test it. And five percent doesn't seem like too much, but I suppose that gets better with higher levels.

She had to look around the room, feeling a bit ridiculous at these considerations. *We're here now. Gotta use what is available.*

Kate changed the value of auto activation to twenty five percent, not planning to find out what it felt like to get to that level of health. *Losing both arms and legs? Half my head? I'd think you'd die pretty quickly when you reach that level of health. How can something like a health value even be associated with the human body? I suppose it's just a general state. So if I'm bleeding out, I would continuously lose health?*

She couldn't find an actual health number anywhere however.

Furious dance is pretty straight forward. I assume I'm just going to be more reckless while it's active, justifying the increased damage and stamina consumption. Now Reckless Charge... that's like an actual game thing. I suppose that's the spell I have for now.

Kate didn't know how to feel about magic. Some kind of force, bending the rules governing physics. *Or it's just some new source of energy that allows for it to have a real impact?*

She had to smile, thinking of all the scientists currently tearing out their hair to try and figure out what the fuck had happened. Assuming of course this was as widespread as the radio broadcasts suggested. *I suppose it's better than a black hole or solar flare just wiping out everything in an instant. If only just a little.*

Toll for the Living... likely what saved me yesterday. I didn't even notice getting the Class but I guess it must've been after killing that Orc.

She confirmed it by going back through the messages, seeing three Goblin Scout notifications after all her Class information. *In a way they saved my life too,* she thought. At least she had confirmed that everything wasn't some kind of misunderstanding and the Goblins were in fact just straight up murdering people.

Not that it was really ever hard to understand, she thought, reminded of the arrows immediately fired at her, back in the forest. It had just been so very absurd. *Must've been the last thought of a lot of people... just straight up confusion.*

She tried not to think about it, shoving the fate of the world, even that of Keilberg and Falstadt to the back of her mind. She couldn't deal with the implications right now, and there was nothing she could do in her current state. *Control what you can control.*

Courage of the Unarmored... seems kind of... weird. Some steel armor is probably still better, but if the numbers go up... or if I wear something like leather or hide armor, she thought and chuckled. *Like some kind of cosplayer.*

Kate had seen some impressive pictures before but the hobby seemed entirely too complex and expensive to her. She had no talent in sewing or fashion design. *Should be around seventeen to nineteen kilos? Less than the heavy gear at work, but that's not suitable for... fighting monsters... that's just weird... should still allow for some useful equipment however, if not heavy medieval steel armor,* she thought, looking at the museum pieces in the room.

The two handed weapon fighting skill was more than self explanatory. Kate considered using a shield instead but wielding a weapon to fight moving creatures would be difficult enough. *One*

handed with a shield in the other hand would require a lot more training that I never had. There's a reason we use both hands when handling chainsaws, hoses, and axes. If I really have to fight, might as well do it in a way I'm somewhat confident in.

"I'm really considering the pros and cons of different weapons to fight actual monsters," she murmured to herself. I'd leave myself open without a shield or armor, but the Class is kind of pushing me towards that anyway.

She thought about it for a while and came to the conclusion that she didn't dislike the style. The overly aggressive approach had worked for her the day before, and she didn't see a reason to switch it up for now. Less to think about.

Now I have two stat point thingies, and a lot of stats.

She tried to focus on the first one.

Vitality – Determines your total health pool and overall ability to sustain damage without dying.

Figures. And most certainly what I'll be focusing on for the foreseeable future.

Endurance – Determines your total stamina pool and overall ability to subject your body to continued physical activity.

That makes it sound like physical activity is some kind of horrific torture. Another really good one. Being out of steam in a flooded basement while clad in gear is not an enjoyable experience.

Strength – Determines your ability to lift things and the damage you deal with blunt, two handed, or heavy weapons.

Concern for later... my crowbar seemed plenty effective so far, she thought, resisting her gag reflex when she thought back to the goblin pulp she had produced.

Dexterity – Determines your ability to be light on your feet and the damage you deal with slashing, piercing, or light weapons.

Yeah, no. I'm not about to study fencing.

Intelligence – Determines your ability to think quickly and the damage you deal with abilities using mana.

No spells so far. And my abilities require stamina, she thought. There was a part of her a little disappointed at her lack of elemental spellage, but Kate didn't really see herself as some kind of witch or wizard. Even in the few role playing games she had played, she usually ended up with something a little more direct.

And Wisdom is for mana.

Wisdom – Determines your total mana pool and your ability to resist spell fatigue.

Wait, I also have the unique one from Berserker.

Perseverance – Endurance specialization. Increases your ability to continuously focus on a single task. Slightly increases your ability to resist damage over time effects.

Useful I suppose. But indeed a specialization. Are the stamina costs just reduced as I focus on something? she thought, wondering if a single task constituted something like cutting wood, or if it

could be vague like fighting monsters for an extended period of time. Kate hoped for the second, assuming her Berserker Class wouldn't award the unique stat otherwise.

The obvious choices for now are Vitality and Endurance, no matter how many points I get.

She tried to select Vitality and managed to put both of her available points into it, seeing as her Endurance was already at twelve. Kate felt her chest heat up. She could hear her heart pounding in her ears before her body calmed down again. *Freaky*, she thought, noticing that her wounds didn't hurt quite as badly anymore, the ones on her leg barely noticeable if she didn't move.

Ah magic, my salvation. Now I just need a bunch of health potions and I'm golden. Maybe some coffee spiked with them.

The food section in her status still didn't show anything but Kate assumed it was similar to the clothing situation. Maybe it just needed something with magical energy in it to provide benefits. She would certainly not consider eating goblin flesh, not until she was literally starving. A blue butterfly however, she might actually try.

Kate moved back slowly, trying to sit up in the bed while constantly checking her bandages. They held up. *Did she give me stitches too?*

She knew she should be resting but at the same time she really wanted to know what was going on. The previous day nearly felt like a nightmare of sorts. Kate knew it had all really happened, but accepting these changes would take more than a single day. "Melusine?" she asked, repeating the word with increasing volume. She decided not to actually shout, in case any monsters were nearby. The cobbled yard outside was rather spacious however and the walls would probably eat some of the noise as well.

The woman came up a few seconds later, immediately rushing to the bed. "You shouldn't sit!" she said as she checked the bandages again.

"I should be a little more sturdy now," Kate said. "I increased my Vitality."

"You're a woman of flesh and blood. Don't talk about Vitality like you're not covered in severe injuries!" Melusine said but didn't actually press the issue, her checkup apparently satisfactory.

"I think you can get the piece out now," Kate said. The longer they waited, the higher was the chance for infection. With anything unpleasant, she'd rather have it done and over as soon as possible.

"Are you sure? I would've suggested earliest tonight. How do you feel?" the woman asked.

"I'm good. The pain is barely noticeable at this point, and I don't want to sit in a bed while the world is ending," Kate answered. "Also my coffee is cold."

"I can heat it up for you, but I understand. Let me grab a few things and then we can start," she said.

Kate didn't have to wait for long, the woman soon bending over her leg. Pants down and a piece of at least furnished wood between her teeth, Kate held on to the bed frame and looked at the nurse slowly opening up the bandage on her thigh. It didn't look pretty. "Remind me," Kate said as she removed the piece of wood from her mouth. "You've been working in your field recently?"

Melusine looked up and gave her a bright smile. "Oh no, it's been at least a decade. Let alone something as delicate as this."

Kate glared at her.

“I’m kidding, Kate. I know you firefighters know what you’re doing, but with the angle and well... it being your own leg, it’s better if I do it. But don’t worry, while it’s not easy to process, I’ve seen people die. I’ll work through it.”

“You’re lovely,” Kate said as she lied back, a dark grin on her face as she bit down on the wood. “Don’t bullshit me.”

“I won’t lie to you, Kate,” the woman said in an absentminded tone as she started examining the wound. The pain started a moment later. “Not a lot of blood flow. I think it missed anything important,” she said. “But I can’t tell for sure without any scans. If it’s the same type of arrowhead as the other creatures had on them, it’s going to be difficult not to cause more issues when I remove it. And I’ll have to do it slowly, or it might break off inside.”

“I know that. Do it,” Kate said and bit into the wood.

Melusine looked at her with an expression of pity before she stood up and closed the door. “You will scream,” she said and sat down, glancing at Kate again as she hesitated. “I could... look again, if there’s morphine or something else to knock you out.”

Kate just gave her a glare. And then she screamed.

Chapter 5 Cooperation

Kate had her eyes closed. Tears still flowed as she occasionally twitched. Her jaw felt weird from the pressure she had put onto the wood.

“Is she gonna make it?” a male voice asked in a whispering tone.

“I made it worse, but the piece is out. And the bleeding already stopped. She’ll make it. But we should give her some space,” Melusine said quietly. “I’ll go make her some coffee. Eloise, just try to be quiet while you’re here.”

“Coffee?” the man asked as he followed her out.

Yes, Kate thought, quietly crying to herself. She opened her eyes wide. *Wait. She doesn’t know how I drink it!*

Her eyes landed on a young woman sitting on one of the bedrolls. The girl hugged her knees and stared back. She wore yoga pants and a black jacket, blonde hair shoved into a wild bun on her head. Her eyes were bloodshot, her mouth quivering slightly. She looked to be in her late teens.

Neither of them said anything for a while, both with tears in their eyes.

“You made that broth, didn’t you?” Kate asked finally, breaking the silence as she slowly wiped at her eyes, the movement creating a stinging sensation from her numb leg. “It was really nice.”

The girl didn’t respond but she hugged her knees a little closer.

“You’re Eloise, right?” Kate asked.

She reacted to the name and nodded lightly.

“I’m Kate. Nice to meet you. Was that a recipe you came up with yourself? Or did you try out and alter something?” she said. Kate knew the last thing the girl wanted to hear was anything goblin related, but perhaps the same was true for herself. She smiled, unsure when she had last talked to someone traumatized while having to deal with some or all of it herself.

“I learned it last year, but Geoff thought it didn’t fit into the menu,” Eloise said.

“You think it would’ve fit?” Kate asked.

The girl shrugged. “He has more experience.”

Kate chuckled, groaning when she moved a little too much. She ignored the scared look on the girl’s face and continued talking. “I didn’t ask about Geoff. I asked about your opinion. I really enjoyed it, would totally order that in a restaurant.”

Eloise smiled at that before her face went slack again. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “I heard you... screaming.”

Oh no.

“Melusine removed an arrow from my leg,” Kate said.

“That must hurt really bad,” Eloise said, her eyes going wide. “I’m sorry... I didn’t...”

"It does. But it's going to get better now," Kate said. "Didn't expect to be shot with an arrow," she murmured to herself.

The girl giggled, covering her mouth when Kate looked her way again.

She giggled too, lying back and closing her eyes.

"Delirious, I hope this room is getting enough air," came Melusine's voice as she returned.

Kate was brought out of her tired state by a familiar scent. It managed to briefly push through the blood and the sterile smell of antibacterials.

"How are you two?" the woman asked, handing a steaming cup to Kate, and another to Eloise. "I can get milk and sugar too if you like."

"No," Kate whispered, taking the darkness with joyous glee. She took a deep breath and started drinking.

"You'll burn yourself," Melusine remarked.

"Oh, that's what this feeling of heat is," Kate said, looking up sheepishly. The coffee wasn't bad. It wasn't great either.

"Grey has been asking about you, he seems worried," Melusine said. "But he didn't want to come bother you."

"He'll get to see my beautiful face again in no time. I have a feeling we'll be spending the foreseeable future together," she said.

"I'm sure the military will come soon enough," Melusine said, giving her a look before she moved her eyes in the direction of Eloise.

"Sure," Kate said. "But it might take a while because Keilberg is so small."

The woman smiled. "Nothing new on the radio. I saw a pair of crutches in the ticket shed, so you can use those tomorrow. If you're feeling better, I can get the others."

"For what exactly?" Kate asked.

"To discuss. Jon is already planning things but your experience will be valuable," Melusine said.

"I don't need more time," Kate said. She'd rather focus on what could be done than sit and wait while everything burned down around her. "You can get them now."

Melusine gave her a look but ultimately nodded. She left without another word.

"Th... thank... you," Eloise whispered, warming herself on the cup of coffee she held in her hands.

"You already thanked me with that broth," Kate answered. She carefully moved to sit up. It took a few attempts as she tried not to move her wounded parts too much. "What time is it?"

The girl got a phone out of her pocket and checked it. "Two thirty."

"Still no internet?" Kate asked.

She shook her head.

"No other connection in the house next door either?"

"No. Bert said he doesn't like the internet."

Steps resounded from below, a few people entering the building and coming up. The first to join them was Melusine, holding the hand of a girl she led into the room. The woman had a gentle smile on her face as she sat down next to Eloise, hugging her daughters close.

Kate thought the second girl to be between twelve and fourteen. Deep brown eyes looked at her with a curious expression. She hadn't said a word so far and simply sat down with her mother. Compared to Eloise, the girl seemed mostly calm, unbothered by or simply not quite comprehending the situation in its entirety.

Next followed three men. The first was Grey, his black hair a little more greasy now. He wore a leather jacket over his hoodie, one that didn't exactly fit very well. Neither in style nor size. He held on to his blade, the weapon sheathed now in a scabbard that seemed to be a bit too broad.

Behind him entered who Kate assumed to be Jonathan, Melusine's husband. He was quite tall at about a meter ninety, with broad shoulders and mid-length hair, well-cut and graying. His build and posture suggested more or less regular visits to the gym but she could tell he wasn't someone who worked with their body. His ice-like blue eyes glanced at his family, a warm smile sent to Melusine before he shifted his attention to Kate. He looked calculating and scared, but most of all just tired.

Kate had seen plenty of men trying to keep their shit together when their houses had burnt down, or worse. Jonathan was doing a commendable job, little of his stress showing despite the situation. She even wondered if he worked in a similar field as Melusine, but comparing the two she still felt like he seemed a little more lost.

The last to join them was a scowling old man. He walked with a limp in his right leg, his back bent a little. He breathed hard after the one set of stairs, an actual double barreled shotgun held in his hands. His nose seemed a little crooked and the hair that remained on his head was thin and gray. He closed the door behind them.

Jonathan grabbed a nearby chair and set it down next to the old man.

Bert gave him a glare and refused to sit down.

Grey had found a corner and shrunk away.

"There's no reason to be that stubborn," Jonathan said in a smooth voice and walked over the bedrolls and to one of the glass display cases. He turned around and rested his back on it.

"I'm not your grandfather, boy," Bert said. "Now why did we have to come here? Much better to be out in the fresh air." He gave Kate a glare.

"You remember the woman who saved us with her intervention last night? Kate is a firefighter from Falstadt. This situation demands that we discuss our priorities, and frankly, I'm not well versed in this outlandish scenario," Jonathan said and gave her a smile. It didn't reach his eyes.

Bert took a step forward and gave her another look. His weary eyes looked downright dim. "Ah, city folk. No need to discuss anything with a firefighter, all they do is come up here and ramble on about safety codes and fire escapes."

Kate sipped from her coffee, closing her eyes for a moment before she addressed the old man. "I live in Keilberg. And if you're too old to keep this place up to regulation, maybe you should finally retire." She had never met the man, nor did she care about the state of fire safety in this castle prior to today. But she knew his type. He would come around.

He growled, one side of his mouth going up in a wicked grin. “Keilberg. Shit village, not what it used to be. I’m more than capable of keeping this place running, girl.”

Jonathan closed his eyes and put a hand to his brow.

“Then I’m sure you have an inventory of all the food and weaponry ready and with you? Escape routes and ways to enter and leave the castle, access to water, and a map with all the hiking paths, roads, and storage or hunting sheds in the vicinity?” Kate asked. “I also hope you’re not too senile to hold and use that rifle. I’ve already been stabbed, I don’t need to be shot too.”

He smirked now, cackling a few times. “Maybe Keilberg got out one or two capable youths after all. I have what you asked for, in my house.”

“The one next door,” Jonathan informed.

“This place is more defensible. We should have it here,” Kate said. “Or does anybody disagree?”

“I suggested that already,” Jonathan said, giving him a look.

The old man scowled. “We’ll have it here then,” he muttered.

Jonathan gave them all a look. “I’m glad you survived, Kate. And I know you’re not the only one who would need a few days of rest after everything that happened.”

He sighed and glanced at his daughters. “But it doesn’t look like this situation is going to get resolved anytime soon. We need to prepare what we can to deal with it all. I’ve made a few plans already and discussed some things with Bert and Grey, but let’s make sure we make the most reasonable decisions. With everyone here.”

Nobody seemed to object to that, exchanging a few glances to gauge each other.

Jonathan continued.

“Yesterday, in the early afternoon, monsters started to appear in and around Keilberg. Based on the radio broadcasts, gun shots, and military jets, we have to assume this is a country wide thing. Maybe even worldwide, as Grey suggests,” he said and gave the man a nod.

“The monsters don’t seem willing to negotiate... despite their obvious intelligence, which leaves us few options to deal with them,” he said and looked at Kate, breaking the eye contact again quickly.

“We already lost people. I think our goal should be to protect the ones that are still here. If we work together, we should have a better chance of survival, but I completely understand if you want to leave, to find your loved ones.

“This castle should provide far superior shelter than most everything else nearby. I think it would be reasonable to stay for at least a while. Until we better understand what is happening,” he said and looked at everyone again.

“The best case scenario is the military clearing out the creatures that now walk through these forests,” he said and paused. “Anything to add so far?”

“We’ll need food and water,” Kate said.

“Enough food here to last a few weeks,” Bert grumbled. “Water we have.”

“For now,” Kate said. “If this is a widespread thing, it’s possible that we won’t have working water lines in about two to four weeks. We should think about a way to get water from the Willow while staying behind the walls.”

“Bucket and rope,” Bert said.

“Do you have that much rope?” Kate asked.

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

“We’ll have to treat the water too. Keep an eye out for water treatment tablets or pumps. We can’t have everyone getting sick,” Melusine added.

“Right. There’s a wood stove below. Is that cleaned out and usable?” Kate asked.

“It’s been usable for hundreds of years,” Bert said.

“Yes. But is it usable now?” Kate repeated.

“Gotta clear it out. Can’t reach the back, not with my knee,” the old man answered.

Jonathan nodded. “Grey, you can help him later. The nights are going to get colder, Kate is right. How much wood do we have to burn?”

“Not much,” Bert supplied.

“We’ll consider that later then. Kate, how long can we expect the heating to work? Same with electricity,” the man asked.

“Hard to say. Depends on what kind of heaters there are, where the electricity comes from, who takes care of those facilities. The fact that our mobile connections are out already is strange. I think we should prepare for the worst. Stacking up on wood will be a priority nearly as important as food. Without an internet connection and a wood stove here, we won’t need a lot of electricity. Light sources will become an issue so we should figure out how to make torches and get all the batteries and flashlights we can,” Kate said.

“But we looked through everything here already,” Eloise murmured.

Jonathan gave Kate a look.

“We will have to go out for supplies,” Kate said. “Who thinks themselves capable of fighting?”

Grey looked back at her, as did Bert, Melusine, and the little girl in her arms.

Jonathan looked to the floor, grinding his teeth.

“Bert knows the castle the best, and is frankly too old to be of any help outside. No offense,” Kate said.

He just grumbled something about the old days and of course lacking respect.

“I can... f- fight,” Grey said in a near inaudible tone.

“You’ll come with me then, once I’m better. Jonathan, what did you do before?” Kate asked.

The man looked up again. “I...,” he started and shook his head. “I’m the owner of an architecture office.”

“Do you feel capable of taking on the organization of everything here?” Kate asked. “We have a group of people with different talents, resources, and knowledge. Efficiently using all that will be the key to our survival.”

He looked into her eyes, seeming vulnerable for a split second before he steeled himself. He gave her a grateful look and smiled ever so slightly. “If everyone agrees to that.”

“I won’t take orders from a city brat like you,” Bert muttered.

“It doesn’t matter where I’m from,” Jonathan said. “I’ve organized projects involving hundreds of people from different companies and contractors. If you think yourself more capable of doing this, we can have a vote.”

Kate gave Bert a nod.

He grumbled and finally sat down on the previously offered chair.

Jonathan took a deep breath. “Alright. Alright. Eloise, you’ll be the cook for everyone. I want you to organize and store all the food we have in the cellar of this building. Categorize everything and plan to ration. The people who will go out, need to get the most food. Everyone else, just as much as we need. Can you do that?”

The girl looked at Melusine and gulped. She wiped away at her eyes and glanced at Kate, a light smile coming to her face. “Yes.”

“That’s Eloise for you. Melusine dear, choose a defensible place in the castle and set up a field hospital of sorts. Make a list of the medicine and materials you’ll need the most. If there are survivors in the area, they might know about this castle and come here. And if there are injuries in the future, we’ll need to be able to treat them in an efficient manner. As a second priority, take care of sanitation in general,” he continued.

Melusine smiled and gave him a look.

Not now, woman, Kate thought and sipped on her coffee.

“Celeste, you help where you can. Do you think you can do that?” Jonathan said, looking at the girl.

She nodded, a serious expression on her face.

“Kate, as much as Bert will complain, I think it would be good to give the place a thorough fire safety check. I know you can’t move yet,” he said.

“I’ll do it once I can move. Just get me those crutches you mentioned,” she said, addressing Melusine with the second part.

“Grey, we’ll take care of the bodies first, after that we help the others,” he said.

The young man seemed a little conflicted. He opened his mouth and closed it again, looking to the floor.

“What is it, Grey?” Kate asked, looking at him as she finished her cup of coffee.

“I...,” he started and gulped.

“You all saw the numbers,” Kate said. “I know it sounds weird but I think they might become the most important thing to help us survive this thing. I think I already survived just because of the Class I got.”

“A Class?” Grey asked, glancing up with an excited look on his face.

“Yes. And it turns out that this scenario much like zombie apocalypses and alien invasions is not something people haven’t turned into fiction already. Grey knows a shit ton about all this. Jonathan, I think it’s best if you listen to him when it comes to everything that seems otherworldly or has to do with the numbers we see in our minds,” Kate said.

The man gave Grey a look and sighed. “This is ridiculous...,” he murmured and rubbed his temples. “Very well. Grey, you’ll tell me what you know. And I think it would be best if you could suggest our course of action when it comes to these matters. Kate I’ll want you to double check all that. Can you do that?”

Grey nodded and looked at Kate. He hesitated as most of the people looked his way. “The... b... bodies. We s... s... should not bury them.”

Kate started chuckling, slowly lying back down. “This is just bizarre,” she murmured. “But he’s right. You should burn them.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked, glancing between the two of them.

“Undead,” they both said at the same time.

Chapter 6 Siege

Kate dozed off again after everyone had left, her body still weak despite the caffeine it had received. She felt much better now that she had met the others, everyone bringing something to the table. Even Bert. A shotgun would surely be useful.

She dreamed of undead and goblins. Monsters coming to kill her. Kate felt she could fight this time, felt like she was armed. She had power flowing around her. Something new. An ally to help her survive, to help her fight, and kill. The monsters attacked with a loud crash, and she woke up.

The armory was dark, the air stuffy with the smells of blood, sweat, and sterile medical supplies. She could hear people breathing, voices speaking with quick words. Steps on wood. Her groggy mind couldn't decipher it all as she turned her head.

"You have children here...", a male voice said, one she didn't know.

The man was massive. Just under two meters with short black hair, likely in his forties. He wore a black shirt, wet stains visible on it. The blood was even more obvious on his jeans. He certainly weighed about twice as much as Kate but she knew it wasn't just fat. The man reminded her of her friend Maurice, a firefighter and the strongest man she'd ever met. Physically that was. She hoped he had survived.

Her eyes adjusted as she rubbed them, now aware of the two people lying on the bedrolls. A young man in his twenties, mid length red dyed hair mostly obscured by a black hoodie. She noted the different shade of red on his brow. He wore green work pants just like the second person on the ground.

A woman, she saw. Her body twitched, a whimpered moan coming from her. Long blonde hair. A wound on her stomach. She wouldn't survive.

Melusine knelt next to her, emptying a syringe into the young woman's bare arm. She cradled her head and lightly brushed her hair. "It's alright," she whispered. Looking up to the man, she shook her head ever so slightly.

His body slackened before he steeled himself, his eyes going around the room. "Keys?" he asked when he reached one of the larger glass cases.

"Over there," Melusine said and pointed to a long glass cabinet. She moved over to the young man on the ground and checked him quickly without letting go of the woman's hand. Her grip was firm and she continued to say reassuring words.

"What is happening?" Kate asked. She forced herself up to rest her back on the wall. Only now did she see the two girls she already knew hiding in their corner of the room.

Nobody replied. The man grabbed the keys and started opening the glass cases. He began to rip off pieces from the medieval armor inside before he fitted it around his chest.

"Talk to me," Kate said and moved out of the bed. The action elicited a sharp look from Melusine but she didn't scold her. *Not a good sign.* She saw the crutches next to her bed and grabbed one of them. With her other hand she took the crowbar.

"Monsters at the gates," the man said, fiddling with the leather straps of the chest piece.

Kate got up. She felt a sharp sting from her abdomen but made herself walk. "You can't put that on yourself," she said and grabbed the straps, quickly knotting them closed. "Shoulders," she said.

The man glanced at her for a split second and handed her the piece. He moved on to the first leg piece he could put on himself.

She finished securing the steel shoulder piece and rattled it to make sure it would hold. Kate had no idea how exactly a medieval knight's armor would have to be assembled but knots she knew, and she had improvised enough to get an acceptable result. She made sure to glance at the leg piece too but found the man knew what he was doing. The armor was absolutely massive. Just large enough to fit him.

They worked in silence. Melusine's reassuring words the only voice close by. Her entire focus was on the young woman now. Kate heard crying from the corner of the room.

"It will be alright. It's okay," Melusine said, her voice steady and calm. Kate believed her, even though she knew the words to be a lie. Nor were they meant for her.

Eloise moved out of the corner with slow steps, hands fiddling with bloodshot eyes.

Melusine looked up and smiled. "Come, hold her hand," she said.

The girl's eyes lit up as she moved forward. She knelt down and did as asked.

"Just keep holding on," the woman said.

Dull pounding sounds came from outside.

The armor was done. The burly man transformed into a terrifying knight of old. He put a helmet on his head, the visor revealing light green eyes below. They looked tired.

Kate saw something else too but she wasn't sure exactly what it meant. "Weapons are over there," she said and pointed at another large display case.

He opened it quickly and grabbed an absolutely massive two handed sword nearly as long as he was tall. The man took a deep breath and heaved the large steel weapon onto his shoulder.

Kate already moved to the exit. Her steps were slow but steady, the pain just a dull reminder of her injuries. She wouldn't be particularly effective but considering the circumstances, she knew her choice.

"You're injured," the man said as he stepped up behind her. "And in the way." His voice was neither accusing nor belittling.

"Then you better help me down," Kate said. She was calm. Ready. Something had changed, she knew. Perhaps it was what had happened the night before, or the weird magic she could feel within her very core, a part of her now. It didn't matter. She wouldn't let another person die.

He looked at her for less than a second before he stepped next to her. A massive gloved hand went under her shoulder.

They walked together down the tight spiral staircase, his sword and armor clattering against the stone as they tried to stay upright.

"I'm Kate," she said when they reached the bottom. She continued on with her crutch and shook his hand away.

“Logan,” he said and moved past.

They came out onto the yard. An arrow whistled through the air in a high angle, coming down before it dug into the soft earth near the lone old tree to their left. The pounding came from the gate. The wooden bar put in place rattled and shook.

Kate closed the door to the ground floor of the armory and gripped her crowbar. “What’s outside?”

“Goblins. Orcs. Either they followed us, or they just happened onto this place,” Logan said.

“They were here last night,” Kate answered. “Do you have a Class?”

“No. Only Ethan had one but he’s out for now. But I have this,” he said and gripped the large handle of his oversized sword.

“A shield might’ve been better,” Kate said.

She received a stare and light nod at her crowbar.

“Fair enough. Plan to wait until they break through?” she asked.

“With an old man on the ramparts and a bunch of teens to defend the yard?” he asked.

“Right. We should find out what we’re dealing with,” Kate said and made for the tower nearest to the gate.

The man followed. They could hear goblin cries now and the occasional guttural sound from the orcs.

More than one of them, Kate thought and gripped her weapon.

“How injured are you exactly?” Logan asked as they entered the tower. Again he helped her up the stairs.

Kate didn’t reply at first, not until he stopped at the door to the ramparts and glared at her. “I have a Class okay? I can absorb health from creatures I kill. Now move, we don’t have time for this.”

He turned and opened the door.

They did their best to crouch, quickly reaching the wood and stone ramparts above the gate. Jonathan, Grey, and Bert sat behind cover, all waiting with loaded crossbows, bolts strewn about. Arrows stuck in the wooden wall behind them.

“T... they... they’re waiting,” Grey got out. “More t... than a dozen. Wi... with bows.”

“They’re good shots,” Kate supplied. She stood behind Logan and lifted her shirt lightly. The bandage had a darker color.

“I know,” the armored man said. “Any other way out?”

“No,” Bert answered.

“It’s not that high a jump,” Kate suggested.

“You want to go out there?” Jonathan asked in a hissed whisper.

“Too many to fight head on. We need a distraction. Go back, we go down between the towers, circle around. When they notice us, you shoot. Aim for the orcs,” Logan said and moved without waiting for a response.

Kate walked as fast as she could. She left the crutch behind and grit her teeth. The wound was open already. The longer she waited, the worse it would get. At least the pain was manageable for now and the thick bandage would keep her steady.

They reached the section between the two towers. Logan checked over the wall and threw his sword down. It landed on the earthy ground with a thud.

Kate did the same with her crowbar. "I shouldn't make that jump."

He gave her another look and started to climb. "I'll catch you," he said and climbed over. He lowered himself as far as he could and let go, landing in a heavy roll. He stumbled and stopped his remaining momentum against a nearby rock. It took him a moment to stand back up. Logan shook his head and looked around before he glanced up.

No time to distrust his catching abilities, she thought and climbed over. She lowered herself and glanced back. Kate aimed and jumped, pulling in her knees and elbows as she fell. She kept her back towards the ground and hit something hard a moment later.

Logan nearly fell as he softened her fall, the impact still enough to push all the air out of her lungs. She coughed, her hand coming away with blood as she stood up and looked for her crowbar.

"We separate," Logan said. "You're smaller, harder to spot. Go from the back, I come from the side."

Kate nodded and moved into the underbrush. She winced with every second step now before she remembered her abilities. Before she could question her decision making in the last ten minutes, she activated Mindless Ferocity. A flow of warmth moved through her, the pain soothed just a little. She could no longer hear her own breathing. Her focus sharpened, now entirely tuned to the excited noises the goblins made, the throaty commands of the orcs. *Almost taunting*, she thought and activated her second ability, Furious Dance.

The world around her shrunk, her thoughts dulled and limited, focused on a single task. She gripped her crowbar with both hands and moved through the trees while slightly crouched.

Quiet.

Move.

She heard the goblins, knew how far away they were. Her muscles tensed. She wanted to rush forward, to kill them all. She needed to.

Quiet.

Calm.

Fire.

Kate forced herself to move farther. Behind the position the goblins had taken. More arrows were loosed.

Go.

Kill.

She was behind them now. Kate didn't care to think about Logan or her allies on the ramparts. She had fulfilled her obligation. She had moved behind them and it had taken all of her willpower to do so. And now, she was free to let loose.

Her form moved out of the trees like a shadow, her steps quiet and fast. She heard the goblins. She knew there were six of them to her left, short distances between them, bushes and trees to obscure their position. The one in front of her turned around at the noise but it was too late.

Kate struck the small creature with a horizontal blow. It slapped to the ground with a weak groan. Again, she struck, this time from above. Two times. Wet sound and a splatter of blood and goblin pieces. They had come to kill them.

She stepped through the trees, tense but at a walking speed. The second one hadn't heard. They were still excited, chattering insults in a language she did not speak.

Silent.

Kate got the second one without it even noticing. The full force of her strike hit it in its face, half of it caved in by the steel bar. It hit the ground already dead.

Delightful.

Something made the creatures move, orcish commands bellowed by the monsters near the gate.

Distracted, she thought and felt herself grin. She waited for a few seconds with a steel grip on her weapon. Her eye twitched. *Go. Fight.*

A part of her knew she had to wait. Just a little bit. It felt like hours.

Finally she moved.

Four goblins now stood on the small field in front of the castle, their backs towards her, bows aimed at the armored figure behind the two parked cars.

She must've made a sound because two of them turned around. It was too late. She struck the first one, its small body raised from the ground before it slapped down with a wet thud. Kate saw the second creature pull back the bow string. Reckless charge activated. Power flowed through her as her body was propelled forward. She held her crowbar sideways and with both hands. Her form impacted the small being, the bar slamming into its brow with a crack, its arrow whistling up and away. She left the downed creature and moved to the next. Three heavy strikes smashed their skulls.

They had noticed her but it didn't matter. Not anymore. Kate ripped out an arrow from her chest and finished the injured one she had downed with a heavy stomp of her boot. She heard a laugh and knew it was hers.

Logan swung his massive weapon with a scream. The steel cleaved through three goblins at once, blood and guts splattering to the ground as the armored man retreated in a defensive stance.

Five more goblins tried to circle him, now more cautious than before. One orc lay dead near the gate, two bolts deep within its shoulders. The remaining two orcs moved to circle Logan, occasionally glancing back towards the ramparts.

Kate ran. She watched one of the orcs shout something in her direction before he turned away to face the armored man with its ally.

Five goblins ran at her with daggers.

Good.

Come to me.

Kate kept running, her reckless charge activating just before the first of them reached her. She moved through them with an incredible rush, her bar of steel held at the height of their heads. Blades cut into her legs but she remained standing. Two of them had been downed, another one falling in front of her when she came to a stop. She slammed her bar down with all her strength and the momentum she still had.

The remaining three goblins looked at her with wide eyes before they turned and ran into the forest.

Logan blocked a strike and swung his sword wide. He struck the first orc, a gashing wound on its side. The man brought his sword back with a heavy swing that went through the stunned monster's neck. Halfway at least before it got stuck.

The second orc rushed forward. Its blade slammed against Logan's shoulder piece, slightly denting the metal before the creature kicked against his chest. Both strikes combined made Logan stumble back and fall.

The sword was ripped out of his hands, firmly stuck in the falling corpse of the other orc.

Kate rushed at the monster when it turned around and slammed its fist into her face. She heard something break, her vision swimming as she stumbled back. She ducked to avoid a horizontal swing and gripped her weapon.

The orc returned to the downed knight and struck against his head. His blade slid off the helmet with the impact.

Logan groaned and rolled to the side, one hand to his head.

No.

Kate tried to use reckless charge but it wouldn't activate. She closed the distance with a few steps and managed to deflect the orc's sword with her crowbar. The two weapons were entangled as she pushed back. Its free arm struck her face. The first blow didn't come in straight but the second nearly knocked her out. More breaking bones.

Her arms didn't relent, his weapon pushed back as she saw the armored knight stumble up to his feet behind the monster. She grinned, half her vision gone and the taste of blood in her mouth. It didn't matter.

The orc moved his arm to the side when a thin blade cut through his hand. A guttural sound came from its tusked mouth.

Kate didn't think. She let go of her weapon with one hand, grabbed the shaking blade, and pushed it forward. The weapon sunk into the orc's neck but it still pushed back. Massive armored hands grabbed the monster from behind, its arms restrained.

Good.

Allies.

Kate let go of the blade and grabbed her crowbar. She slammed it down against the monster's head, her third strike cracking its skull. The armored hands let go and the blade was gone but she continued. The orc was on the ground now. Kate stood above its chest and turned its head into

mush. She took a deep breath when she knew it was dead and shuddered, her attention moving to the distant sounds of running goblins. She knew where they had gone and started towards the direction.

“Stop,” someone said, barely audible to her.

Something grabbed her arm but she ripped it away. The fight wasn't over.

“Kate,” a voice said, concerned.

It didn't matter.

“Kate,” this time the grip on her arm was firm.

She turned around and found herself looking at an ally. The armored man. *Who?* She balled her fist and slammed it against his helmet. It hurt, just a little. He wouldn't hold her back.

Someone else grabbed her other arm before she could strike again. “Kate, it's us. It's me, Grey, come back.”

The armored man moved his head back slightly before he tried to take her weapon.

Kate held on. She knew something was wrong. Why were they holding her back? The battle wasn't over, or was it? She no longer heard the enemies. Her body felt heavy. Hot. She couldn't see very well. Blood was in her mouth, her head was thrumming.

“Kate,” Grey repeated, his voice pleading, fear in his eyes.

Fear of what?

Her eyes opened, the tension in her body gone as Logan pulled away her crowbar. “I...,” she stammered out and tried to hold up her hands.

“You're back,” Logan said. “Come, we can't stay out here.”

Chapter 7 Shock

Kate stood there for a few seconds, confused as to what had happened. The dull pain she felt from her legs and face slowly crept to the foreground with her skills now disabled. She grit her teeth, bringing a hand to her head as the exhaustion came over her. It felt similar to coming down from an intense adrenaline rush, just ten times more extreme.

“Got to get back,” Logan murmured as he turned around.

She wiped at the blood dripping from her brow. *Shit.* Her focus was on the crowbar on the ground. The bloodied crowbar. Corpses, goblins and orcs. Heads smashed in. Kate doubled over and puked her guts out.

“Are you...” Grey asked but stopped himself when she held up a hand.

“Help Logan,” she said, blinking her eyes to regain some resemblance of focus. Her head thrummed. Something had cut into her legs. *Blood. Gotta get back. Where’s my crutch?*

She remembered leaving it on the ramparts. *Wait... my stomach doesn’t hurt.* She raised her shirt and found the bandage still covered in blood but the pain was gone. *Shock?* she asked herself but it didn’t make sense. She felt the pain from her legs and face. *Focus. Focus. Not important now. Get back inside.*

Grey had gone to Logan, unsure how to help the man. Logan looked over and put an arm around the young man’s shoulders, his steps really more akin to shambling.

Kate followed when she saw the large two handed sword still stuck inside one of the orc’s necks. She froze, the sight simply bizarre. *What the fuck?* she grabbed the slightly raised handle and ripped on it a few times until it came loose. The wet sound reminded her of preparing meat. *Of course it would. It’s the same thing, Kate,* she thought, smiling for some reason. *Go back. You lost a lot of blood.*

She dragged the large weapon behind herself, the thing sliding on the earthy ground and occasionally bumping into a rock. *He needs the weapon. For more battle.*

A sudden confusing thought made her stop. She stood there, bathed in early moonlight before she turned towards the line of trees. There were goblins still alive. Her right eye twitched, a drop of blood rolling down into her eye. Kate wanted to rub it but found the sword too heavy to lift her hand. And she couldn’t let go either. *We didn’t kill them all.*

A part of her knew that fact was bad news. Scouts, reinforcements, information on their location, numbers, abilities, armor. But what confused her more was that she felt angry. Something cold. The enemy had to die, but it had escaped. Why?

“Kate, don’t stop, come on,” Jonathan walked closer. His movements slowed before he came to a halt a few meters away from her.

She turned to look at him with the one eye not blinded. Was he scared? Was there a monster behind her? She looked and found nothing. *Well, I’m covered in blood and whatever else stuck to my clothes. That was quite the rampage... anybody would be scared.* She grinned at the thought before her face turned serious. *What the fuck is happening to me?*

“It hurts,” she said.

The look in his eyes changed and he rushed towards her, grabbing the large sword before he moved his arm below her shoulder. “I’ll help. You did well. We won. We survived. Come, it’s just another few meters.”

Kate didn’t talk. She felt the pain, the confusion, the joy of killing. *Joy of killing?* Her breathing sped up. She was panicking. It had happened before, she knew what it felt like. Mostly when she had still been a child. Unable to do anything, unable to fight, or help. That wasn’t her. Not anymore. Kate didn’t panic. Kate was in control. Kate was experienced. And yet even though she knew what was happening, she was powerless to stop it. *Just let it pass. Focus on something else. Blood. No. Something nice. Death. NO!*

“It’s gonna be okay,” Jonathan said, his voice calm now. They were through the gate.

Something snapped, the spiral gone as she broke down to her knees. She took a deep breath, then another one, and a third.

“Mel, Kate is injured too,” Jonathan said.

Too? she looked up, smelled puke and blood now. Her own. A hand went to her nose but the touch stung. *Broken.* She snapped it back into place, groaning at the pain. Her hand came away bloody, but what else was new? Someone shut the gate behind them. The sound of the heavy wooden bar sliding into place somehow grounded her, just a little. Something heavy between her and the monsters out there.

Beside her lay the armored man, Logan. Kneeling next to him was Melusine. She checked the armor for cuts before she went on to the dented head. “Nobody move him. Grey, go get me a pillow.”

“He was hit on the head...” Kate said, still on her knees. *I hit him. Why did I do that?*

“Kate, I need you to focus. Listen to me, look at me,” Melusine said.

She did as the woman asked.

“Jon, come and hold his head. Careful,” the woman said and slowly handed him over before she walked to Kate. “I need light. Bert, move over.”

The old man grunted and stepped over with the lantern in his hand, an electric one giving off a warm light.

Kate blinked at the light and turned away slightly.

“You’re in shock. Lie down,” the woman said and helped her. “Tell me where you’re injured.”

“Cuts on legs. Face, broken nose, blood,” Kate murmured.

“Good. You’re gonna be fine,” the woman said and moved to her legs. She checked each cut in the pants before she sighed. “Nothing dangerous. I’ll disinfect them later but you’ll survive. No stretcher here Bert?”

“Nah,” he muttered.

“One of the beds then,” Melusine said. “We can’t leave them out here.”

“What about the corpses in the barracks? I don’t know what I should believe but we should keep the door closed. If Grey and Kate were right about the undead...,” he said.

Grey returned with the pillow and gave it to Jon, the two carefully stabilizing Logan’s head, eliciting a groan from the large man.

He moved his hands up.

“Stop! I’ll take it off soon. Just lay down, you’re probably concussed. At least,” Melusine hissed and raised Kate’s legs as well as she could. “Grey, get me a bed frame and mattress from somewhere. How are we doing, Kate? Talk to me.”

Grey nodded and rushed off to Bert’s house.

The old man muttered something before he put down the lantern and followed with a slight limp.

“Spinning,” Kate said.

“Good. You will spin for a while. But it will get better,” Melusine said.

“Killing... I killed... killed so many... it... it,” Kate said before she sobbed. She rubbed her eyes again but all she did was smear around the blood and tears.

“They came to kill us. It was self defense,” Jon said in a calm tone.

You don’t get it. I enjoyed it. I loved it. I want to go kill more! What is happening? She gulped, forcing herself not to share the insane thoughts flashing through her mind. It was her Class, she realized. It was obvious. Berserker. Isn’t that what Berserkers do? Lose their minds? Go and kill until they’re incapacitated? Until they can’t move anymore? Is that happening to me? Is it infecting my brain somehow? Changing me?

She closed her eyes and took in a sharp breath. Everything that had happened in the past days came crashing down on her. The monsters, the magic, all that death, and killing. All that violence. The feelings, fear, confusion, pain, anger, the frenzy. She felt goosebumps. *Fires are out. What you saw. What you did. Think after a good night’s rest. You lost a lot of blood. You’re not yourself. But you will be again. This magic shit saved your life. It saved everyone’s lives today. That’s all that matters.* The thought helped. Calmed her just a little. Gentle hands led her onto a soft mattress. She looked up and saw Melusine’s face, slightly strained but smiling. The world rocked lightly, then up and up until she was moved down onto a bedroll.

“That was the easy one,” Melusine said as she brushed sweat from her face.

Eloise stood up.

“You can help carry,” the woman said as they once again heaved the frame and mattress down and away.

Kate smelled the blood, the stuffy air. And death. She smelled death. Not her. *The woman. The blonde haired woman. Did she come with Logan? Who was she?*

“Are you okay?” a voice asked.

Deep brown eyes stared down at Kate, the girl crouched and with her arms crossed. “You have blood on your face,” she added.

“Thanks. I didn’t know,” Kate deadpanned, exhausted and apparently in shock. *Where’s my blanket?*

The girl smiled. “No problem! Do you want to wash it off? There’s a rag here.”

Kate smiled back. “That would be nice.”

Celeste stood up, a few quick steps resounding before she was back, water dripping on Kate’s face. She carefully brought it down when she noticed Kate didn’t grab for it.

A cool feeling came to her face, her eyes covered by the wet fabric as a sigh went through her. “Thanks. Celeste?”

Two small steps resounded, the girl moving closer.

“Is there a blanket somewhere?” Kate asked.

More steps before something rough was pulled onto her. The girl didn’t quite manage to cover her but the effort alone was warming.

“Thanks,” Kate whispered.

The girl returned to her corner and sat down, the two of them silent for a while, their breaths the only sound in the room. Whistling wind moved past outside, the noise dulled.

Kate snuggled into the blanket. She felt safe, the spirals in her mind slowing down, exhaustion taking over near entirely.

“Did the woman die?” Celeste asked in a whisper.

She was quiet for a while. “I think so. I’m sorry.”

The girl didn’t reply for a few seconds. “Oh.”

Kate didn’t know what to say. Dealing with kids that age wasn’t exactly her strong suit. The truth in a gentle way was her usual approach.

“Will you die too?” Celeste asked, the sound a little weaker now.

“Someday,” Kate said and turned towards the girl. She moved her hand and lifted the rag slightly. “But not today, or tomorrow. Not for a long time,” she said and flashed the girl a grin. More confident than she felt.

Celeste giggled. “I think you’re right.”

“How come?” Kate asked.

“The monsters hit you yesterday. And now there’s more blood. You’re like Logan!” she said.

Kate put the rag back and rested her head on the shit pillow. “He was pretty strong with his armor, like a knight.”

“No. The one with the claws,” the girl said.

With the claws? What does she... ah. I see, she thought and started laughing.

Noise came from below, the remaining people bringing up the injured man before they shut the door behind themselves. Melusine spent the next ten minutes carefully taking off the man’s helmet before she applied an ice pack. He muttered complaints but lacked the strength to stop an experienced nurse from doing her job.

Kate fell asleep what felt like a few minutes later, the cool rag coupled with the warm blanket bringing her back to ages past, her mom bringing her hot soup when she was sick. She heard someone talk about a brave knight facing down a dragon, unsure if it was Jonathan's attempt to distract his daughters, or just a dream. Either way, she was glad for it.

The rest of the night, Kate slept like a rock. Chirping birds woke her, coupled with shuffling steps. Sunlight came through some of the cracks in the ceiling, the air even worse than she remembered. She felt her face sting, just like her legs. Her whole body felt like she had gone through a sixteen hour shift twice in a row. Her stomach rumbled. A good sign, she thought and turned to the side.

The blonde woman was no longer there, dried blood on a bedroll the only thing that remained of her. The red haired man was still sleeping. He twitched occasionally. Neither of the girls were there but Logan lay in his bed, her previous bed, and glanced her way. Green eyes, tired, with bags under them. He had a bandage strapped around his head, an ice pack entangled within. Logan no longer wore his armor, the pieces stacked up in a pile nearby, his sword resting against the wall.

"Good morning," he said.

"Morning," Kate said and rubbed her eyes. Her skin was dry, bits of blood flaking off when she touched it.

"You look horrible," the man said.

"Appreciate the pep talk," she answered in a dry tone. "You're charming too, with that head wear." He smiled ever so slightly. "Glad you made it."

Kate stood up, slow movements to prevent her from getting dizzy. She looked down and found her work pants cut in several places. Everything was covered in blood. "Lovely," she muttered. "I need about eight baths."

Logan huffed. "Go get them then. I believe in you."

"Feeling okay?" she asked.

"Better than yesterday. Concussion probably. Can't really move straight," he said.

Oddly straight forward, Kate thought with a light smile. "You'll survive. Thanks for yesterday, and... sorry for hitting you. I don't know what got over me."

"Some magic shit probably. Don't worry about it, you hit like a woman," he answered.

Kate blinked. "Well. Yes." He was bullshitting her of course. His helmet alone had prevented worse coming from that punch.

"I did get a Class too," he said and closed his eyes, resting his head.

"Oh really? Valiant Knight?" she asked with a smile.

"Something like that," he said. "I think Eloise made food by the way, said she's in the kitchen next door if either of you wake up and can move."

"Sounds wonderful. I'll go wash my face first," Kate said, mumbling the second half.

“Good idea,” Logan mused.

Kate glanced at the sleeping red haired man. Logan had mentioned his name but she had forgotten. She glanced at the large knight and decided not to ask right now. Plenty of other things interested her too but that could all wait. She was filthy. Filthy and hungry.

She stepped down the stairs and out to the courtyard. A few clouds were visible in the sky but it was mostly sunny. A chill wind blew through, reminding her of autumn. Nobody else was outside, so she went over to the old barracks, wooden stairs leading her to the second floor where a toilet sign led to an open door.

Inside the small room, she found two closed doors, a basin, and a broad mirror. She nearly took a step back, seeing the zombie staring back at her. *The undead are real. But it's me. Holy shit,* she thought and glanced to the door, hoping nobody else had seen her. *Bert might actually just shoot me on sight.*

She turned on the faucet and carefully washed her face. Several bits burned and stung, others near entirely numb. Her nose definitely didn't feel right but it mainly just hurt when she touched it. She could still breathe and smell. Kate looked back up and smiled lightly. *From Halloween costume to MMA fighter.*

Her face was covered in bruises and cuts. Her cheeks felt numb, the right side of her visage a little swelled. *Looks like I got into several fights.* Kate's grin vanished when the thought crossed her mind. She lowered her head to the basin and retched for a few seconds. Nothing of substance came out. She brushed away the spittle hanging from her lips and shuddered. Images of smashed in goblin heads came to her mind. She forced herself to think back, reliving the battle with a clear mind. *There were so many. I didn't hesitate at all. Just went out into the forest and killed them all.*

She no longer felt the strange joy. More apprehension, fear of a loss of control, and a strange confidence. Her dreams made sense. Of course it did. She had thought she could fight, and she really could. Injured and armed with a crowbar of all things. Kate checked the bandage now, still seeped by now dried blood. She pulled on the fabric and raised it a little. *Skin... perfectly healthy.*

“Hmm... toll for the living indeed,” she mused. Kate closed the door for a moment and pulled down her pants. Most of the cuts were indeed shallow, two bandages likely taking care of the worst ones. The wound from the arrow didn't hurt anymore, a quick check revealing the skin perfectly recovered as well. *Scary. But I won't complain.* She forced herself to look at the corner in her vision, messages expanding when she focused on them.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Archer]'

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Archer]'

...

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Archer]'

There were nine in total.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Orc Raider]'

'ding' 'Berserker reaches lvl 2'

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

'ding' 'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 2'

Kate instantly allocated the new stats into Vitality.

The whole thing definitely felt weird. But right now she was more worried about getting some fresh clothes, food, and most importantly, a coffee.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 2

- Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 2

- Active: Furious Dance – lvl 2

- Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 1

- Active:

- Active:

- Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 2

- Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 2

- Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 2

- Passive:

- Passive:

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 14

Endurance: 12

Perseverance: 2

Strength: 9

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 8 Eggs and Bacon

Kate closed her eyes as a warm feeling spread through her, the feeling likely caused by the two new points added to her Vitality. The stinging pain from the many cuts and bruises didn't feel quite as present anymore. She closed her hands into fists. It almost felt like her skin had become harder, or thicker. She stretched and flexed her muscles before she allowed herself a small smile. *It does feel better. Definitely the right decision.*

She grabbed her crowbar and rinsed it under warm flowing water. A rag helped get rid of the dried blood and the few pieces still stuck to it. Kate tried not to look too closely, her eyes focused on the reflection of herself in the large bathroom mirror. She thought her cheeks had a little more color compared to before, but it could've just been the light. *Not an absolute mess anymore, just a mess.*

Done with the quick cleaning, she went to the bathroom and washed her hands after. Her stomach growled. "Yes. I agree," she murmured.

Kate left the bathroom, greeted by the morning sunlight and an expanding view of Maar Valley, snow capped mountain range in the distance. The air was crisp but not yet freezing. A sweater alone wasn't quite enough anymore to stay outside for long. She took a deep breath and walked over to Bert's house. Hearing voices from within, she opened the door and went inside.

Kate rubbed her hands as she entered, shivering at the sudden change in temperature. It was a little too warm for her liking, but she assumed it was the old man's doing. The ground floor was split into an open kitchen and a spacious living room. An older TV sat on a long wooden cabinet, a yellow leather sofa in front of it with a brown arm chair to the side. The kitchen housed various shelves and cabinets mounted to the walls, yellow tiles with inlaid flower designs giving it an eighties feeling. Sunlight came in through the front windows, a floor lamp in the living room adding its warm light. Wooden stairs to the right led up to the first floor of the home.

Jonathan, Melusine, Celeste, and Grey sat around the dining table in the kitchen, most of their plates already empty. If not for the tired expressions on their faces, one might've mistaken them for a family on vacation. Eloise wore a white apron, her hair bound in a messy bun when she turned and looked at Kate. "Eggs and bacon?" she greeted with a light smile.

"God, yes," Kate murmured. "Don't suppose anyone has a fresh sweater?"

"I'll fetch you one," Melusine said and stood up. "Your pants are all cut up too."

"I noticed," Kate said, looking for coffee when Eloise handed her a mug.

"Black, no sugar, right?" the girl asked.

Kate smiled, receiving the mug with near divine care before she sat down on one of the empty chairs and rested her crowbar against it. She closed her eyes and drank. Hot but not scalding. She sighed and set down the mug, half empty already. Eloise walked over with a smooth motion and refilled it.

"Thanks," Kate said.

Melusine joined them again. She put down a set of clothes on the table. "The shower is upstairs. You're filthy, darling."

Kate just smiled at her.

“You look better than yesterday,” Jonathan said. “How are you feeling?”

Kate looked at him and sipped from her coffee. “Hungry, tired, scared, confused. I’m focusing on one at a time.”

A light smile tugged on his lips. “And here I hoped you’d be the hero we saw last night.”

That wasn’t me. Not fully.

She didn’t dare voice the thought, silence descending on the room. Her spoon clinked in the mug as she took another sip.

Eloise put down a plate in front of her, the scent of freshly fried bacon getting her back on track.

She wolfed down the food before she sat back and slid down in her chair a little. Kate took her mug and sighed. “So, any plans?”

Jon scratched the back of his head and looked at Melusine. “It depends on... how everyone’s doing. You, Logan, and Grey most of all. We... need supplies. Ethan is getting worse. The faster we can get them, the better. I-”

“I’ll go,” Kate interrupted him and took a sip of coffee. “Grey, think you can come with me? I’d take Logan too but he didn’t seem perfectly healthy.”

“Concussion. He has... magic,” Melusine said. “Without it, I didn’t like his chances.”

Him as well. Hopefully something that doesn’t change him into a thoughtless murder machine, Kate thought and puffed. Deep dark energy filled her veins, her body supplied with caffeine and calories to burn.

“I... yes, if,” Grey said and glanced at Jon.

“Bert is on guard duty now. I’m up next. The gate is closed and it should hold for a while, even if... monsters come again. We have crossbows and if all that fails, Bert still has his shotgun. Nothing else attacked since the group last night,” Jon said. “Others will be scavenging what they can as well. If we can find more people, that would help too, but medical supplies are the priority.”

“I used up nearly everything we had here already. I prepared a list. Painkillers and fresh bandages are the highest priority,” Melusine said and put a piece of paper on the table.

“There’s a pharmacy in Keilberg. We can check out the general store too,” Kate said.

Grey gulped.

“Cars outside yours?” she asked.

Eloise had sat down as well, eyes focused on the table.

Jon showed her the keys. “Yes. The Mercedes.”

She looked at him but he avoided her eyes. “I’d prefer the other one. Looked smaller, less loud probably.”

“It’s a hybrid. Noise shouldn’t be a problem. Probably better secured too, more space, and less likely to break down,” he said.

“Fair enough,” Kate said. “Can you drive, Grey?”

The man shook his head.

"I can," Jon said.

Melusine touched his hand. The two shared a look, quiet for a few seconds.

"We will just get supplies," he said. "I can take Bert's car. He gave us the keys, I think he understands the gravity of the situation now as well. Maybe the... battle, last night got to him."

"We take one car. His has too little space. If we find the time, we can get another one in town. I know Lars has a truck. We'd get ten times as much stuff back with that one," Kate said.

Jon nodded, his eyes not meeting hers. He looked to his daughters instead. "Celeste, do you want to go check on Ethan and Logan? You can bring them some food as well."

"Okay," the girl said and stood up. She grabbed two plates and left a minute later.

"Have you dealt with the bodies already?" Kate asked. "Even if the undead thing isn't going to happen, we shouldn't leave them around."

Jon hesitated. "Is it really necessary? Can we not just bury them?"

"Maybe. Look, we all know pretty much nothing about what the hell is happening. But with what we do know, I think it's best we make sure. The smoke might attract other things but so will the bodies of all those goblins and orcs," Kate said. "And maybe it will attract survivors."

"You want to burn the m... monster bodies too?" Eloise asked.

"Wild animals and disease would be troublesome," Melusine said. "Especially without access to an equipped hospital. The nearest one is in Falstadt, and with everything happening, it's not certain how long we'll have electricity."

"Nothing new on the radios either," Jon said. "Bert says he saw a plane earlier, but likely not military. The valley has quieted down too."

"Same warning still on all frequencies?" Kate asked and received a nod in response. "Thank you for the breakfast, Eloise. We'll try to get some nice food back too. Before it all goes bad," she said and stood up, not about to waste any more time. If they wanted to survive, they had to prepare as well as they could. *And there might still be people in Keilberg, hiding.* She pushed away any thoughts of people she knew there. Worrying would not help. *Keep busy. Do what you can,* she reminded herself. *Don't let it overwhelm you. The flames will spread, every step can be the difference between saving a life and losing one.*

Kate stood up and grabbed the clothes. "I'll get that shower. Melusine, I'll need a first aid kit with everything you can put together. The thickest pants, jackets, and gloves you can find for me and Grey. Knives, a fire axe, small weapons in case we lose ours. Food, water, backpacks, and bags. And anything else we could need," she said and touched Grey's shoulder. "You're sure you're ready for this?"

He gulped and avoided her eyes. Then he nodded, ever so slightly.

"That's my katana guy," she said and squeezed his shoulder. "Good job last night. You saved our lives," she added and walked up to find the shower.

Warm water ran down her hair and body, the experience not exactly pleasant with all the small cuts she still had. And still it felt good. Important. She dried herself off and put on a fresh shirt. A little

too large for her, then a hoodie, boxer briefs, a pair of jeans, and her slashed work pants on top. The bathroom was small, a shower and toilet squeezed into the room with a tiny basin and a mirror. Her reflection looked less dead by now, red hair wet and clinging to her face. She took a deep breath and bound it all into a secure bun. “You can do this, Kate,” she said, noticing her lightly shaking hands. She made fists and then grabbed the crowbar.

The preparations took half an hour, everyone decked out with warm and thick clothes, weapons, water, food, and small backpacks. Larger ones and bags were stored in the car’s back seats.

Grey wore a brown skiing helmet and a blue balaclava that covered all but his eyes. A green and pink winter jacket over a few pieces of mismatched armor, black skiing pants, and thick military boots. He looked like a kid who had raided Bert’s closet, holding his katana with slightly drooped shoulders.

Good thing the old man is a fucking hoarder, Kate thought, her own jacket and gloves a little tight around all the clothes she wore below. Everything was quite used and rather old, but high quality.

“Return before nightfall,” Bert said, holding his shotgun in a casual manner. He had donned a hunting hat, the existence of the accessory giving Kate a bit more confidence in his ability to wield the weapon.

“We will. And you shut yourselves into the armory while we’re gone,” Jon said. He had donned a few pieces of armor just like Grey, a scabbard with a short sword strapped to his belt and a crossbow in his hands, currently not loaded.

Kate gripped her crowbar as she waited for the man to say his goodbyes to Melusine and their daughters. She had wondered many times if the walls she put up with other people were worth not having what they had. Right now she was glad she didn’t have to worry as much. It didn’t feel right to take him along, but three people had a much better chance than two. And they could get another car. Jon was afraid, but so was she, and so was Grey.

“We should get going,” she said and started towards the castle gate.

Grey followed, Jon too a few seconds later.

“I didn’t ask before, but do you have relatives in Keilberg?” Kate asked as she removed the heavy bar at the gate.

“My... m... mom. But she’s... on a business trip,” he said.

Kate looked up. “Where is she?”

“I d... don’t remember,” he said, looking at the ground. “She’s not here... often.”

“I see,” she said and slowly walked outside, checking for any creatures Bert might’ve missed before. Visibility was good and she could neither hear nor see anything. “Looks clear,” she said and opened the car. They had agreed that she would drive, knowing the area much better than Jon.

Jon got in next to her. He fumbled with the crossbow and his sword but finally sat down and put on his seat belt. Grey got in one of the back seats, his Katana sheathed and held with both hands.

Kate turned the key and the car sprung to life, near fully silent. Jon gave her a quick run down before she drove out of the parking spot, the gravel ground below the tires, bodies already moved aside. Melusine and the kids waved from the battlements, Bert ushering them back down.

They had about fifty kilometers left on electricity before they'd have to switch to the combustion engine, more than enough for a few trips down to Keilberg. "The drive shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. But I think it's best if we park at a viewing spot above the town. Higher chance of not getting spotted if we move down on foot."

"A map would've been useful," Jon said.

Kate got her pack and gave it to the man. "Phone in the small pocket at the top. Code is four five four five."

"Google maps needs internet," Grey said.

"Exactly. Which is why I downloaded the offline maps, both for wandering and from google. Open the latter, it has all the buildings in it too," she said.

Jon fiddled with it for a little while before he glanced over. "I'm getting a lot of errors."

Kate took the phone and held it behind herself, eyes on the road as she drove slowly through the forest, trees moving past on each side with sunlight breaking through.

Grey took it and handed it back to Jon a few seconds later. "It's in airplane mode too," he said. "Might use less power if it doesn't try to connect all the time."

"Thanks," Kate said, tempted to put on the radio before she remembered it only had one channel at the moment and that one wasn't music.

"Oh... the pharmacy is pretty central... baker... the skiing store might be good too. No police?" Jon asked.

Kate puffed. "Really? In Keilberg? Nothing happens here, other than one brutal murder every thirty years."

"Really?" Grey asked.

She sighed. "No. But I wouldn't be surprised. It's always towns like this in thrillers."

"In reality as well?" Jon asked. "Not much else other than a few restaurants and hotels."

"How should I know? I'm a firefighter, not a police woman. And yes, not much around here. Hotels should be quiet too. Even in the skiing season they're not particularly busy," she said.

The conversation died after that, everyone sitting with their thoughts for the rest of the short drive, there sure as hell was plenty to process.

Kate parked in the first spot at the viewing point, the entire parking area empty. She waited for a moment and turned to Jon. "Leave it running?"

He nodded, hands white as he gripped his weapons.

"Let's move then," she said and left the car. Down here it felt a little warmer already, but she assumed it had more to do with her clothing than the change in altitude. A simple paved road led down into the small town. Houses dotted the area, most of them rather old with brown or red tiled

triangular roofs. The forest moved into the town from the slope of the mountains, brown and golden leaves rustling in the wind.

Kate had chills on her arms. It was quiet. Granted, Keilberg was always quiet, but never quite like this. "Get that crossbow loaded," she said.

Jon did as she suggested. It took a moment because he looked up a few times but in the end he managed.

Grey had strapped the scabbard to his backpack, the sword held with both hands and aimed towards the ground.

Kate led them, her crowbar at the ready as she walked down the slope in the hopes to get some more cover in the trees. They soon reached the first building, so far no sign of any monsters in the area. She moved close to the wall and walked towards the edge. Looking around the corner, she could see the side street leading down into the town proper. Kate was about to turn around when she heard a tearing sound from the left, her breath caught as she signaled her companions to wait.

The sound came from within the house. A few growls in between the tears.

Something biting down... into flesh, she thought and gripped her weapon. "Something inside, eating," she whispered to the others, listening to hear if the being heard her speak. She crept towards the door a few meters ahead, the house a single story home with windows all around. Kate couldn't see anything until she came to the open entrance, the wooden door splintered and broken in. A glance around the corner revealed a dog like being. She thought it large and downright made of muscle, its maw biting down into a corpse.

She moved back and held her breath, taking a few seconds to calm herself as well as she could. Kate pointed at Jon's crossbow and then towards the door, she made a monster like expression to indicate what was waiting inside. *The legs were moving. It's eating a person.* The thought was pushed back as she gripped her weapon.

Jon crept closer and took a look as well. His arms shook as he aimed. He took a deep breath and held it, his eyes focused on the monster before he fired.

The twang of the string resounded as the bolt was fired forward.

Kate pulled the paralyzed man back as she prepared her weapon. She looked around the corner and saw the beast turn around with a staggering motion, a whine resounding as it tried to get to its back with its clawed front paws. Its face looked hideous, long teeth lining its jaws, beady black eyes looking down the small corridor as it growled and charged.

She trusted her weapon and stepped aside, the being staggering out of the entrance before she slammed her crowbar into its skull.

Kate jumped back when it lashed out with its clawed paws. Another strike snapped its head to the side before Grey pierced his blade into the monster's neck.

The thing sagged down, whimpering one last time before it died.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Warg]'

Kate shuddered, waiting for more monsters to come but nothing happened. She started towards the corridor when Jonathan touched her shoulder.

"No time," he said with an apologetic tone.

“Right,” she murmured and tried to at least close the door. The hinges were broken. She gulped before she crouched down and pulled out the crossbow bolt from the monster’s back. Her companions had strained expressions on their faces. They were looking at her. *Fucking hell.*

Kate took a deep breath and started towards the main road.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 2

- Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 2

- Active: Furious Dance – lvl 2

- Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 1

- Active:

- Active:

- Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 2

- Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 2

- Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 2

- Passive:

- Passive:

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 14

Endurance: 12

Perseverance: 2

Strength: 9

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 9 Carnage

The group of survivors continued through the town of Keilberg. So far there were no signs of any other humans in the area. Living ones that was.

Kate gulped, a flash of the corpse she had just seen going through her mind. *Stay focused.* She checked behind herself, the two men following with quiet steps, making as little noise as they possibly could.

The outskirts of the small town consisted mostly of lone standing houses much like the one they had gone into. A few of the roofs were burnt, some walls entirely broken in and every door opened with force. She wasn't sure goblins alone could've done that kind of damage. More Wargs perhaps or even Orcs. If they wielded their blades or hammers, a door made out of wood couldn't withstand an assault for long.

Compared to large cities, the people living here had little reason to add security doors to their houses. Kate hoped a group of people had managed to stay safe in the core of the town. The buildings there were larger, and she was sure a few of them had bunkers. Still there from the cold war era.

"Wait," Grey whispered from behind, pointing at a single house about forty meters to their right.

Kate squinted her eyes and saw a single goblin. The green creature wore simple brown pants and a padded long sleeved chest piece. A dagger was strapped to the string going around its waist. It looked out into the forest.

She moved forward, ushering the others to follow. A few steps and they couldn't see the creature anymore.

"S... shouldn't we kill it?" Grey asked in a whisper.

"We don't know how many there are," Kate answered. "Could be a few, could be hundreds," she added. "Thanks for the warning."

They spotted a few more single Goblins in the next minutes, growling noises from within the buildings growing more frequent as well. Blood now dotted the streets here and there. More of the houses closer to the center had been set aflame, their windows shattered, some even fully collapsed.

Her heart sank when they reached the central square. She took a step back and nearly stumbled into Grey. He just barely stepped aside, focused enough to react.

"Wh..." he got out when he saw the same thing. He was about to make a noise when Kate's hand covered his mouth.

She pointed to the building behind them. A square slab of concrete that housed the local tourism office and a few apartments above. Kate shook her head at Jon before he had rounded the corner to see the square.

The building seemed clear, no noises coming from within.

Kate gripped her crowbar and went inside, the glass door broken down like everywhere else. She checked the few rooms on the ground floor and went upstairs. The others didn't talk as she stopped near the first apartment door, forced open.

She nodded to the others and went inside.

The living room had been turned upside down, picture frames, pots, and furniture broken and strewn about. The door to the bedroom was open but her eyes fell onto the bathroom instead. No lights were on but sunlight flickered in through a few of the windows. She walked to the door with quick steps and closed it, the person inside not someone she could help anymore. *Like a wild animal attack*, she thought and sat down on the couch, both hands gripping her weapon as she tried to stop the shaking.

"S... should I close t... the door?" Grey asked in a whisper.

She looked up and gave him a light nod. *Right. Not why we're here. Not why we're here.*

"I remember this building. We're not far from the center are we?" Jon asked.

Grey drew his sword and checked the bedroom before he came back.

"There's... I've never seen anything like it," Kate said. The image of the square covered in blood, half eaten corpses, bits and pieces of humans. It was all she could do not to puke up her breakfast. She felt sick. Out of her depth. There had been Wargs too, more than one, still feasting on the humans. Humans she had known. Most not in a personal manner but she had seen most everyone in the small town at least a few times.

Jon grabbed both her shoulders. "Kate. We need you. Here."

"R... right," she said and took a deep breath. *If we don't move, we're just going to be adding to the bodies.* She stood up and sneaked to the bedroom. The blinds were open, two sets of windows looking out onto both the main square and the street on which all the main stores were located. She looked out onto the square, three Wargs visible within the carnage. She focused on the knight statue at the center of it all. The stone sculpture stood beheaded, his sword broken and left on the ground, blood covered just like the horse he still sat on.

She ground her teeth and sat down for a moment. An absolute slaughter and an attack on her home. Kate felt something click in her mind, as if a calm came over her. Maybe it was part of her magic, one of her skills, or her Class itself. But she knew just getting supplies wouldn't be the end of it. Not for her. She grit her teeth and took a deep breath.

A glance out onto the main street showed a similar scene, albeit less extensive. Bodies still littered the ground, some as if thrown out from the windows of their homes.

Kate walked back and pointed towards the street. "No Wargs towards the store. Out through the back door and onward behind the buildings. The pharmacy is the fourth one," she said and walked to the door. She hesitated. "Bodies out on the street. They're all dead," she added, perhaps in part for herself. "We stay quiet."

Jon nodded, his face strained and crossbow ready. Grey did the same, both waiting for her to lead the way.

She opened the door and left, down the stairs and out through the back door. A glance around showed no creatures in sight, a single body in the small field ahead. A man in his thirties, four

arrows sticking out of his chest. His face looked familiar but she had never learned his name. Kate ripped her gaze off the form and moved onward, quietly through the trimmed and yellowing grass.

A cool wind picked up, the smell giving her pause. Blood and death. *We'll need those masks*, she thought, checking for any monsters as they crept through the mostly quiet town.

It had been her home, desecrated and turned into nothing more than a ghost town. Filled with savage beasts and the corpses of her neighbors. Kate knew then, that no matter what happened that day, she would come back.

The doors to the pharmacy were broken in, just like everywhere else. Blood covered parts of the floor. Whatever had been injured here, had been dragged out and away. Most of the glass cabinets had been broken. Wooden drawers lined the walls behind the counter, some of them cracked open but the majority left alone. Medicine was strewn all about the bloodied and glass shard covered floor, the storefront smashed in but in the shade.

"Close the door, we have some cover behind the counter," Kate whispered behind herself. "We need keys," she said and got her backpack. Her crowbar still in hand, she started to chuck every intact box and pill blister she could see into her pack. "Only small glass bottles," she said as Jon started doing the same.

Grey checked the counter itself, searching through the open drawers until he motioned towards Kate. He held a set of keys.

"Let me check," Kate said as he handed them to her.

It took them near twenty minutes of quiet and tense work to open all the drawers and empty the contents into their packs. None of them cared for the actual list Melusine had given them. They just decided to take everything they could get before this building too was burned down or searched by someone else.

"We s... should leave... a note," Grey said. He had reserved a single pack of near everything they had found and put it into one of the drawers, the keys returned to where he had found them. "Others might come."

Kate glanced at him and nodded. "Good idea," she said with a light smile, walking over as she grabbed a random piece of paper and a pen.

Come to Keilberg Castle, survivors there. She wrote the words and hesitated. *Can they read and speak English?* She found she didn't care. The chance of a human searching through the pharmacy was much higher than them going through everything again. Not with the lack of care they showed in their actions. She added directions, estimated walking time, and kilometers before she added the piece of paper to the collection of medicine Grey had prepared in one of the drawers. They locked it and shouldered their packs.

"Mine is nearly full," Jon informed with a shaking voice.

"Same here," Kate said. "But we should check the skiing store anyway. They should have larger packs. We'll circle around afterwards," she said and checked her phone. "Half past two."

The two men nodded.

She glanced over the counter, the door to the left slightly ajar. *A side room? Storage or a cellar?* "I'll check the door quickly," she said and was about to go when Jon touched her shoulder.

"We go together," he said.

She looked at him for a long moment before she nodded.

The door led into a small hallway, one door revealing a toilet. Stairs on the other side led down into the cellar. Kate turned on the lights. They found boxes of medical and cleaning supplies ripped open and strewn about. A human corpse sat against one of the walls, her eyes open, deep cuts on her stomach with blood pooling below her legs. Kate stopped and turned off the lights.

“I think we have enough for now.”

Her companions didn't complain, the group moving up and out the back of the pharmacy before they made their way to the next store.

Whoever had gone through the skiing store didn't do a whole lot of damage. Some of the clothing racks were on the ground and the skis themselves were piled up on the wall they would normally rest against. The front door leaned against its hinges, sunlight coming in through the high windows but most everything inside shrouded in shadows. They checked but found no monsters.

Kate took off her ripped work pants, her jacket, and gloves. “Let's gear up,” she said in a whisper and started going through the trove of high quality equipment. A pair of mountaineering pants for seven hundred bucks, a backpack worth four hundred. She moved on to thermal underwear, gloves, hunting and army knives. There was so much useful stuff in the store that they had to consult with each other on what to take. Their previous backpacks fit into the new ones, dark green colors to help obscure their large forms.

Kate strapped four large hunting knives to her belt, Grey copying her as soon as he saw it. There was enough here to equip half a town for a month-long expedition into the mountains. Which was essentially what they tried to accomplish, for the smaller group they were at least. “Can you carry more?” she asked the two.

Both looked at her with strained expressions, the heavy packs already more than enough.

She didn't say a word, grabbing a large sports bag and filling it with more gear.

“Kate...” Grey whispered from near the storefront. He was crouched and looking out onto the street.

She moved over and followed his gaze.

A single goblin stood in front of the Golden Swan, the little creature shooting an arrow into a nearby corpse, looking around with a lazy expression.

The large establishment was the jewel of Keilberg, the rustic restaurant and hotel attracting more tourists than anything else in the area.

“Why is it there?” she whispered. *What are you guarding?*

They moved back to Jon and told him about the goblin.

“Should we do something?” he asked.

Kate glanced at each of them in turn. “What if there are people inside?”

“You want to fight it?” Grey asked.

She hesitated. “I've... killed a lot of them already. I can take one,” she said. “If you two don't want to risk it, you can wait here...”

Jon gulped.

Grey looked at her. "I'll come too."

"I..." Jon whispered.

"Watch from the storefront. If you see us running back, get the bags and move them out back. Or shoot whatever is following us," Kate whispered and put down her two bags near the back door. She took off her boots as well and motioned to Grey.

He did the same and unsheathed his katana.

Jon gave her a nod but avoided her eyes. "I... I'm sorry... I j... my daugh-"

She grabbed his shoulder. "It's fine. Time for that later. Grey, we move," she said and went out the back.

The two of them sneaked past another building before Kate glanced around the corner. She could see a piece of the bow the creature was holding up but its body itself was obscured. "I go, you follow. Once it's dead, I'll check inside. You follow half a minute later, in case I have to come out quietly. If you hear fighting, you come inside."

Grey nodded.

He listens, good, she thought and crept forward while checking her corners. It was eerily quiet. Kate didn't remember if she had ever experienced Keilberg so silent. She focused and glanced around the corner. The goblin was right there, just a few meters to her left.

It snickered to itself as it prepared another arrow.

She waited until it shot, three quick steps bringing her next to the creature.

Yellow eyes turned towards her when she slammed the hunting knife into its neck.

Kate moved behind it and covered its mouth with her gloved hand, the knife deep in the gurgling monster's throat. It stopped moving a few seconds later, a message appearing in the corner of her vision. The goblin was dead.

Grey had managed to grab the bow before it fell to the floor, the man now standing next to the entrance with his blade at the ready, the weapon shaking ever so slightly.

She lowered down the corpse and rested it next to the entrance. A quick glance towards the square in the distance showed no monsters on the way. And so she went inside. The lock had been broken with brute force, allowing her to simply push the door open without much effort. Inside, she slowly closed the entrance again with a last glance towards Grey.

The entryway led into a small coat room, a door to the left marked with the signs of toilets. The one to the right was open, the sound of a crackling fire coming from within. *I missed the smoke*, she thought and crept inside on her socks. The room was warm, strong smells of sweat and roasted meat coming her way.

All the tables and chairs of the main room had either been smashed or pushed aside, some stacked and covering the many windows, others reduced to wooden bits and piled up. Kate froze near the door, with her eyes on over a dozen sleeping monsters, all of them goblins.

She forced herself not to gulp, not to breathe. *Get out*. The thought made her take a step back. Another one, and then one more.

Kate sneaked out and put a finger to her mouth. She waited until the door closed behind her as well as it could before she moved her face close to Grey. “A shit ton of goblins inside. They’re sleeping. We’re leaving, now.”

He nodded quickly and turned.

Kate sighed, taking a last glance towards the square when her eyes fell on the corpse riddled with arrows. A burly man, jeans and a brown leather jacket, his one remaining eye open and lifeless, his hair and stomach covered in blood. She knew him. It was Lars, the man she hoped would’ve somehow managed to hide himself away with whoever had survived.

Her lips quivered, her head slightly tilting to the side. She inhaled sharply. The sound made Grey pause and turn around. Kate looked from the corpse to the young man. A ringing sound came to one of her ears, then in both. The broken in homes, the massacre, all the blood, all the bodies. It had all seemed so surreal, a lucid nightmare, their task in the town clear and rational. She had known that she would come back, had known that she wasn’t ready, not for what she was about to do.

But Kate knew that if she left here. Right now. That something inside of her would break.

She wanted to protect those who had survived. A part of her knew it was all she could do, all she should do. But another part demanded more. It demanded blood. Payment for what these creatures had done to her home.

She stood there for a long moment, gripping her crowbar as she stared into nothing. Her eyes focused again, her breathing steady, her heartbeat slow. “Leave,” she said in a whisper and turned around. Her magic activated, her senses sharpening as she went back inside.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 2

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 2***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 2***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 1***
- ***Active:***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 2***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 2***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 2***
- ***Passive:***
- ***Passive:***

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 14

Endurance: 12

Perseverance: 2

Strength: 9

Dexterity: 8
Intelligence: 7
Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 10 Blood

Kate couldn't hear her own breath or her own heartbeat. The ringing in her ears had stopped. *Quiet. Sleeping.*

She repeated the words inside her head as she crept into the restaurant she had once known. They had taken it, were sleeping on the floor as if it was theirs.

Kate felt the resistance as she pushed down the sharp hunting knife. She removed it and crept on to the next monster. Bloodied blade in hand, she crouched down to each of the small green creatures. She stabbed into their throats with slow and calculated movements, the gurgling sounds now louder as they drowned in their own blood.

She grit her teeth. *Quiet. Fight! Quiet.*

Her body twitched as she bit her tongue, the taste of blood filling her mouth as she continued through the room. The dull pain felt good, calmed her down. She wanted to use her crowbar, wanted to crush their skulls, wanted to see their fear, hear their dying words. But she stayed calm, forced herself to move through the room.

Another was by her side now. An ally, she remembered. He helped. Killed with her in tandem. And he would fight, when the time came.

His mouth moved when their work was done but she didn't listen to his words.

There were more, she knew, upstairs. And so she crept onward, ignoring the sounds of all the monsters they had left to die. *They have to pay. All of them. Have to pay.*

She ground her teeth, blood dripping from her chin. A glance around the corner revealed a monster at the end of a long wooden corridor. Its yellow eyes were half closed, the creature forcing itself to stay awake.

Too far, she knew. Quiet. Impossible.

She tried to communicate her frustration but failed to form coherent words, maybe because of the blood in her mouth. It was terribly hard to focus on talking.

Her ally looked at her and glanced around the corner. He lightly tapped the wall near the stairs.

Not quiet!

She grabbed his chest but he just pointed towards the corridor, fear in his eyes.

Kate stopped. She heard the sound of tapping feet, confused sounds coming from the creature woken by the noise. *Smart*, she thought and pressed herself against the wall, blade at the ready.

She turned the moment the creature came close enough, her knife ramming into the being with a hook like blow, the weapon penetrating into its chin and through half its skull as she raised it up from the ground. She let it fall and stabbed it a few more times to make sure. Blood splattered onto her clothes, the stench of shit and piss mixing in with everything else.

"Kate, we should go," her ally whispered.

She looked at him with a confused expression. *More enemies.* The thought was clear, she could tell there were more. The one green monster was guarding others. Six closed doors remained in the hall and she had to kill what hid within. She stepped over the mutilated corpse and ripped her arm free of the pathetic grip of her ally.

He was scared. She could downright smell his fear.

Kate opened the first door. *Quiet.* A dark room lay within, a bit of light coming in through the half closed blinds. She shut the door behind herself and moved, quick steps bringing her next to the large bed. A sleeping orc lay within. Kate aimed her blood soaked hunting knife and stabbed down at the large monster's exposed throat.

The weapon sunk into its flesh. Yellow eyes shot open as it went to grab its throat, the creature rolling out of the bed and clattering to the floor with a gurgling sound.

Kate raised her crowbar and waited for the opening. It came a second later as the beast looked up. She ripped off half its face with the first strike. The next one broke something. It took another five strikes to kill it. She closed her eyes and shuddered, blood pooling below the cooling corpse.

Her ally had entered the room as well, his stare the same as it had been before.

Fear.

She touched his shoulder and squeezed. *Quiet.*

"We... will... win," she whispered and locked her eyes with his. "Not... afraid."

He took a deep breath and got out of the way, his blade half covered in blood.

She smiled at the sight. He was with her.

The opposite room was much darker but she could hear the enemy. Could see the silhouette. A single goblin, sleeping on the floor and on top of a blanket. He wore more clothes than the others, trinkets and monster pieces in its thin gray hair and beard. The creature died the same as all the others. It gurgled and sputtered as it tried to raise its hand towards a small wooden staff. Kate stomped her foot down on its small fingers, bones breaking as the creature whined. *Yes. Die,* she thought and grabbed its bleeding neck, her knife falling onto the blanket. She raised it up and looked into its eyes. *You made. A mistake,* she thought. The words didn't come out but she knew it understood. *Pain and fear.*

She let him fall onto the blanket and grabbed her knife again.

Her ally stood next to the door, waiting with his blade.

Kate turned around, alert as she heard steps from beyond the closed door. Heavy impacts shook the wooden frame as her ally jumped back. She pointed at a dark corner and threw her knife aside. More noises, a set of shouts. Doors slamming. She pointed at the entrance and then down towards the ground floor, two fingers there. "Three. Enemies."

The door was opened with a strong push, a massive orc stepping inside with his chipped and bloodied curved sword in hand. He uttered something as his eyes fell on Kate. He charged with a shout when he saw the dead goblin.

Kate sidestepped the powerful strike. She swung her crowbar in return but found the orc crouching before he slammed his shoulder into her. The blow raised her off the ground, all the air in her lungs

punched out with blood splattering out from her bitten tongue. She landed on her legs but stumbled, hitting the wall behind her as she watched his blade descend from above.

She held up her crowbar with one hand, just barely slowing the blade before it dug into her jacket covered shoulder. It severed the fabric and bit into her flesh. Kate grinned and raised her other hand with another one of her hunting knives, the weapon digging into the underside of his left arm. She let go of the blade and pushed up with the crowbar, using both hands now. She just barely managed to get the hooked weapon out of her shoulder before she kned him right between his legs. A steel blade came in from the side and stabbed into his neck before he staggered back and growled something in his guttural tongue.

Kate didn't let him finish. She had taken another of her knives and held it up at the height of his face. Reckless charge activated as her body was forced forward with a surge of energy. Her blade impacted his face with a dull sound. Her wrist twisting from the impact, the two falling down with her weapon embedded deeply in its head.

She stumbled up and heard steel hit steel, something clattering to the ground. Kate rushed up to see her ally dodge a blow before he was stabbed in his stomach.

No.

Her charge activated once more, her crowbar swinging forward and impacting the large orc in his chest. She took a step to the side, the orc doing the same as they glared at each other. A gash showed on his chest, his weapon gone as he reeled over. Her descending crowbar was caught in his hand before a blow hit her head. This time no teeth went flying. Her nose didn't break. The second strike made her head snap to the side, her hand going for the last knife on her belt, too slippery to grip the handle.

Another strike hit her head, Kate falling to the ground with her vision swimming. The ringing sound returned. A kick sent her on her back, the air pushed out of her. She scrambled up as the orc recovered his sword. He swung down at her but she rolled aside. The being staggered when the bloodied tip of a blade broke out of its stomach.

"Fuck you," Grey murmured before they both went down in a clatter.

Kate grabbed the knife and moved to the orc, a heavy strike into his neck severing the spine. She felt her vision go dark when a bit of energy returned to her. The world had gone back to normal, her focus gone, pain coming from her face and shoulder. Her eyes opened wide. "Grey!" she turned him around, a slight smile on his face as he looked up at her. Blood soaked through his jacket. "Fuck... we have to get you out of here... there was another one," she said with a stuttering voice, grabbing one of the knives and pushing it into the sheath on the side of her belt.

"It... s... okay," the boy got out.

"You shut the fuck up and stay awake," she answered.

Stomach wound.

Kate grabbed her crowbar and raised him in a princess carry, hoping the sword hadn't penetrated all the way through. He wasn't the heaviest man, but neither was she in any state to carry someone, let alone in such a difficult manner. And yet she pushed on. She listened as she stumbled down the stairs. Her eyes fell on the near twenty goblins on the ground floor, all their throats cut. She knew it had been her. Her and Grey. *What the fuck did I do? Why? We were supposed to get supplies and leave. We're not here to...* She remembered the face of Lars, an arrow in his eye, thought back to the

massacre on the main square, the moving legs of the man eaten by a Warg. She gulped. She understood.

It was supposed to be me. Just me, she thought and hurried out into the open. An orc lay in front of the skiing store, a wooden bolt stuck in its head. She walked past and inside. “Jon. Help me,” she said, forcing herself not to shout.

She knew there were more monsters around. At least her state of battle didn’t push her to fight on. In a way she was glad the orc had punched in her face. She set Grey down at the back of the store and opened her pack. Jon did the same, spilling out the medical supplies he had in his, hands shaking as he looked for something appropriate.

Kate grabbed the first large bandage she could see and rushed back to Grey. She opened his two jackets and moved back his shirt, wiping away the blood from his stomach with a clean cloth. The wound looked bad but there was no time to consider. She pushed the gauze down and grabbed another. “Jon, come here, put pressure on it,” she said and started moving the bandage around Grey.

Jon listened to her words, stepping next to her and applying pressure to the bandage.

Quick breaths and adrenaline kept them going, the three people entangled as layer after layer of cloth was wrapped around the injured man’s abdomen. Kate slapped his cheeks when the second bandage was done. “Stay with me, Grey,” she said and wrapped a third one around him. “We need to get out of here. Fast,” she said.

Jon just shook his head slowly, eyes on his blood covered hands as his breathing sped up.

Kate grabbed his face with both her hands. “Focus. We’re here. You’re here. Wipe the blood on a cloth, pack the bags again. I’ll get us that truck,” she finished and stood up. Kate ran towards the exit when her legs gave under her, just barely managing to catch herself on the door frame with her vision blurring. *Magic.* She focused on the bottom right of her vision.

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

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

...

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

She moved past the kill notifications to what she deemed relevant.

‘ding’ ‘Berserker reaches lvl 3’

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

‘ding’ ‘Berserker reaches lvl 4’

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 4’

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 5'

'ding' 'Reckless Charge reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 3'

Stats, I can't fucking run anymore. Endurance, and we have to carry him. Strength.

She put two points into each of the stats. The plan had been more Vitality but if she wanted Grey to have a chance at survival, she had to move. Now. Kate felt a surge of energy flow through her, as if someone had injected her with a cocktail of steroids, caffeine, and methamphetamine, only one of which she was familiar with.

Her vision had returned to normal and she felt ready to run for hours. Kate could feel the muscles in her arms and core straining. She took in a deep breath and blinked her eyes. Then she ran.

Lars lay where they had left him. She turned him around and searched his pockets, ignoring the panicked thoughts and sinking feeling in her stomach. The keys were there. *I'll come back for you, I swear it*, she thought and grabbed her crowbar, running off towards the general store on the same street. Kate looked at the road and gulped. There were no monsters in sight at least, but a few corpses would be in the way.

The windows to the store were shattered, a chaos on the floor inside. The vegetable and fruits section was emptied. Much of the rest seemed either damaged or thrown to the ground.

She didn't go inside, instead running past the building and to the parking lot at its side. Three cars were parked, the last one being the white truck of Lars. Kate could see various dents and scratches on the vehicles but most of the windows were still intact. *Too high for goblins and wargs*, she thought and rushed to the door. Kate fumbled with the keys until she managed to get it open. A glance to the loading area showed a few empty crates but more than enough space for her companions. *Don't you dare fucking dying.*

The car sprang to life, a quick check of the fuel gauge showed just about full. "Thanks old friend," she murmured and reversed, punching the gas to get out onto the street. Kate hadn't exactly known Lars well. They had exchanged pleasantries whenever she had bought something. She distinctly remembered him hitting on her a few years back. A nice gesture really, but her stance on dating hadn't changed, and with the shit that was happening now, she didn't think it ever would.

"Don't get too close to people, you idiot," she said to herself in an angry whisper. Kate felt goosebumps on her arms when she drove through the bloodied street in reverse, wincing when the truck went over a bump. She stopped in front of the skiing store, a last glance taking in Lars's prone form. It still didn't feel real. And in a way she felt more connected to him than ever before. Kate opened the door and stepped out, her hand gripping the crowbar as she looked towards the central square, dull pain coming from her shoulder. Concerns for later.

She rushed inside and shoved a jacket under the door. "Get the bags, I'll take him," she said.

Jon nodded and rushed past her. He had moved the bags closer to the entrance, now chucking them into the back of the truck.

Kate moved down to Grey. He still breathed. She lifted him with one arm below his knees and one below his back. Kate had trained carries like this one many times before but not once had she been able to lift an adult this easily, let alone a man. She looked at Jon's strained face as he came back inside.

"The d... dogs," he said.

"Get your crossbow, and jump on the back," Kate said and moved outside, Jon coming out behind her. "Help me with him."

She raised Grey onto the loading area of the truck, Jon helping from the other side as they set him down as gently as possible.

He's gonna feel that drive, if he survives, Kate thought as she went back into the car. The growls she heard coming closer were muffled when she shut the door, two approaching wargs visible in the rear view mirrors when she slammed her foot onto the gas.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 4

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 4***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 5***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 2***
- ***Active:***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 4***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 3***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 3***
- ***Passive:***
- ***Passive:***

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 14

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 4

Strength: 11

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 11 Calm

The wheels spun against the gravel before the truck was propelled forward, Kate steering past the Golden Swan and out towards the edge of town. She saw movement through the rear mirror but focused on the road. She tried to dodge the bodies and debris as well as she could. Not a task she entirely succeeded at but they got out of town a few minutes later, the car nearly drifting as she left the main road.

Kate didn't dare ask about Grey. Instead, she checked their surroundings. The dirt road led westward but she knew the area well enough to get them back in the fastest manner possible. She just hoped it was enough.

Dark clouds had started moving through the valley, moving eastward towards Keilberg and Falstadt. It would likely take an hour or two for them to reach them but she was glad at least that they had managed to avoid the rain. Kate gulped, the adrenaline starting to leave her body as her breathing sped up. She glanced right and saw distant fires in the valley. Not houses or patches of forests in flames but what seemed like bonfires. Tiny creatures moved around and between them, some much larger. Hundreds, if not more.

She looked back at the road. Nothing followed them. A few goblins they had missed in town pointed at the moving truck but they wouldn't make it. Nor did their bows reach them at the already considerable distance. *We'll get back*, she thought. A glance down showed her hands still covered in blood, whose she didn't know. Her crowbar was wedged between the high seat and the door, a dark red sheen visible on the top half of the impromptu weapon.

The sound of the engine rattled on, wheels moving on the dirt road. The air felt stuffy, smelled of blood. Her shoulder hurt, more with each passing minute. She didn't really care. It didn't bleed, not badly. She would be fine.

Kate wiped at her face, more just adding blood to her cheeks than getting rid of the itching tears. *Pull yourself together*. She just focused on driving, as fast and safe as she could. *Melusine will know what to do. She can save him*.

Memories of corpses in the armory flashed before her mind's eye, her hands shaking. She tried to keep them steady. Kate focused on her breathing before she turned on the radio. Lars must've stored some songs on the device itself because the moment she turned it on, Metal started blasting through the speakers. She turned it down a little but didn't change the song. It fit the urgency and fear she felt, pushed her onward. *Lars' music. A dead man. Survive. Survive*. She started repeating the word, in a whisper first and then louder, talking to herself as she sped through the forest.

A peaceful forest, once a space to find calm, beauty, balance to her dangerous and hectic work. Now it was just another hellscape, full of unknown dangers. She didn't dare open the windows, her focus on the road, on the music.

Kate didn't know when they arrived at the castle but they did. She honked several times before she got out of the truck, glad to see no new monsters in the area. "How is he?" She got out and opened the loading area.

"Still breathing," Jon replied in a shaking voice, his face covered in sweat.

“Help me move him out and then go get Melusine,” Kate said as she got onto the loading area. They carefully lowered Grey, Kate shouting for help as they went. The boy looked pale, his eyes closed, bandage soaked through with blood. She bit her lips and carried him towards the gate, Melusine running out as soon as she saw them.

“Medical supplies,” Jon said, rushing towards the gate with two of the backpacks.

“Inside,” Kate said when the woman reached them.

“Talk to me, wounds, treatment?” Melusine said instantly, walking next to her as they passed the gate.

“He got stabbed in his stomach. Bleeding badly, not all the way through,” Kate said as she set him down in the yard.

Melusine immediately went to work. She checked the bandage, touched his cheeks, checked his pulse then went through the pile of boxes Jon poured out next to her.

Kate just knelt there and watched. She grabbed Grey’s hand and glanced between the boy’s face and Melusine. Bert and Eloise closed the gate in the meantime, the truck still running out front.

“He’s losing too much blood,” Melusine said and looked up to Jon with a tense expression. “Dear, I need your arm.”

He took off his jacket and rolled back his sleeve in a hurry. The man started laying down next to Grey when Melusine stopped him.

“I need you higher up than him. Kate you have to hold him,” she said and started preparing syringes, unpacking various tubes as she rolled back the sleeve on Grey’s arm.

Kate did as she asked. She assumed Jon couldn’t handle needles. She walked behind him, holding his back and arm in place.

He closed his eyes. It didn’t help. The man started wobbling as soon as Melusine pushed the needle into his vein.

She connected the tube and pushed the other end into the arm of Grey. She needed three attempts to get to his vein. “I hope this works,” she murmured as a red flow of blood started moving out of Jon’s arm. “He’s still losing blood... I can’t remove the bandage...” she murmured in a slightly shaking voice, looking through the pile of medical supplies when she glanced up. “You have to lie down,” she said in an absentminded voice before she grabbed a thick bandage.

Logan had joined them from the armory, a hand to his head as he walked over with stumbling steps. He fell to his knees near Grey and gagged. The man refocused and put both of his hands on the injured stomach of the boy.

Kate could hear her jaw grind as she kept the semiconscious Jon as steady as she could, his arm held up to make sure the blood flowed towards Grey. Her eyes went wide when a warm light came to life around Logan’s hands. She could feel the hairs on her arms stand up, both her and Melusine staring at the large man and what looked like magic.

He started sweating a few seconds later, blinking his eyes before he swayed to the side and puked. Logan forced himself back up and moved his hands towards the blood covered bandages again.

“Stop,” Melusine said. “We don’t need two dead,” she added and touched the bandages, waiting for a few seconds before she moved up again. “It’s better. Lie down Logan, I can give you something

too now,” she added and grabbed a package from the pile. She ripped it open and took out three pills, stepping over to the man before she shoved them into his mouth.

He gulped them down and closed his eyes, head hitting the ground as he passed out.

“I’m not a fan of this magic,” she murmured and checked her husband. “A little more,” she said and looked at Kate. “How are you holding up? You look horrendous. Seen death?”

Kate didn’t reply, her eyes on the dying Grey, the smell of puke and blood irritating her senses. Something wet touched her shoulder, the sudden piercing pain making her twitch. She glanced up to see Melusine tapping the wound with a soaked cloth.

The woman looked into her eyes and smiled. “I’ll need a lot more than what you got me if this is how you return from every trip.”

Kate sighed and turned her attention back to Grey. “Is he gonna make it?” She held her breath, the sound of her own heartbeat audible in her ears.

“With Logan’s magic touch, maybe,” Melusine said and checked her husband. “The only reason I married him was his type O blood,” she murmured and touched his cheek. “You’ll be fine, dear. Just a little longer.”

“Thank you,” Kate said.

“I’ll have a look at your face and shoulder later. You’re all too reckless,” Melusine murmured. “Eloise, can you get something to clean up the puke?”

The girl nodded and ran off.

Bert moved over with his shotgun at the ready. “Ye don’t look so good.”

Kate carefully set down Jon after Melusine had removed the syringe. She went to Grey and held his hand. His pulse felt strong, the spread of blood through the bandages stopped, his breathing more steady. *God you fucking idiot. I told you to leave*, she thought and let go of his hand. Kate stood up and took in a deep breath before she refocused. There was work to be done.

Melusine touched her arm. “You need stitches. Sit down before you pass out.”

Kate nodded slowly. *That makes sense.*

She sat down, eyes on the three half passed out men as Melusine threaded a needle. She twitched slightly when the woman started closing the wound on her shoulder. They didn’t speak. Slowly, she started to calm down, taking in deep breaths as she relived the intense last hours in her mind. *We killed them. And nearly died.* A deep breath. She noted with an absent mind how Eloise cleaned up the puke. They were out in the open. Rain would soon come. *We have time.*

Bert went up to the battlements, complaining about the running car as he did so.

Kate felt absolutely drained. Every muscle in her body ached, her arms especially. Her face hurt, as if a train had slammed into it. And her shoulder stung. She could feel her legs fall asleep and moved them. A familiar smell made her look up, Eloise holding out a cup full of steaming liquid. *An angel, in the dark of night.*

She took a sip and sighed, watching as Melusine prepared two needles, a few bottles, cloths, and several bandages. Kate watched her check the medical scissors before she got to work. She gulped when she saw the large incision, messy too.

Melusine paused for a split second right after she had wiped away the blood. Then she got to work, first cleaning as much of the wound as she could before she sewed it shut, covered everything up and finished with two sets of fresh bandages. She took off the medical gloves and threw them on the pile of blood soaked materials.

“Why is his skin so hard to pierce... Oh... now that is something...” she said, lost in thought as she stared into nothing.

“What is it?” Kate asked, drinking from her coffee as she closed her eyes.

“I think I unlocked a Class. Based on all the medical care I provided, I can become a Healer,” she explained and glanced at Kate. “I suppose I should accept. Wisdom was the thing that helped with more magical energy, was that what Grey said?”

“It’s usually like that, yes,” Kate confirmed.

Melusine was occupied with reading for a few minutes before she looked up again. She touched Grey for a moment, moving her hand over the wound and to his heart. “He will survive,” she said and touched the fresh bandages with both hands. They glowed in the same warm light as Logan’s had. “But this might help.”

“You can heal wounds with magic?” Kate asked.

“As absurd as it sounds, but yes, it appears to work that way. Care with medical tools and supplies is supposedly better too, and the healing is more efficient if the injuries are properly taken care of,” she said. “Five point five percent.”

“Did you get a new thing as well, a stat? Like Vitality and Endurance,” Kate said.

Melusine glanced at her. “Yes. It’s called Calm. This is all very confusing.”

“Just take care of them,” Kate said. “I’ll get the rest of the supplies and clean up. You should get them inside soon, I think it will rain.” She finished her coffee and stood up.

Eloise took the mug. “Can I help?”

“Sure, let me get the rest. You can get it to the armory and start sorting everything,” Kate said and went to the gate. “Bert! Is the outside clear?”

“Yes, yes,” the man said as he looked out from the battlements. “No need to shout,” he murmured.

She opened the gate and went to the car. The bodies were all still around. Somehow she felt light on her feet. Kate turned off the car and got onto the loading area. Checking one of the bags, she got on fresh gloves over her still blood covered hands. Cleaning up now didn’t make much sense. She jumped down with the bags and the third backpack. *Weird*, she thought, looking down at the bags before she raised them up a little. They were light. Lighter than they should’ve been.

All that from two points in Strength? she wondered and checked the forest around her. Nothing came running at her and she went back to the gate. She left the bags on the ground and looked around. Logan and Grey were still passed out, Jon now sitting up with a hand to his head. She spotted a band-aid on his arm and smiled lightly.

Eloise had packed up the spilled out supplies in the meantime.

“Let’s get them inside the armory,” she said and went for Logan.

“Let’s get the bed fra-” Melusine started when Kate lifted the large man with a puff.

She took a step back to steady herself but held on. "I'll m... manage," she said and walked towards the armory with steady steps.

The large man in her impromptu princess carry opened his eyes at some point and smiled. "Sure..." he murmured and closed his eyes again. "Why not."

She helped with Grey and Jon, everyone but Bert back in the armory. Eloise had brought the bags and already started sorting through things.

"Melusine, where did you put all the bodies?" Kate asked. "We should get started on that pyre. I don't want to find out what kind of monsters will be attracted by all those corpses," she said, thinking of the wargs and the large humanoid beings she had seen in the distance. *Will they come here? What if they see the smoke?* She pondered the thought for a moment before she made a decision.

"In the old barracks," the woman replied, mixing something into a glass of water before she held it to Jon's mouth.

"I'll... get rid of them. The monster ones that is," Kate said and went back outside to open the gates fully. She walked to the truck with her crowbar in hand and got to work. All the goblins they had killed, and the orcs. Even the latter she managed to lift and put into the bed of the truck. She was breathing a little when she was done but nothing like what she had expected from the exertion. *Endurance. Right. These stats are pretty fucking useful.*

She drove the truck inside and parked in front of the old barracks. Jumping out, she went to the door and hit the wood with her blood covered weapon. She listened for a few seconds but nothing resounded from within. The key was stuck. Kate opened the door and looked inside. "Any zombies?" she asked and took in a deep breath. When nothing answered, she went in.

A few minutes later, she had added the monster bodies to the bed of the truck. The only ones she left in the barracks were the two humans. She didn't dwell looking at them. The light wasn't good and she had seen enough for a single day already. The door locked once more, she drove the car back outside and closed the gate.

"Will you be alright on yer own?" Bert asked.

"I'll just dump them and come back," Kate said and got back into the car. A few minutes later she stopped, having driven a little farther up on the slope towards the mountain range. She waited for about a minute to see if something would attack the car before she got out, her crowbar at the ready.

Each monster corpse was dumped into the underbrush, one at a time until she threw the last goblin down onto the pile. She looked at them, lifeless bodies. Intelligent beings once. Somewhat at least. And yet she didn't feel bothered or conflicted. All she thought of were the dead humans in the barracks, the injured and nearly dying Grey, the dozens of bodies down in Keilberg.

She gripped her crowbar and went back into the truck, turning on the radio as she reversed. She checked the available frequencies but received only the same warning message from before. A last glance went to the pile of bodies before she switched the radio back to the music stored on the drive.

Lars apparently had an eclectic taste. From Metal to Techno, to pop, and even piano only. She arrived at the small castle when the first rain started to fall, the skies now gray. Kate stopped the car and turned the key, the sounds replaced by the silent pattering of rain. She sat there for a minute, looking at the shrouded form of Bert behind the wood covered battlements.

Her muscles ached and she felt tired. They still had a few hours till nightfall but she didn't exactly know what else to do. *Shower. A shot, and some food would be nice*, she thought and finally left the car.

Bert came down to open the gate, the rain and wind picking up with every passing minute.

She went inside and gave the old man a nod. "You should probably get inside as well."

"Ain't as frail as you think," Bert said with a grin. "You go warm up. We'll need ya if more of 'em come at night."

Kate left without another word, towards his house and the shower inside.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 4

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 4***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 5***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 2***
- ***Active:***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 4***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 3***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 3***
- ***Passive:***
- ***Passive:***

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 14

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 4

Strength: 11

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 12 Rest

Kate sighed, a smile almost coming to her face when she put on a set of fresh clothes. Just a pair of trainers and a shirt, the supply surely running low at this point. The shower helped, it really did. She hoped the thing never stopped working. *We'll need someone versed in plumbing, and replacement parts for the future.*

Putting on her wandering boots, she went downstairs. Nobody remained in the kitchen and living room space, the lights already out. She saw a thin drizzle of rain outside. An early autumn evening. *Could just cuddle with a blanket and watch something on the TV with a hot chocolate,* she thought, looking at the thing. *Maybe later.*

Instead she poured herself a bit of coffee, heating it up in a small pan when she realized it had turned cold in the meantime. She leaned against the kitchen counter and tried to think through what had happened today. Monsters had come to Keilberg, had killed everyone? She didn't know. *Maybe there are people hiding still. Somewhere.* They had killed a lot of beings. Goblins, Orcs, half of them in some kind of magic induced haze. She hated the loss of control, hated that her abilities demanded things from her that she didn't want to do. And yet a part of her reasoned that it was rational, no, maybe even what she really wanted.

Kate didn't know if that part was her own mind or whatever magic had invaded it. What she couldn't deny was the fact that they were still alive. Both herself and the others. *Barely.* She gulped, thinking of all the blood, the panicked look on Jon's face. What would she have done if Grey had died? If Jon had died, and they had returned to his daughters and wife. Her introspection was broken by the smell of her coffee. She turned and filled her cup, turned off the stove, and left the home.

People had already died. She didn't have the resources to consider scenarios like that. What she had to do was focus on the now, focus on what she could and should do. What ifs and regrets were what destroyed the mind. *You're alive. You have coffee. And you fought against the monsters that dared invade Keilberg. One step forward. Through the smoke, until the fires are out.*

She reached the armory, going inside with slightly wet hair. It didn't exactly pour. Faint voices could be heard from above, the ground floor cool but not cold. They really were lucky to have the old castle, especially the wood stove. Kate walked upstairs and knocked on the closed door. "It's me."

Someone turned the key before Eloise looked at her from the other side. She smiled, looking just a little embarrassed when she stepped aside.

The two girls were sorting through the loot haul they had gathered from the town, most of it medical supplies but there were plenty of useful items from the skiing store as well. *And we'll go back for more.* Melusine sat on her knees above the still unconscious Ethan, his red hair now flowing freely, the blood she had seen on his face cleaned off. She saw the familiar look of burn scars on his brow. Something old.

Kate closed the door behind herself and locked it. She hopped up on one of the glass cabinets and leaned her back against the stone wall. *Cold. I'll gear up later.* She sipped on her coffee.

Jon lay on one of the bedrolls, same as Grey, neither of them in a state of particularly high consciousness. They seemed calm, and alive. Logan had glanced at her once but had closed his eyes again in the meantime, a wet towel covering most of his face.

“How are you, Kate?” Melusine asked, turning her way as she stood up and wiped a bit of sweat from her brow.

“Could be better,” she admitted. “The coffee’s nice though. And I’m glad we now have all that to work with,” she said, gesturing to the large pile of medical supplies, clothing, and wandering tools.

The woman smiled. “They’re all better. Much better than they should be,” she said and paused, giving her a look. “How do you handle it? The magic? It is magic I think, or some advanced technology we don’t understand yet.”

Kate considered the question for a few seconds, drinking from her mug again. “It’s kept me alive.”

The woman chuckled into a raised hand, the image reminding more of a high class politician at a social event than the woman who had just saved the life of another human.

I suppose it’s unfair to think both couldn’t apply, Kate thought.

“A very pragmatic approach,” Melusine said, a knowing look in her eyes.

Kate just sipped from her coffee. She would’ve liked some music, to escape, to think of nothing for a while, get rid of the memories, but it would disturb the injured and sleeping. And she still had some things to prepare.

“Were there monsters in the town?” Eloise asked in a quiet voice.

Kate nearly snapped but she managed to stop herself. The teen just wanted to make conversation. She could handle them the day before but after everything that had happened, she could tell her batteries weren’t exactly charged. “There were,” she said simply and downed the last bit of coffee. She crouched down above the pile without another word and started looking through everything.

Thermal pants and shirt, sturdy pants with plenty of pockets, a good belt, thin skiing jacket against rain and wind. She focused on the labels and made herself a pile in her size. She added four non blood covered hunting knives as well and chose one of the larger backpacks, a dark gray color that wouldn’t stand out too much in most environments.

She put the whole pile into the pack and started looking through the cabinets. The armor was right out. It surprised her how light some of the pieces were, but the fact remained that none of it was built to fit her. If her goal was to simply protect herself, it could’ve worked, but she had to fight with it on.

No female knights in ye olden times. Sexist fucks could’ve done me a favor.

Even with my unarmored skill, steel would’ve been so much better. Oh well. Let’s see if I can use something else.

Her eyes fell on one of the weapons. It looked a little like a simple hammer, just larger. Nothing ridiculous like she’d seen in popular fantasy movies but definitely something you wouldn’t use in one hand. Not if you weren’t two and a half meters tall and four times her weight.

I am stronger, somehow. And I’d have a little more reach. Thing is made of solid steel as well and that spike on the backside looks nasty. No need to use daggers if I have that thing. Similar size to

my firewoman's axe, just probably much heavier. And at least if I use the blunt side, it shouldn't get stuck anywhere.

She had seen a few axe type weapons, but they were far too large and more akin to halberds. Nothing like what she had trained with before.

The front bit of the hammer was a solid chunk of steel, one side flat, the other one a straight spike, a matte gray just like the rest of the tool. A tool quite obviously made for one purpose only. She couldn't find any seams, suggesting the thing was a single piece of metal.

Kate grabbed the keys and unlocked the respective cabinet, the jingling of keys mixing in with small boxes being moved and the faint sound of rain pattering against the wooden ceiling above the attic.

She expected the weapon to be heavy, at least twice as much as the crowbar. Grabbing it, she raised her brows. Kate felt the weight, heard the sliding sound when she lifted it. Solid steel. And yet it didn't feel heavier than the crowbar had. Maybe a little bit, but the weight was good. It felt familiar. When she took it out and held it with both hands, she could tell the balance was taken into consideration. *Not a toy, or a tool made to open doors.* She looked at the weapon for a few seconds, questioning if she had gone insane. *Monsters, magic, classes, a fucking war hammer.*

The top bit was maybe twice as thick as her closed fist, the spike a little longer than her index finger. The handle was thicker than the crowbar, the grip even better. She rotated it and looked at the spike. *Was this ever used? It feels real enough.* Even the spike was blunt but she assumed it didn't matter, not with the weight and momentum she could put behind it. She shook her head, thinking of the fighting earlier. It was good she didn't have much left in her stomach. *Keep the coffee down.*

"You look terrifying. Did you lose your mind yet?" Logan asked in a tired voice.

Kate looked at him and rotated the spike towards his chest. "You'll be the first to know." She locked the cabinet again and put the keys away. Her pack ready, she held the hammer with one hand. The weight felt good. Something grounding. A sense of security. Using it would be similar to a fire axe.

"Are you going to change?" Melusine asked.

"Yes," Kate replied.

"I should look after them for a while but I'm sure everyone is getting hungry," the woman said and glanced at Eloise and Celeste.

"I'll be in the house," Kate said. "And I can help with the food."

The woman smiled and gave her a nod. "You heard her girls. Get out of this sick room and go make something nice. They'll need a lot of energy."

Looks like it's gonna be me and Bert tonight. Let's hope nothing shows up, Kate thought as she left.

Showered and dressed in her fresh and comfortable wandering clothes, she put her shoes back on and got on her jacket. Everything fit rather well, not too large or too small, except for the slightly too long sweater. Granted, except for her height at one seventy seven, everything else wasn't out of the ordinary. She liked the feel. *More prepared than just a sweatshirt.* The pants were a mix of

black and gray. The thermal pants and shirt, including the sports bra were a simple gray, the jacket more going towards black. Everything was the same brand of course, and they knew what they were doing.

Were doing. Probably won't be making wandering gear anytime soon, she thought as she walked down the stairs, her jacket open, backpack around one shoulder, and her hammer in hand. The coffee had helped calm her down a little, as did the warm set of clothing. The fact that most of what she wore was from the same line of clothing helped too in some weird way. She assumed it had to do with her usual firefighter uniform. *Work mindset thanks to something vaguely familiar? Hell if it works, it works.*

Eloise had started setting out ingredients, cans of beans, chopped tomatoes, spices, and a variety of cold cuts, some of the packets already open. Celeste sat nearby and played with one of the cans.

The cook nearly jumped when she noticed the sounds and turned around.

Kate tried to force a smile but could tell it didn't exactly come out perfectly. "Hey."

"H... hello. Y.. you look good," Eloise said.

"Thanks," Kate answered. "Look, sorry about before. Today was a lot."

"It's okay!" the girl said immediately, holding up a tube of tomato puree. She lowered it when she realized the absurdity of the gesture.

"Can you use the hammer?" Celeste asked and looked over.

Kate raised the thing and threw it up a few centimeters before she caught it again. "I hope so. It's not the most complicated tool."

The girl seemed thoroughly unimpressed, returning her attention to the can of beans.

"Chili?" Kate asked.

Eloise nodded. "Something like that. Not a lot of variety around."

"I'll get you more soon," Kate said and leaned her hammer against the table, her pack put on the floor next to it.

"You'll go back?" Eloise asked, gulping as she turned to look at her.

Kate started looking through the cabinets, taking out a cutting board and a few bowls. "We don't exactly have enough supplies here," she said. "Even if the military or someone else comes to help in a few weeks." She doubted that would become a reality but everyone was stressed enough as it was. A little optimism felt nice. *At least we have walls and some weapons. Most people wouldn't be that lucky.*

She focused on the onions instead of her thoughts, Celeste soon leaving her chair because of her stinging eyes. Kate didn't mind. She glanced at the pink bluetooth boxes sitting on one of the shelves but decided it would be irresponsible to listen to music right now. *Maybe tomorrow. If the others are feeling better.* Instead she started humming a tune whilst cutting onions, then garlic, and finally carrots.

Eloise worked silently, her hands moving all over the place as she put together the meal with practiced efficiency. A few minutes later, a nice fragrance was already spreading through the apartment.

“Celeste, can you check what movies the old man has?” Kate asked. She felt a little like a babysitter, not that she would’ve ever considered doing that job. *Maybe for a cat or a dog.*

“Okay,” the girl said and jumped up from the armchair, falling to her knees before she started digging through the TV cabinet. “Band of Brothers, Saving Private Ryan, The Winter War, there are lots of soldiers on the pictures,” she said and held up a few of the dvd boxes. “This one has women on it. The Backdoor, part four, with Extra Jui... Juicy-”

Kate grabbed the thing with her knife in the other hand. “That’s... not. Let’s not check these right now,” she said and put them back inside.

She wasn’t particularly keen on war movies either. Not before the monsters and not after. *Will have to bring some of mine after I get to my apartment.*

“Do you two watch a lot of movies?” she asked instead, back to cutting.

“I do,” Celeste said.

“What do you watch?” Kate asked, seeing the side glance from Eloise.

“Aliens is my favorite!” the little girl exclaimed before she jumped on the chair, grabbing the rests. “Get away from her, you bitch!” She looked around before she started giggling.

Kate just looked at her before she glanced at Eloise.

“I don’t know why they let her watch stuff like that. She’s seen it twenty times already,” she said. “I tried to talk to dad about it but he doesn’t think it’s an issue.”

“What about Melusine?” Kate asked.

The girl shrugged. “She thinks most of the movies Cel watches are harmless.”

“I want to fight Aliens when I grow up,” the girl said, making punching motions with her arms.

It would’ve been cute if not for the state of everything. Kate still smiled to herself, finishing the last carrots. She was a firefighter, not a parenting counselor. *Maybe it helps her rationalize the whole thing. She seems the most calm out of us three.*

Kate reminded herself that the girl was a kid. She didn’t understand the implications of these events, not to the same extent as they did. *Not that I know what the fuck is going on beyond the suggestions from Grey. The game stuff doesn’t really help with everything.*

“I’ll take over the guard duty for a while,” she said when she was done with cutting. Her jacket closed, she grabbed the hammer.

“I will bring you something when it’s done,” Eloise said. “And some coffee.” The girl smiled.

Kate smiled back, the gesture genuine now. “Thanks. I appreciate it. Look after your sister.”

“Easier said than done,” Eloise replied and glared at the child who had started going through the DVDs again.

Kate sighed and quickly collected the pornographic content, putting it on top of a nearby shelf before she went outside.

The rain had intensified a little but it wasn’t particularly windy still. She put up the hood and walked to the tower near the gate. “Bert, it’s me, don’t shoot!” she shouted preemptively as she walked over the stone part of the yard.

The old man stood up on the battlements, looking out into the forest from the wood covered section, two loaded crossbows resting against the low wall. His shotgun lay on the ground behind him.

“Go get warm,” she said. “I’ll take watch for a few hours.”

“You were out there and fought, girl. Take some rest,” he grumbled, eyes focused forward.

Kate leaned against the back wall and put both hands into the jacket, hammer resting against her leg. “Yeah, but you’re ancient.”

“Back in my day, women showed some respect when talking to their elders,” he said.

“In my day, men are supposed to be less sexist, I don’t grumble about it like some bitter old shit,” she answered. “Get your ass inside before you freeze.”

He chuckled. “You remind me of my granddaughter,” he murmured and grabbed his shotgun.

“Times are changing fast for an old man like myself. First all these smart telephones, and now there are small green monsters in the forest.” The man stepped past her and touched her shoulder. “You keep yer eyes open. A storm is coming.”

“What is that, some kind of fucking prophecy?” Kate asked.

“Cursing a lot, are we?” he asked.

“Fuck off,” she replied.

He snickered before he pointed westward. “Heard thunder. Been up here for a long time, Kate. A storm is coming. Get inside when it’s here. No monster would come out in that weather.”

Kate gave him a light nod. She wasn’t so sure about that herself but she wouldn’t stand outside in the worst visibility if an actual storm came.

Bert trotted off, protecting his shotgun from the rain.

Storms had a special place in her heart. Close to heavy drinking. Enjoyable in the evening and an absolute pain the next day. *At least there’s the silver lining of not having to work tomorrow. Just well... likely going back into a monster infested forest. Can’t have everything,* she thought and pulled up the already high collar of her jacket. *This thing is amazing. No wonder it’s like six hundred bucks.* She watched the forest, rain pattering onto the leaves, the first noise of thunder rolling through the valley.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 4

- Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 4

- Active: Furious Dance – lvl 5

- Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 2

- Active:

- Active:

- Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 4

- *Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 3*
- *Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 3*
- *Passive:*
- *Passive:*

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 14

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 4

Strength: 11

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 13 Instinct

Kate smiled when Eloise brought her a bowl with chili and rice, her hands warmed immediately when she received it.

“It’s cold out here,” the girl said. “Are you sure you don’t want to come inside? Jon said we will hide in the armory anyway.”

“I’ll be there soon,” Kate answered. “Still seems like a good idea for someone to be up here.” *If only in case any survivors find this place. We won’t hear them with the rain and wind.*

“If you think so. At least take these as well, it’s already really dark,” Eloise said and handed her two small flashlights. She shuddered when a gust of wind moved through, the rain at least stopped by the wooden roof above this part of the battlements. Similar to the watchtowers, the section just above the castle gates was covered to offer at least some protection against the elements.

“Thanks,” Kate said and put them into her jacket. “For the food too. Go and sleep.”

“I will. You should soon come inside as well,” Eloise said again, a shy smile on her face before she left, pulling up her jacket against the rain. She wore the same one as Kate.

The battlements would give them a massive advantage in a fight as well, at least with a few people using crossbows. If they hid inside the armory and the gate was breached, they’d have to fight in the yard or the buildings.

Kate tried not to think about the hordes she had seen down in the valley. *But what am I hoping for? That they’d just move on? To where? Falstadt? And then?*

The chili warmed her. Not quite spicy enough for her but it was an acceptable heat, everything cooked down to a hearty stew of fine tasting energy. *What if we run out of cans to raid. Do we have to start hunting?*

The food gave her something nice to focus on, the many questions and uncertainties floating through her mind popping in and out without anything managing to stick. Not after the day she’d had.

Kate finished the bowl and set it aside, leaning back against the battlements hidden from anything that would arrive near the walls. *Another few hours*, she thought, rubbing her hands together. The thermal set of long undergarments really shined in that moment. She would’ve been half frozen with so little movement otherwise.

Eloise brought her a rough blanket half an hour later, a gesture Kate gratefully accepted. Another coffee followed soon after, the warmth and caffeine helping with her aching body and mind.

When night fell, the rain was pouring, the rumbling thunder closer now. And with it came flashes of lightning. Kate hoped none of it would strike the tree in the yard or any of the buildings. The rain would maybe prevent a fire but it really was the last thing they needed right now.

Melusine and Bert checked on her every half hour or so, making sure she had everything she needed. The healer’s request for her to come back inside was ignored. Kate was too tired to determine her real reasons. Did she think herself some knight protector? Did she hope for survivors to come? Did the magic in her body push her into something dangerous and stupid? Or was it just

her, preferring to be out here to gain some sense of illusory control instead of being holed up with the others, hiding in the dark.

About two hours into the night, Kate started to hear a strange slapping noise through the still pouring rain. Not entirely sure what to make of it, she grabbed her hammer and sneaked up to the other side, making sure not to show her head. Dim moonlight came through patches of the sky not covered in clouds. Her presence up on the battlements was questionable with the crappy visibility, even to her. And yet she had remained nonetheless.

The cramped room in the armory, all the injured in there, survivors more than anything. It wasn't where she wanted to be. Not when she could be doing more out here. *You're just scared of being trapped.*

It didn't matter. The slapping noise happened one last time, Kate just barely able to make out the silhouette of a rope catching around a slab of rock a few meters to her left. *Even in this rain.* She grimaced and held on to her hammer. *What should I do? Cut the rope? Get help? Wait for them to come up? Scream for the others? Who would even come? They're all injured and exhausted. We can't go on like this.*

Waited too long, she thought when she saw the goblin jump over and onto the battlements. She had no more time to think. The others were safe for now, and she had tools at her disposal. Surprise being one of them. Her magic came to life, the sounds around her dulled but intensifying at the same time. She could hear the silent breaths of two more goblins coming up on the side of the wall behind her, one more on the same rope she had already seen. Yellow eyes stared up at her as she brought the blunt end of her hammer up in a slightly angled strike.

It felt light to her, more so than the crowbar even. She knew her senses were dulled but it was no longer an unknown sensation. Even the part of her that remained rational accepted the magic for what it was. Her ability to not only survive, but to fight back, to defend what may very well be the last living humans in Keilberg. And to kill the monsters that had slaughtered everyone in the town she had called home.

Her weapon struck the goblin's head with a heavy impact, the rain and wind deafening most of the sound as the small creature was lifted up, dark blood splattering against the stone. Kate didn't see well, but she could make out the unmoving form lying before her, and she struck again, a cold feeling in her chest when the monster's head was smashed down onto the stone. She put a boot against its body and pulled out her weapon, crouching and moving silently to the closest sounds.

Attack.

No. Wait.

Let them come.

Her arms were tense, her every sense focused on the approaching enemy. She was still hidden. A better hunter than these beings. *Arrogant. Stupid.*

A part of her knew she herself was doing the same, not getting help, choosing to fight alone. And yet it felt right. She had to use every advantage that she had. And right now she was still hidden.

The next goblin jumped over the stone, landing with a wet impact, a dagger taken from the simple belt on its waist.

Kate had waited, slamming the spike of her hammer right into its head. She kicked off the body and went to the last on this side of the wall. *More cautious.* She saw the creature looking over before it jumped.

She reached out her hand and grabbed, catching its slippery arm before she pulled. *So light.* The goblin fell and hit its head against the other side of the battlements, Kate brought her hammer crashing into its face a second later. She heard the crunch resound, ripped out the weapon and turned it around, slamming the spike into what remained of its head.

She turned when a lightning strike illuminated the walls, a single goblin standing a few meters in front of her with its yellow eyes wide open. The night went dark again and thunder rolled through the trees. *Fear.* Fast steps brought her to the creature, its dagger held up against the large steel hammer. Her strike only brushed against its shoulder, a kick against its chest sending the creature reeling back, staggering as it let go of the weapon. Kate didn't hesitate. She brought down the spike from above, striking into the goblin's skull and pulling the small body down against the stone battlements.

Weak.

Kate used one of her knives to cut the ropes, moving at a fast pace along the walls while crouched. Three more of the monsters had managed to get up, one even down the stairs and onto the yard. She caught them all.

The last one noticed her and turned around, looking for its allies with nervous yellow eyes, the previous smirk of a predator on a silent hunt replaced by a very contrary expression.

Kate had her magic up, the slight discomfort she had still felt from her shoulder now entirely gone, as was most of the exhaustion she had experienced before. She didn't say a word as she walked towards the being, hammer casually held in one hand until she reached it. Kate watched as the goblin moved forward with a fast set of steps, dagger angled at her legs. She struck first, the middle part of the long handle catching the skull of the advancing goblin, her arms long enough to negate the reach of its short weapon. Stunned by the strike, the creature tried to reorient itself when the blunt end of her heavy tool of war struck the side of its large skull. A single heavy strike was enough, but she made sure with another one.

No corpses.

She grabbed the body, easily lifting it with one hand as she moved back up to the battlements, throwing it out. *Let them know.* All the others followed, Kate slowly moving back to the gate as she watched and listened, the latter much more useful in the night. When the last goblin hit the gravel down below, her head turned left. *Noise.*

In the underbrush just beyond the parking lot. *Fleeing.*

She didn't look back. Her rational side reminded her that she had to protect the others, but what better way to protect them than to kill the monsters lurking in the forest? The monsters that had killed so many humans already. The grip around her hammer steeled as she climbed over the wall. She let herself down as far as she could and jumped, landing in a roll. She felt the heavy impact, the dull pain in her thighs and tendons. A small price to pay.

Hunt.

Kate followed the noise, running into the underbrush with little regard for her own safety. Within the trees, she could no longer see, the night too advanced and the clouds too dense. *Light.*

She moved one hand into her jacket and grabbed the small flashlight she had put inside. Turning it on, she bit down on it with her teeth and continued running, both her hands on the blood covered hammer made for war. Her own breathing she could filter out, the rain now less pronounced below the canopy of branches, leaves, and needles. The small cone of light bobbed as she ran, Kate now hearing the running creatures ahead, one of them screeching when it looked back and saw the light.

Kate followed. She wondered if they would understand. Keilberg Castle was their own. And the people inside were prepared to fight.

They were too slow to get away. Instead they scattered.

Two directions.

She chose the one going down the slope, catching up with the running goblin shortly after. Her knee slammed into its back, Kate stumbling from the impact, the goblin instead falling. She reached its rolling form and brought down her weapon, the streets of Keilberg in her mind, blood covered and full of death. She struck again.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Warrior]'

...

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Assassin]'

'ding' 'Berserker reaches lvl 5'

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

'ding' 'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 5'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 6'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 5'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 4'

The two new points went into Vitality, the short moment of calm enough to let her make the choice.

Wind and rain brushed against her face as she turned off her light and listened. The noise was gone but her hunt hadn't ended. She took in deep breaths, calming her body before she looked up into the darkness. Something was approaching.

Heavy steps resounded, two large yellow eyes looking straight at her as the being grumbled something with a slurred and guttural set of sounds.

Kate turned on her small light, just barely managing to roll away when an axe came down. The heavy piece of steel crashed into a nearby tree. It sank in a third of the way. Wood groaned when the creature pulled out its weapon, the long handle made of wood, untreated and as thick as Kate's arm.

She took a few steps back, watching the nearly three meter tall being take in her form, some intelligence in its eyes as it stepped to the side. It wore simple leather armor, more or less directly

stripped from whatever animal it had come from and thrown onto its form, a mix of brown and black on its sickly green skin. Fat and muscle gave it the same advantage Kate had against the goblins but she found herself neither scared nor worried. Those senses were dulled. Her focus was on every move of the creature, her body tense, her breathing calm. A dangerous foe. *Finally*.

Attack. The thought barely in her brain, she rushed forward, watching as the monster ripped out the axe from the tree, bringing it back with a swiping motion. Reckless Charge activated, moving her past the attack and its leg, all her momentum, strength, and skills working together to deliver a single strike against its knee. Kate felt something shatter, her arms shaking at the impact but she managed to hold on to her weapon. The beast roared in pain and swiped its left arm at her, the back hand hitting her shoulder and chest.

All the air was pushed out of her lungs as she was sent tumbling to the ground, the flashlight gone as she pushed herself up, coughing. Something splattered onto the leaves but she barely saw anything in the darkness. Her jaw hurt and her shoulder didn't feel right. But she heard the howls and steps, jumping aside when the axe came whistling down, hitting the ground with an earthy thud.

She stood up and moved through the darkness, away from the sounds until she found a tree and leaned against it. The second flashlight out, she turned it on and saw the large monster shuffling towards her, a pained and angry expression on its face as it dragged the dirtied axe behind itself. It tried not putting any weight on its left leg.

Kate bit down on the flashlight and held her hammer, slowly circling around the creature, bringing trees between their forms. Warm blood dripped down her jaw, her left arm feeling weaker but still functional. Her entire focus was on the monster's movements, each shuffling step eliciting a pained groan. Her own body hurt, kept moving by adrenaline and her magic, more so the latter. She had injured its leg and could likely get away, but right now, Kate would not consider that an option. Not if it would follow. A few strikes of its axe would break through the castle gate. She had to kill it. She wanted to.

The monster stopped and struck at the trees in front of her, a single strike going halfway through the first one. She waited, getting into position as she focused on her breathing. Another strike, the axe stuck. Reckless Charge moved her forward past the hand still gripping the axe. The being was large, but not particularly fast. The same strike as before, this time aimed at the other leg and followed by a blind roll onto the ground. She heard the howl and felt the axe pass over her before she came back up. Her flashlight illuminated the monster's form, falling to its knees with the momentum of its angry strike. Another painful growl.

She stepped up and used her whole body, weight, and strength to strike its head, her reach just enough to get there. The impact sent the monster reeling back, gritting its teeth as it came back around, one of its eyes now dim, blood flowing down its head. Kate brought her hammer back from the other side, the spike end biting into its massive skull just before it grabbed her left arm and shook its head.

The movement ripped the weapon away, flung into the darkness. It pressed down on her arm and pulled. She yelped, dragged to the side as her limb was crushed, her skin and muscle torn at the shoulder. Her right arm flailed before she reached her belt, her vision blurred as she got out a knife and started stabbing down into the large hand. She heard another howl, her ears starting to ring, the flashlight still held down by her jaws, vaguely angled forward. Kate saw the large fist coming her way and activated Reckless Charge again. Her body was moved forward and under the large monster's limb, the grip it still had on her arm making her spin slightly, something in her shoulder breaking before she managed to get free.

She fell and rolled, stumbling up and away from the sounds with her flashlight moving over the ground. The pained growls behind her continued, her ears still ringing. Kate found the hammer, blood covered on the ground, her magic the only thing that kept her focused on the fight instead of the pain. Her entire left side felt mangled. She didn't look. Instead she grabbed for her weapon, the glove on her left hand gone and her jacket torn. Blood dripped from her fingers, the limb uselessly slapping against the steel handle. She couldn't move it.

One hand would have to do.

She turned the weapon, the bloodied spike facing downward as she tried to stay steady. The flashlight shined into the forest, coming to a stop on two dim yellow eyes, blood flowing down from the deep wound on the monster's head. It had stopped moving. Kate stumbled back, taking in a sharp breath when she felt her mangled arm shake, energy flowing into her as she hit a tree with her back. It wouldn't be enough. *Stay awake.*

Thunder rolled through the trees.

Keep.

Moving.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 5

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 5***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 6***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 2***
- ***Active:***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 5***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 3***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 4***
- ***Passive:***
- ***Passive:***

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 16

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 5

Strength: 11

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 14 The Forest

Kate kept her magic active, her state of mind dulled to everything but battle. And yet there was nothing to fight. The pain started to overwhelm her, sharp breaths leaving her mouth as she bit down on the flashlight, glad the thing was sturdy. A part of her knew that she had to keep her magic active, no matter what. The new blinking messages in the corner of her vision were easier to focus on than her thoughts. She knew they might help and started stumbling through the forest, listening for prey.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Ogre]’

‘ding’ ‘Berserker reaches lvl 6’

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

‘ding’ ‘Berserker reaches lvl 7’

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

The new points she immediately put into Vitality, her chest heating up with the allocation. Some feeling returned to her left arm, the bones in her shoulder cracking. She kept biting down on her flashlight, the pain in her body slightly less overwhelming. Her breathing remained ragged, her steps stumbling. She walked downwards, lost entirely in the dark forest. Her hammer dragged along and through the leaves, her vision swimming.

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 7’

‘ding’ ‘Furious Dance reaches lvl 7’

‘ding’ ‘Furious Dance reaches lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Reckless Charge reaches lvl 3’

...

‘ding’ ‘Reckless Charge reaches lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Toll for the Living reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Toll for the Living reaches lvl 7’

‘ding’ ‘Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 4’

‘ding’ ‘Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘You have unlocked the passive skill: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 1

Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 1

You have chosen the path of the Berserker. No battle will end before you will it so. Damage you deal and resilience against physical attacks is increased by 5.5% for every minute you remain in or seek battle. To a maximum of 25%.

Kate assumed it would help but she didn't much focus on the messages besides increasing her Vitality. Her skills were getting stronger too but she felt more than read that. After a few minutes of walking, she collapsed. Her magic deactivated, Kate entirely spent. She was glad now for the flashlight as clarity returned to her and with it the whole experience of what she had gone through.

Her head pounded, silent tears flowing at the pain of her injuries. Every breath felt like sandpaper moved through her lungs and jaws. Her vision remained blurry, shaking hands turning off the flashlight in an attempt not to announce herself to every stray being in this part of the woods. *The trail of blood will do that anyway.* She had to move. Had to get back, or at least away. But her body didn't listen, even simple movements nearly making her black out.

She was too exhausted to blame herself. Of course it had been stupid. Everything about the night. Staying out had been selfish, facing the goblins alone had been a risk. And going after them really took the cake. But she was still here. Still alive. She had killed the monsters that had come for them. Even the giant. *One more hit or a single strike of its axe and that would've been it.* She gulped, then winced. *It hurts.*

It hurts.

But I should be dead. Should've died many times already. But here I am.

There was too much going on for her to reasonably handle. Kate had dealt with plenty of things before but nothing came even close to the flood of emotions, thoughts, and possibilities of everything that had happened in the past few days. And so she focused on the now. The flashlight helped, turned off but still gripped between her teeth. Either her gums were bleeding or she had coughed up blood before, the taste of iron obvious between the flares of pain.

I need to rest, and then I have to either get back or find more monsters to kill. Something less dangerous than that fucking ogre. Fuck. But if I kill a single thing, I'll continue on again, looking for more and more.

Isn't that good? I'm getting stronger. If I survive that is.

But when does it end?

She knew the answer. *When we're safe. When every survivor is safe.*

And when the dead are avenged.

Kate thought of the monster horde again, the streets of Keilberg, the ogre she had just killed. How many more would be out there? How many would come for the humans left on Earth? *The now. Focus.*

The pounding had lessened a little, but not by much. She could focus between the pain but didn't dare move yet. *Melusine can help me.*

Help yourself.

Kate stood up, or tried to. She groaned, pushing herself up before she fell again, the pain and exhaustion back.

I'm a mess, she thought. She tried again a few minutes later, this time managing to stand, albeit on wobbly legs. This time she didn't turn on the flashlight, shuffling in a random direction with a pause every few steps. The pouring rain had stopped, reduced to a drizzle by now. Powerful gusts of wind flowed through, Kate shivering now with a part of her jacket torn, wet blood sticking to everything, most of it probably hers.

She leaned against a tree some time later, hoping her trail wouldn't be as easily found as before. *Feels like I just killed a monster in a life or death battle*. She sighed, shivering again. The movement made the pain flare up. A wonderful circle.

Steps resounded between the winds and her breathing. Small ones, fast, and multiple. *Coming my way*. She froze, waiting with her hammer gripped with both hands, the left one barely able to hold on. She heard guttural sounds but not as pronounced as with the goblins or orcs. Low growls were added to the mix as she heard the beings fan out around her, moving through the bushes. Something struck wood.

They're here for me.

Kate didn't have a choice. She activated her spells, not knowing if she would collapse immediately upon doing so. She felt the pounding in her head increase before the sounds around her sharpened. The rain was less pronounced, her own breathing and heartbeat gone. Instead she heard fast steps around her, two creatures climbing up the trees and one sneaking up behind her. It jumped.

She ducked away and turned on the flashlight, skittering movements visible where she had just been, a small humanoid creature with brown skin screeched, long clawed arms at its side and bloodshot eyes staring back at her before it ran into the underbrush. She turned at the sounds, two of them running at her. She swung her hammer in a low horizontal strike, wincing at the movement.

One of them managed to jump aside, the other one hit in its shoulder. It fell with a wail.

Kate tried to finish it off when something jumped at her, forcing her to dodge aside. She switched to the spike instead, holding out her hammer to keep the creatures at a distance. There were five in total, one crawling down on the tree she had stood at before. They regarded her with beastly eyes, claws spread as they fanned out again.

She didn't give them time. Kate could feel her energy going out, rushing at them with the intent to kill. Being careful wouldn't save her, not in this fight. The one she had hit before was slower to react, a wide whirl of her hammer keeping the others at bay before she struck the injured one in the chest. The beast was lifted off the ground before it was flung aside, Kate already on the next one.

One of its claws struck her leg, cutting through her pants and into her flesh. She let it, slamming her spiked hammer into its head in retaliation. Some energy returned to her, she could feel it. Her left hand managed to get a better grip on the steel handle. And yet she felt a burning sensation from her leg now, nothing like she had ever experienced. Another one jumped at her, Kate's reaction not as fast as she wanted it to be, barely able to block the overhead claw attack of the creature.

They were locked together for a second before she could kick it away, another one jumping on her back in the meantime. She could feel something hacking into her jacket, whirling around before she managed to shake it off. The creature landed in a tumble, the others rushing her as she ran at the downed one. Kate stopped as abruptly as she could and brought her hammer around behind her. She felt the hot sensation on her back now too, smiling when her flashlight illuminated the impact of her

hammer on the first and then the second monster. Both went down and she finished the second one first, hacking into its back from above before she turned to the other. She could feel herself recover but despite the change, her weapon felt heavy. She raised it up above the downed monster, bringing it down right when the last creature tackled her. Kate let go of her weapon, unable to hold on as she fell.

The monster was less than half her size, smaller even than a goblin, and yet she felt its weight impact her as if it had been an orc. Arms raised, she turned on the ground with the being trying to slash at her, one set of claws cutting past her cheek, the other one stopped by her hand. Kate felt the impacts of its legs kicking against her stomach. Clothing ripped but not cut through entirely. She moved her head back as a claw flashed past, unsheathing one of her daggers before she rammed it into the squirming monster's chest. The small blade managed to nearly punch through to the other side.

Her cheek stung, Kate trying to get up when she fell to the side, all feeling in her left leg gone. Her back felt numb too. She fell face first into the dirt after trying to get up again. Her spells wore off, the pounding in her head worse than before. She groaned, crawling forward and under some bushes. Kate turned off the flashlight and rolled onto her back, the effect of the poison spreading as she unsheathed one of her knives. *Please don't stop my heart or brain.*

A few minutes later, she couldn't move her leg at all, her shoulders and neck having lost feeling as well. Half her face was numb, her left eyelid halfway closed. Her whole body felt hot, and cold at the same time. She simply lay there, letting her immune system deal with the unknown and dangerous substance. The grip on her knife felt weak but at least she still felt the solid handle. Much of her clothes had been cut through, Kate checking herself in the dark to see if there were any wounds she had missed. Killing the last of the critters had helped her heal the cuts they managed to cause, at least mostly. She was surprised to find her thick pants cut through as cleanly as she'd expect a razor to manage, and yet the wound on her leg didn't come close. *It couldn't get through my cheek either. Not without a lot of force.*

She sighed, unable to close her eyes as she waited. Kate hoped the poison didn't last for days on end, or left permanent damage. Either wouldn't be a surprise but she'd likely be dead if they were the case. *The first one at least. Melusine has healing magic now. Just have to get back.*

I hope they don't go out to look for me. No. They wouldn't be that stupid. Unlike me. She couldn't help but smile a little. A half smile at least. *Lying under a bush next to five monsters I killed. In Keilberg. With my Berserker Class and a bunch of magical stats.* She stopped herself from giggling. Ridiculous things just kept on happening. This one she supposed was mostly her fault. She should've just stayed in the castle, preferably in the armory. But of course she had to act defiant. *Can't argue with results.*

Kate blinked her eyes when she started seeing the leaves above her. *Too early to be morning.* Her body still felt weak and feverish but she did manage to turn her head ever so slightly, seeing through a spot in the bushes that had previously been entirely dark.

Green light illuminated the surrounding forest, flowing through like some kind of mist. She hadn't seen the polar lights but it was the closest thing she could think of based on the images she had seen. The phenomenon was not known to occur in Keilberg. She held her breath as well as she could and waited, one eye focused on the downright magical light. Perhaps it was.

A few minutes passed, the light growing brighter before it started to wane again. She thought she saw something move through past the tree tops but couldn't be sure. Darkness returned a few

minutes later, the sounds of wind and light rain her only companions. At some point she checked the messages again, the last critters not enough to advance her Class level.

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

...

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

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Furious Dance reaches lvl 9’

‘ding’ ‘Toll for the Living reaches lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 6’

Kate checked through the skills, most of them providing half a percent more benefits for each level it seemed.

Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 6

You have chosen to forego both shields and subtlety. While wielding a weapon with both hands, you deal 8% more damage.

I wonder if that multiplies with other damage bonuses. Probably not.

The idea of eight percent more damage to a physical attack executed by her seemed like an impossible thing in the first place. Sure, you could gain experience wielding a specific weapon, getting better at it, but a consistent eight percent more? Overall perhaps one could gain eight percent more muscle mass but even that wouldn't directly correlate to damage dealt with a melee weapon.

She tried not to think about it too hard. Survival was more important. Grey could do the math on all these things, as long as she had some abilities that helped her not die, she was more than content. *And coffee.*

Kate didn't hear any other creatures for a few hours. The poison luckily started to wear off at around that time. She assumed the night had progressed somewhat far but without a clock on her, it was difficult to tell. Her intuition wasn't bad but with all the fighting, her exhaustion, blood loss, and poisoning, she assumed her accuracy could be *slightly* off.

She felt sore and tired but she wasn't about to sleep here. The first thing she wanted to do was get away from the corpses. At least now that the poison wasn't noticeable anymore. Her clothes were drenched in sweat and blood. The left arm of her sweater and jacket had been reduced to a few flimsy strips of fabric and she didn't want to know how her face looked right now.

Kate forced herself to get up in the darkness. The clouds had cleared a little, allowing her to see the silhouettes of the nearby trees. Finding her hammer a few meters away, she thought on where to go. She had a hard time gauging the slope and wasn't about to use her flashlight. The batteries wouldn't hold up forever and she had to have it in case more monsters showed up. Hammer at hand, she started in a random direction. Anything but forest would give her an indication of where she was

and waiting until morning was not an option, not with the possibility of more monsters attacking the castle, or creatures tracking down the corpses she had left behind.

She gulped, hoping the others were safe. *One goblin did get away. But so far they only attacked at the start of the night. I should be able to get back before they try again. I hope.*

Kate hastened her pace, walking through the darkness until she heard movement up ahead. Slowing down, she pressed herself against a tree and tried to see.

The now familiar guttural sounds of an ogre came to her ears, luckily still quite a distance away. Cries of pain and frequent attacks suggested he wasn't doing particularly well against what he was fighting.

She rubbed her hands and moved on, changing the angle to avoid the fighting. A few minutes later the sounds had stopped.

Kate finally reached the edge of the forest. *At least I know where I am*, she thought, looking at the distant bonfires. The same ones she had seen driving back from Keilberg with Jon and Grey. *Good thing we left the keys in the ignition.*

She hadn't planned to go back to the town so soon but the idea of waiting for dawn inside a building and then driving back was considerably more attractive than the alternatives. *Let's see if I can get to my apartment. I'm sick of using someone else's underwear. Maybe we can get two runs in tomorrow. God they're gonna be so pissed that I left in the night. I should leave a note next time. Killed some stuff, losing my mind. Have to kill more stuff. At least they know some things about my Class already, maybe they can connect the dots.*

Kate moved along the woods and towards Keilberg, the sky clear now that the storm had passed, the stars and moon providing enough light for her to orient herself. These parts, she knew and whatever waited in town for her, she had her hammer.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 7

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 8***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 9***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 5***
- ***Active:***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 8***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 6***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 6***
- ***Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 1***
- ***Passive:***

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 20

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 7

Strength: 11

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 15 Necessities

Kate saw the first buildings about twenty minutes later, her pace faster now that she knew where she was. The thought of her own bed, french press, fresh clothing that fit, and a shower pushed her onward, despite the hostile territory and what she knew waited for her in the streets of Keilberg. She felt less anxious than on her earlier tour with the others. Perhaps it was some kind of high from nearly dying twice in the same night, killing dangerous monsters, or really just her being incredibly exhausted.

She slowed down when she got closer, careful to stay in the underbrush at first before she started moving from tree to tree. Her apartment was in an old three story building, the six flats all rented out by the owner who lived in Falstadt. Approaching from the east would let her get there without moving through the town center. Visibility was better now but she still tread carefully, assuming that the monsters could see better than her in the relative darkness.

There were no lights coming from the town, the distant bonfires now hidden behind the structures. She sneaked past and reached her building without alerting any creatures that may or may not have been there. Not even a full day had passed since they had killed the goblins in the Golden Swan. She hoped that meant only a few goblins and the two Wargs on the main street remained.

The main door was broken in, wood splintered and glass shattered.

The same was true for the apartments upstairs. She gripped her hammer at the first door. A part of her didn't want to check on her neighbors. And yet she felt it was the least she had to do. To at least make sure.

Her flashlight angled at the ground, she called out in a whisper. Nobody answered. Inside she found a single corpse. Kate put a blanket on top of the murdered man before she moved on. She focused on the goal of getting a shower, too emotionally exhausted to even try and process anything she would find in the other apartments. Just based on the splintered doors, she had little hope to find a survivor.

Ten minutes later, she had the confirmation, for those at least that had been home. Her own apartment had been broken into as well, the door open but still hanging from the hinges. *Came in and left again when they didn't find anybody.* Some of the furniture had scratches and dents but it didn't seem like the monsters cared much about her things. *Just here for killing. Or some weird interpretation of hunting.*

Her apartment was separated into a bedroom and a mixed living room with the kitchen. The bathroom with a shower had been mostly left alone. Kate closed the door as well as she could before she quietly dragged her chest of drawers to block it.

First thing's first, she got a glass of water and downed it, the plumbing luckily still intact and working. Next, she searched through her clothes, a sigh leaving her when she found everything undisturbed. *Fuck I'm glad they didn't torch this place.*

All her underwear, shirts, and working clothes piled onto the floor, she went for a shower. With her hammer in hand, the thing definitely requiring some cleaning as well. It felt strange, standing in the dark, warm water flowing down with blood pooling on the ground, a medieval weapon in her hands. *Like some drunk and paranoid party girl that just came home from a medieval festival.* She smiled

at the idea, shaking her head as she tried to focus on the warmth. Being clean. Having fresh clothes. Silver linings in the shit state of the world.

She felt tired after, any semblance of adrenaline gone and the danger around her feeling more surreal than anything. *Could go back now, try to sneak past and get to the car.* It didn't sound like a good idea. Not with her lack of sleep, but even more so with the nightly activities in the forest. The goblins too seemed to prefer sleeping during the day, or at least the mornings. Kate even left her french press for the next day and instead fell into her bed, hair wet and hammer in hand. She fell asleep in less than a minute.

Kate stirred in her bed, yawning as she turned to the side. Something hard pressed against her thigh. She grumbled and tried to push it away before her eyes opened wide. Pushing the hammer away, she raised a hand to her head and took in a deep breath. She had thought it was Sunday, but instead it was the end of the world. Slowly sitting up, she rubbed her eyes, sunlight streaming in through the closed blinds. Her alarm showed eleven forty. *Overslept.*

Hammer in one hand, she stood up and moved to the kitchen. Her clothing pile remained where she had left it. She heated up water in a pan, avoiding anything that would make a lot of noise. She got her largest backpack and her sports bag, filling the former with most of her clothes. Just the utility stuff. She added cleaning products, tampons, creams, toothbrush, a nail clipper, and a pack of condoms, just in case. Kate made herself a large cup of coffee, leaning against her kitchen top to enjoy the beverage. Then she poured herself another cup, eating a few crackers in between. There wasn't much in her fridge sadly, the appliance dented in by a blunt object but still mostly working.

She cleaned up the french press after and put it into her pack with all the coffee she still had in her apartment. Her bluetooth speakers went in too. Necessary items only. The last thing she packed was a photo of herself with her parents, looking at it for a few seconds before she put it in. *I'll come find you when I can.* Kate had no idea how the fuck she would get to Scotland now but if there was a way in the future, she would find it. *If he doesn't come for me first,* she thought with a grin. *And don't you dare die. You old idiot.*

The sports bag was empty but Kate didn't plan to sneak out with just her own belongings. Not while she was here, with a car hopefully waiting for her at the edge of town. There were a lot of things they needed, and now was the time to get them. Before the monsters figured out how useful it all was. She gave her apartment a last look and moved aside the chest of drawers, focused now as she stepped back out into the monster infested town.

The sun was high on the horizon, a few clouds visible in the distance. The cool autumn breeze wasn't quite as noticeable with the sunlight. Kate moved around the building after she had checked the street, crouched and alert. She went from house to house, on the lookout for creatures when she came across a warg sniffing the air in front of a former home.

She activated Mindless Ferocity, leaving Furious Dance out of the mix for now. Her senses sharpened as she moved forward, steady steps up to the creature. Kate let go of her empty sports bag, the sound coupled with her steps alerting the warg which turned her way, right in time to see the spiked hammer come in from below.

Its jaw snapped closed as the weapon entered, its body lifted up slightly by the direct impact. A gurgle was all it could produce.

Kate pushed the hammer to the side, the monster staggering away with blood dripping from its jaws as the spike was ripped out. She finished it off with a direct strike of the dull end, skull cracking before it sagged to the ground.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Warg]’

She looked around and deactivated her magic. Kate heard birds chirping nearby as she went and grabbed her bag. *One down.* She had no time to hesitate, and no reason to consider.

A few minutes later, she stood at the back of the general store, looking around the corners to see if anything was nearby. She heard and saw nothing. The back door was open, the lock broken. Sunlight drifted in through the front, providing enough light for her to see. Her sports bag at the ready, she went inside and filled it with everything she deemed worth the space. High amounts of calories in the form of canned beans, lentils, peas, rice, pasta, and everything else that seemed essential.

The one bag wouldn't get them far but it was at least a week's worth of food for the entire group. She didn't wait any longer, leaving the rest for later as she made her way back outside. Listening for monsters, she continued behind the buildings until she crossed the street to the skiing store. There were a few things she had missed the last time around. Kate grabbed another bag, filling it with rope, binoculars, headlamps, and more clothes.

Her last stop she made at a small electronics store. Broken glass lay scattered on the floor, various devices spread around. She heard an electronic crackle from the back and set down her bags, sneaking in as well as she could, trying to avoid the glass. She found two goblins staring at a flickering TV, the display broken with colorful pixels flashing.

The second goblin saw her right before the brains of its companion splattered against the shelf it had stood next to. It got out its small knife and took a step back, taking in a deep breath.

Kate shot forward with her charge, her knee impacting the goblin's chest and pushing out all the air it had gathered in a quiet yelp. She watched the creature hit the wall and swung her hammer in a horizontal arc, a wet impact resounding before the monster fell. It tried to crawl away when an overhead strike hit its skull.

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

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

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 9’

‘ding’ ‘Reckless Charge reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 7’

Her hands were steady, blood on her boots and jacket. *Just as surprised as the people who lived here.* She left the corpses and grabbed what she had been looking for. A few sets of small radios, some smartphones, several handfuls of batteries, and battery packs with usb connectors and solar cells.

Both bags and her backpack full, she went back outside, crossed the street at a brisk pace and started making her way back all around to the southern part of town where they had parked Jon's car. *Hopefully still there.*

The higher Endurance seemed to help more than she had expected, much like the other points she had invested into her status. With all the weight she carried and the speed she moved at, she would've at least expected to be breaking a sweat. It all felt smooth however, a good night's rest and copious amounts of caffeine certainly helped. She saw a few creatures move in the distance, a group walking over the open field beyond the town. Orcs and goblins she surmised but moved on quickly before they could spot her.

Up the slope and onto the parking lot, she found Jon's car as they had left it. The doors were open. Kate moved the bags onto the back seats and got in, the key still in the ignition. *Smart for once. Well done Kate.*

The drive wouldn't be long, the power left in the car enough to make it several times over. She turned the key and watched the lights come on. Turning it around, she drove onto the road back to the castle and hit the breaks a few meters in. "Gods, what the fuck," she murmured, watching a woman stumble out of the forest, jeans shorts and a flimsy top, both blood covered and ripped. She wore wandering boots, the laces on one of them open.

Blonde hair was strung together in a filthy bun, blood and dirt on her face with dried run down makeup. She stumbled closer to the car, saying something that Kate couldn't hear, finally collapsing in front of the vehicle.

She got out immediately, crouching down over the woman before she checked her pulse. *Still breathing.* Kate quickly checked for injuries. There were a few obvious cuts and bruises but nothing she deemed immediately life threatening. Kate moved over to the car and opened the passenger seat, hoping that the woman wasn't some kind of zombie or shape changer. It wouldn't make sense for either to collapse however, that was more an insurance fraud thing. She moved her onto the seat and secured her, closing the door right after when she heard noises from the forest. Growls.

Kate didn't waste any time. She got into the driver seat and drove off. A glance into the section of the forest didn't reveal anything. *Growls sounded different than anything I've faced before. But I might just be getting mad. With all the shit I've already done.* She looked at the knocked out woman, just now noticing the smell. It only took a few seconds for her to find the relevant button to open both windows. *No music for now.*

She drove the way back, much more aware of her surroundings this time around. Though it seemed quiet compared to the previous night. *One benefit we might have compared to most of these monsters. As long as they don't climb over walls.* She shook her head slightly, thinking back on the goblins she had killed. With her skills active, it was easy. Like she had fought against monsters for years already. The confidence she felt, wielding her weapons. It felt good. Intoxicating in a way, like dancing to a new song she discovered, when everything just fell into place. But really, she was fighting monsters.

Her hands wrung around the steering wheel. She took a deep breath and focused on the now. There was still a lot to do, if they wanted to get some sense of safety. The woman next to her stirred when they came up on the castle, Kate slowing down the car. She leaned out of the window and waved to Jon looking down from the battlements. "Open the gates," she called out.

He nodded, rushing back and down, shouting for the others. Half a minute later the gates opened.

"Where... wha... who are you?" the woman asked, tired blue eyes looking at her with some apprehension.

"You're gonna be fine. We have a healer," Kate said with a smile. "God knows we need her."

Back inside, she stopped the car and turned it off, everyone rushing towards them with a variety of expressions.

“This is... Keilberg castle,” the woman said and rubbed her eyes.

“It is,” Kate said and got out.

“Injured?” Melusine asked immediately.

“Not much, check her instead,” Kate said, pointing behind herself. She opened the other doors and grabbed the bags.

“What happened?” Jon asked.

Kate’s shoulders sagged a little, smiling when she saw Grey and Logan join them too. They looked better.

“Your Berserker Class,” Grey said, a shy smile on his face as he looked at her. “I t... told them it w... was fine. That y... you were out there.”

“Good thing you took care of the goblins first,” Logan said. “We saw the corpses. Thank you. For her as well,” he added, nodding towards the woman being led out of the car by Melusine.

“Who is she? Why did you go to Keilberg... what is all that?” Jon asked, looking between her, the car, and the bags.

Kate didn’t answer, steadying herself against the near jumping hug from Eloise. The girl had tears in her eyes, holding her tight before she stepped back with an embarrassed expression.

“Sorry,” Kate said. “But I have a feeling this won’t be the last time.” She looked to Grey.

“We have to look at the... system... and plan t... things. Test the skills. It’s important,” he said.

“Yeah, that sounds reasonable,” Jon said and grabbed one of the bags Kate was holding.

Logan did the same from the other side. “I’m glad you made it back.”

“Yeah,” Kate said with a sigh. “Me too.”

Melusine brought the woman into the armory, sending her daughters to fetch various things from Bert’s home.

The others gathered in the old man’s living room, looking through everything she had brought.

Kate set down the backpack and shook her head at the look Logan gave the pack. “That’s my stuff,” she said and carefully took out the french press.

He smiled and started taking things out.

Eloise smiled brightly when she saw the food, redirecting it towards Kate before she vanished again with a wet cloth.

“What’s all the commotion about?” Bert asked as he walked down the stairs. He looked even more grumpy than before. “Survived eh? Told em they shouldn’t worry. You’re not like those city folks.”

“Yes Bert,” Kate said as she carefully put away her coffee. “Thanks for the confidence.”

“Headlamps and radios... good idea,” Logan said, opening the plastic packaging.

“It was dark. I wouldn’t have made it without the flashlights,” Kate said.

Grey gulped and looked at her. “You were in the forest at night?”

She gave him a nod.

“Any different than during the day?” he asked.

Jon sat down at the table and opened a notebook, looking at the labels as he started taking inventory. He flipped to another page when she started telling them about the monsters, the man asking specific questions about the creatures. “Only if you’re comfortable with that of course.”

“Are you starting some kind of monster manual?” Kate asked.

“Yes,” he answered seriously. “I am.”

Chapter 16 Team

Jon finished his notes, the smell of coffee drifting through the open kitchen. He sighed, giving Kate a slight smile when she handed him a cup. “Berserker hmm?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Mine is called Assassin,” Grey said. He couldn’t fully hide how cool he actually thought that was.

Kate puffed, drinking from her mug. “Of course it is.”

“And I have the Precision stat that comes with the Class. I think it’s one point per level, two normal stat points for the Class level itself, I’m at level two already from what we’ve done in Keilberg. I... don’t know if I would’ve survived... without it. The four points I had to put into Vitality...” Grey said, frowning a little at the last bit. “I guess it makes sense as a hardcore character. Nobody respawned yet, right?”

“What do you mean? Grey you need to use normal people language, not gamer speak,” Kate said with a sigh, making herself another mug of coffee.

“Well... you know RPGs. The Classes, they usually adhere to some kind of roles. I don’t know how this system works exactly but so far it seems to go that route at least. Precision increases my ability to hit weak spots with my attacks for example, which fits with the Assassin Class. I get bonuses to light bladed weapons, throwing knives, nimble movements, all that from passive skills in my Class. The system is basically telling me to invest into Dexterity. Because I’m moving fast and because I attack with nimble weapons, not for example like you... I assume Berserker is more a Strength thing?”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Kate said, taking a sip of coffee. “What was that about respawning?”

Grey moved a hand through his hair as he walked in a small circle. He wrung his hands and bit his lip. “Well you see... in most games an Assassin wouldn’t really level Vitality much. Because you’re going for the kill basically. DPS, damage per second. But the issue here is of course... we might not come back to life. And testing that would be insane. So I think it’s best if we all invest some of our stats into Vitality. I tested a little with a fork earlier and my skin alone is... well watch,” he said and grabbed the aforementioned utensil. The man proceeded to stab his arm with the metal piece.

Jon stood up from his chair but Kate just sipped from her mug. She knew nothing would happen, her own Vitality was at twenty after all.

Grey stabbed a few more times and showed them, his skin only slightly red where he had rammed the fork down. “I don’t know how, but these stats are making more than noticeable changes. As to the hardcore comment, some games have an option to play a character that is permanently gone when they die once. The entire meta is different for those... meta being... like the best gear and skills to level, often more on the defensive side for obvious reasons. If you can come back to life you’re basically fine with using a single high damage spell before being one shot.”

“Gamer speak,” Kate reminded.

“Yes. Well, it doesn’t matter. This is hardcore, which means we have to consider our defenses,” he said, cupping his face with both hands before he took in a deep breath. “But it’s good. Our composition so far isn’t bad. Logan has a Paladin Class and I talked to him about his skills already.

Bonuses to heavy armor, large weapons, and he has a light heal. Nothing quite like Melusine but it's still substantial. That brings us to your wife, Jon. Having a healer this early on in this mess is key. We wouldn't be talking here at all without her, but recovering somewhere on our own. If we had the chance to recover at all," he said and gulped. "Do you mind sharing your skills with us?" he said finally and looked at Kate.

She looked at the coffee before she closed her eyes. "I suppose I can," she said, noting that the young man hadn't stuttered a single time in all the talk so far. Kate went on to describe her special stat and her various skills, reading the descriptions to the others.

"Pretty much what I expected," Grey said, now sitting next to Jon who noted everything down with his fast handwriting.

The older man looked at Kate with some apprehension. "That's why you ran off..."

She didn't say anything.

"It's good," Grey said. "I mean she was the first one to fight and kill things. We couldn't have adjusted as quickly without your Class. Now in a game I'd just send you in from the side, or as a frontal attack while everyone else is at the rear but that's obviously quite dangerous."

"I can control it to an extent. I managed to stay quiet and wait before attacking. The problem is... stopping," Kate said, gulping.

"Maybe there's a way to snap you out of it. We will have to test, but our abilities and levels are just not high enough yet to know a lot. Five percent seems to be the baseline for every skill that grants a tangible bonus, with half a percent more per level, but other than that... the descriptions could mean anything. We don't have the dev notes or anything so we'll just have to figure things out. I'm interested in the food and gear bonuses; you got anything there yet?" Grey asked.

Kate shook her head.

"We'll have to figure that out at some point. The question also remains if there are support Classes or if everything is battle focused. Even Melusine has a bonus to damage with medical tools," he said.

"Gibberish," Bert murmured from his chair.

"Thanks for the contribution," Kate said, receiving a dismissive wave in return. "So how do we level the skills and Classes? Just... killing?"

Grey tapped the table. "Maybe. It depends. Just using the skills while training together might do the trick but who knows. That stuff is usually possible early on in games but there are exploits too. Though I doubt there are any bugs in this system. And... it might be too dangerous for us to train with your... main buffs active."

"I can go without. But we can't be sitting here training while the world goes to shit out there," Kate said. "There are still a lot of things we can get in Keilberg. I think it's best if I go again today."

"I'll...j... join," Grey said.

"No. Out of the question," Kate replied.

"W... what you d... did. Was right," he said. "And y... your skills-"

“Exactly. My skills. I’m unpredictable. And you followed me in. We could’ve both died, all three of us even. I don’t want to risk that,” Kate said.

“We’re here together,” Jon said in a calm voice. He leaned forward slightly. The expression on his face was different now. More serene. “You’ve saved us a few times already, Kate. The least we can do is not send you into a monster infested town by yourself. Especially with those... skills of yours. If I understand it correctly, your abilities allow you to ignore pain to an extent, and you can... absorb... health. Of the monsters you kill. With a few people having your back, our overall chance of survival is higher.”

She shook her head. “I understand the logic, Jon. But this isn’t a game. You were there, you saw what happened.” She tried hard to stay calm but her voice got louder in the end nonetheless.

“I did,” he said with a sigh, rubbing his brow. “But this isn’t about how I feel about it. I’m sure it’ll take years for me to work through what I experienced in the past few days...” he said and paused. “Neither is it about how you feel, Kate. If we plan to stay alive, get through this... mess. We have to make the decisions most likely to succeed.”

The man remained quiet for a few seconds before he talked again. “My... daughters... are here. I d... I don’t know what I would do if... I’ll come with you too. I’ll get a Class, whatever it may be. We were given this... system... I know it’s not what you want. I don’t want to go out there either, Kate. I want to hide. I want to hope the military is coming, but I have a feeling it won’t. I have a feeling that these creatures are here to stay. They’ve already killed everyone in Keilberg.”

The man paused and looked at each of them in turn. “I won’t let them take my daughters. We will survive. Everyone here. You included.”

Grey smiled but didn’t say anything. He glanced at Kate before he looked down.

She lowered her mug and sighed. “You pieces of shit,” she murmured. The father, protecting his daughters. The awkward gamer kid turned Assassin. *Maybe we will. Maybe.* She didn’t want to think about them dying on her. Maybe even because of her own actions. Jon was right though, it wasn’t just about her. The rational side was there. She could’ve died several times in the past night alone. Someone to support her or distract the enemies would’ve made a massive difference. She couldn’t deny that. It annoyed her but she knew Jon was right. And most of all, she couldn’t deny their guts. It reminded her of her friends in the force. She didn’t like it. Not one bit. But she supposed if the world was going to shit, she too had to adapt.

Kate downed the rest of her coffee and steeled herself. *And though the fires may rage, all consuming. We shall stand. We shall fight. We shall prevail.*

She couldn’t help but smile at the thought. *Fred, you absolute idiot.* The firefighter had loved his quotes and catchphrases. Silly really, but so were goblins and orcs roaming the forests of Keilberg. *Perhaps I could use a bit more of his optimism.*

“We’ll prepare to leave momentarily. Grey, get your gear ready, we have enough clothing now thanks to our expedition yesterday and thanks to Kate. I think it’s best if we use the truck,” Jon said and finished his notes. He closed the notebook and put it into one of the cupboards. “Bert, you’re tasked with protecting the castle.”

The old man coughed. “Boy. I’ve protected this castle for fifty years.” He got up and grabbed his shotgun. “Just come back without nearly dying.”

“Sure you’re up for this?” Kate asked the two. She thought back to Grey nearly bleeding out on the ground just out in the yard.

“I could ask you the same,” Jon said.

She smiled. “Don’t act cocky now, Mr. Crossbow. I’ve killed an Ogre all on my own.”

“And you nearly died doing it,” he said and stood, starting to prepare his own gear. His hands shook ever so slightly but he looked into her eyes now. “Next time, we’ll kill it together.”

Kate smiled and finished her coffee before she too started to prepare. Her gear was mostly already on her but she grabbed one of the radios and tuned it to one of the few available frequencies before testing quickly.

“The range is not very good on those,” Grey commented.

“You’re into radios too?” Kate asked as she put one onto her belt. She added a headlamp and a few extra batteries before she shouldered her pack and grabbed her spiked hammer.

“I r... read the... package,” the man admitted, scratching the back of his neck.

“That makes sense,” she said with a smile and left.

Back in the armory, Melusine had sat down the newcomer on the ground floor. She had cleaned her wounds and cuts. She looked better. Much less grimy and pale.

Kate noted her blue eyes as she glanced her way. Her makeup was cleaned off now but Kate assumed the woman made quite a few heads turn wherever she went regardless. “You look better,” she said, glancing to Logan as he joined them.

“Ethan is awake. Already mentioned the stinking bedrolls, the nerd gallery of medieval garbage, and this fuckface,” the man said as he pointed at himself. “He still needs rest but he’ll get around. Melusine, let me know when he goes too far.”

The woman smiled his way as she cleaned off the last of the blood on the newcomer. “I’ve handled worse, Logan. How are you feeling Allison?”

“Less shit,” the woman said with a sigh. “What were those monsters? You h... you have a hammer. Is this really happening?” she asked with a shaking voice.

“I’m afraid so,” Melusine said in a calm tone. A tone which said that everything would be alright.

Kate took in a deep breath hearing her. *Guess I needed that one too.*

Allison rolled her eyes back. “Fuck, this sucks. At least festival season is over. Internet doesn’t work and now there are monsters. Thanks for bringing me here, I’m Allison,” she said, addressing Kate. “I don’t know how much longer I could’ve run from those things.”

“Happy to have stumbled upon you,” Kate said. “You were around Keilberg when it all happened?”

“Yes. I was hunting for squirrels,” the woman said and rolled her eyes at Kate’s brow rise. “Dead ones. I’m not a monster.”

“You were hunting for dead squirrels in the forest?” Kate asked.

Allison sighed. “That’s why I don’t tell people about this stuff. Yes. I make stuff. Here, look,” she said and pulled out her phone. The screen was cracked and it didn’t turn on. “Shit. I make cosplays, alright?”

“You do? You don’t look like someone who does cosplay,” Kate said.

“At least you know what it is. It’s so annoying to explain all the time. And yes. I have... well had, an instagram with over a million followers. Horny nerds but it pays well. I do a lot of personal projects too but I guess that’s over now. God I hope Heather is alright,” she said, sharing the words quickly before she tried to check her phone again.

“I’m lost,” Logan commented.

Allison glanced at him for the first time, her eyes lingering on the man for a second before she turned back. She opened and closed her mouth before she spoke. “I’ll explain it to you later.”

Kate smirked and pointed to her left. “Brought back a bunch of phones if you want to grab a new one. If you have a storage card or something you might be able to use it. Reception and internet are fucked of course.”

“Are you going somewhere?” Logan asked. He glanced past her to see the others moving about outside.

Kate looked at him for a moment. “Yes. Back to Keilberg.”

“Didn’t we just come from there?” Allison asked. She groaned when Melusine tabbed a cut on her arm with a piece of wet cloth.

“You should eat something, shower, and get some rest,” Melusine said to her, touching her brow. “I got rid of the infections.”

“How?” Allison asked.

The others looked at her.

“There’s magic now,” Kate said.

The woman covered her face with both hands. “Oh my god.”

“I’m good again,” Logan said. “I will join you.”

Kate looked at him and shrugged. She was too tired to have another argument about the same thing. He could heal with magic. Their chances would be better. *Jon is right.*

Melusine didn’t comment on anything, her focus on the injured and exhausted woman.

“Put on your armor then, big man. We’re leaving in about ten minutes,” Kate said.

He nodded and went upstairs.

“Did he decide on his own?” Melusine asked when the man had left.

“Jon? Yes. I wanted to go alone,” Kate said.

“Holy shit, you’re like some medieval fighter or something. Are you alright in your head?” Allison asked before hissing again.

“I’m a firefighter,” Kate said in a matter of fact tone.

“That’s good then. Thank you, Kate. And you, stop insulting the woman that saved you,” Melusine said.

Kate smiled. “She’s tired and hungry. Can’t exactly blame her.”

“You understand. Good. Reasonable people. Speaking of which, it does smell really nice,” Allison said and stretched.

Kate left the two alone and prepared herself as best she could. Her bags were empty once more and she put them back into the car when Jon stopped her.

“We’re taking the truck. More space,” he said, checking the quiver on his belt.

“It’s louder,” Kate said.

“We know there weren’t any goblins near the parking spot. And we know most of them are asleep during the day,” Jon said. “And we have to assume there’s another attack coming tonight. We have to get everything we can, as fast as possible. Before Keilberg is full of creatures. I do hope that horde you saw doesn’t come up here.”

Me too. She didn’t disagree with anything he said and moved the bags out to the truck instead. She had a few knives on her belt again and her hammer. *As prepared as I’ll get.* The clothes felt good at least. As did her weapons. She looked at Grey and Jon, the two men now dressed in black and gray, weapons at the ready. *Not exactly a military force, but at least we’re no longer a miss matched skiing group.*

Logan managed to improve the look further with his steel armor and greatsword. The others didn’t argue when he got onto the back of the truck without a word.

“Food, medical supplies, weapons, and anything else useful we can find,” Jon said. “I drive.”

Kate didn’t argue. He knew the way now too. She got in on the passenger seat and checked her radio. “Test, one two three.”

Her voice resounded from three corresponding radios.

Jon grabbed the steering wheel and closed the door, silence coming over the group.

Kate turned on the car radio, switching to the usb left behind by the original owner of the truck. She glanced at Jon and then the two others on the back, nobody complaining about the guitar solo in the middle of a Metal track. She moved her hammer to the side a little but kept a hand around the handle. And then they were driving.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 7

- Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 9

- Active: Furious Dance – lvl 9

- Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 6

- Active:

- Active:

- Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 8

- Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 6

- Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 7

- **Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 1**

- **Passive:**

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 20

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 7

Strength: 11

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 17 Bread and Games

Kate turned off the radio a few minutes before they reached the parking lot. She reminded the others that just a few hours prior there were growls coming from where Allison had burst out of the underbrush.

The engine of the car continued to produce considerable noise but they arrived without an interruption. Jon turned the key and got his crossbow ready. Grey and Logan jumped off the side of the truck and grabbed their bags, three each.

Kate got out as well and did the same. The weather was good today, the grass still slightly wet from last night's downpour. A few clouds remained on the horizon but nothing that suggested more rain. She waited in silence and looked towards the forest but nothing showed itself.

"Kate in front, then Grey, me, and finally Logan," Jon said in a hushed voice. His weapon was steady.

She was surprised at his initiative but they grouped up all the same, ready to save what they could from the desecrated town. This time, they couldn't spot a single goblin guard as they went into the streets but Kate soon noted a strange difference. "There are fewer bodies."

The others pondered the whispered comment but nobody added anything. They had discussed the possibility of undead but neither were there any shambling creatures to replace the missing corpses.

A few Wargs were growling at each other in one of the side streets, the group circling them in silence.

Kate ground her teeth but she didn't have her spells active. They were here for supplies primarily, not to take unnecessary risks. Soon they reached the general store, this time from the back. Kate stopped the others at the entrance when she heard a sound from within. She activated Mindless Ferocity, the steps and gargled words from within instantly more audible. She held up three fingers and gestured the height of a goblin, then she raised one finger and gestured much higher. She moved the finger to her mouth then pointed at herself then inside.

She tried to explain that the others should follow her with some distance, and most importantly to stay quiet.

Furious Dance activated as she willed it, the sounds clearing even more. There were enemies. Monsters she could kill. Monsters she had to kill. Beasts in the way of their goal. Her allies were around but they were no longer relevant. She moved inside, each of her steps deliberate, slow, careful. Her eyes were focused. She didn't miss a thing. *Silent.*

Quiet.

Kate was inside. She sneaked through the small corridor and came up on the shelves at the back. The monsters were loud. Loud and unaware. The three goblins were to her right, two, maybe three rows down. The orc she saw, its head sticking up over one of the shelves on the left. Just slightly. He ripped something open, sniffing before he murmured a few words. Kate didn't waste the opportunity. *Distracted. Stupid.* She checked her right and saw the goblins but ignored them. They were irrelevant.

Instead she moved farther, coming out into the corridor with the orc. He held his sword with one hand and an open package of crisps in the other. She moved. Reckless Charge activated before he noticed, Kate speeding up with her hammer raised horizontally. She slammed the spike into his head the moment she stopped. A grazing hit, her foe staggering backwards, a hand going to the bleeding wound. She took a step forward and ducked below the wild swing of his sword, coming up with a short handed strike against his jaw. The top bit of her hammer broke something. She did it again and watched him stagger once more. One step forward and she swung with the full force of her body behind it. Her hammer impacted his head with a sickening crunch, his weak counter unable to cut through the fabric covering her arm. Kate watched her prey fall, his blade clattering to the ground as she stepped above the confused and injured orc. She brought the spike down on his head with one last strike, ripping it out before he slumped to the ground, unmoving.

She could feel herself grinning as she turned around, blood on her weapon as she looked at the three goblins now staring at her. They weren't moving. *Fear.*

She growled. A low noise, something she didn't know she could produce, but it felt right. *Come.*

A wooden bolt struck the goblin at the back, the two in the front shrieking at the sudden impact.

Kate ran at them. She brought her hammer up from below, hitting one of the small creatures in its chest. A blade flashed past, blood splattering the shelves. She brought her boot down on the creature's head. Again and again, until she felt its skull give, a mush of gore below her as she turned and looked around.

One of her allies stood with his blade drawn, looking at her with wide eyes. The armored one was right behind. The two goblins were dead. She listened for more. She knew there were enemies in the town. There had been wargs, large dog-like monsters roaming the streets.

"Kate," someone said.

She felt a tugging on her arm. One of her allies.

"Kate it's over," the voice said.

"She's not there," the armored one said.

She had to go out, find the other monsters. Kate looked up and found her armored ally standing in her way. She tried to walk past. He stepped in her way again.

"Try this," a third voice said. He held a knife and something else in his hand.

She turned and looked at him, her nose sniffing the air. She watched as he poured out more of the powder, holding it closer to her as he approached with careful steps. She took in a deep breath. *That's the stuff.* Her eyes closed before she opened them again. *Disable the skills. The fight is over,* she told herself and did as she asked.

"It actually worked," Logan said, his face covered by his helmet.

Jon smiled. "A simple creature, acting on instinct."

"You know I can hear you," Kate said, squinting at the man. She glanced down at the handful of coffee powder he held and the open package to the side. "And you're wasting coffee."

The man gulped and handed her the open package.

She shook her head lightly but took the thing anyway, looking for tape to close it again. Kate noticed the others staring at the gore but she found herself less caring. They were monsters in their way, and more importantly they were responsible for the carnage out there.

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

...

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

‘ding’ ‘Berserker reaches lvl 8’

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 10’

‘ding’ ‘Furious Dance reaches lvl 10’

‘ding’ ‘Reckless Charge reaches lvl 7’

‘ding’ ‘Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 7’

‘ding’ ‘Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘You have unlocked the active skill: Hunting Leap – lvl 1

Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 1

Power surges through your legs, propelling you upwards. Charge your muscles for 15% of your total stamina and jump up to 2.25m high. Not cliffs nor walls shall stand between you and your prey.

A jump? Sounds good, Kate thought as she bandaged the poor and injured package. It’ll hurt like a bitch though if I fall from that height. Or maybe not? With my high Vitality? She looked at the two stat points she still had and pondered for a few seconds. A look at the orc showed blood pooling under its head, various injuries where she had struck it. That needed so many hits. She decided on Strength, her hands shaking and her muscles tensing up when she allocated the points, feeling the magical surge go through her body.

She panted a few times before she calmed down, sweat on her brow as she felt the weight of her hammer lessen. Considerably so. She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment, refocusing on their task.

The others hadn’t seemed to notice. Grey seemed preoccupied with his own notification and Jon was already packing things.

Kate looked at the armored Logan before she tapped his shoulder. “Are you okay?” His gaze was focused on one of the goblins.

He didn’t react for a few seconds before he recoiled, taking a step back.

“Turn around,” Kate said and helped him move. She took his sword. “Sit down.”

He listened, his armored arms on his legs as he sat on the ground. Jon gave them a look but didn't stop what he was doing. Grey now started collecting goods as well.

"Talk to me, Logan," Kate said and helped him take off his helmet. The man was sweat covered, his eyes slightly unfocused and his jaw clenched to a noticeable degree. She had seen similar reactions before, crouching down next to him as she put a hand on his shoulder. "We won, Logan. Hear me? We're here to collect food and other goods, okay?"

He looked her way and started rubbing his eyes.

"Can you do that? Just the back aisles? Fill your bags and then we go back outside," she said and handed him one of them.

Logan closed his eyes for a few seconds before he opened them again. "I... yes." He stood up and started towards the shelves.

Kate watched him go. *No time for this.* She intended to talk to him later and went to go through the goods herself.

The group of monsters had destroyed quite a few packages but there was still enough to feed half a town. Jon helped Grey figure out what to pack, the others experienced enough to focus on anything that wouldn't go bad quickly. It took them the good part of twenty minutes to fill their bags before they went outside again. The walk back was largely unproblematic. Kate did note that the wargs weren't in the same alley anymore.

Jon and Grey struggled considerably with their bags but they managed it in the end, piling everything into the back of the truck.

"We should go for more while we're here," Jon said.

"Packs from the skiing store? We can clear that one out too," she said.

The man gave her a nod, the others following in silence. They remained alert as they walked back into the streets. This time, they did have to avoid a goblin guard they spotted near one of the homes, though it seemed the monster's ability to see them in broad daylight was limited at best.

The skiing store looked just like they had left it, all four of them going to work immediately. There were many backpacks and sports bags, soon filled to the brim with climbing equipment, hunting knives, clothes, binoculars, and everything else that seemed useful.

"What other stores are there, Kate?" Jon asked before they were done.

"Not much else that would be immediately useful. I got enough from the electronics store," she said. "And we have several sets of clothing now, for everyone."

The man looked at her. "What about games?"

"Games?" she asked. Grey perked up.

"Well yes. Games. Boardgames, cards, gameboys or whatever they're called these days. Books too maybe. Bert didn't have the largest collection and I did see his dvds," he said.

"Don't think any of that is a priority right now," Kate answered.

"I think it is. It should be. We can't be thinking about monsters all the time. It's been barely a few days and I can already feel myself spiral. You're good with coffee but I'd prefer something to read," he said.

“And music,” Logan said. The first thing he had said since the general store.

“I mean we can check, sure. There was a small store with board games and the like. I think they had some games and music too,” she said.

“Herbert’s Corner,” Grey said. “I w... went there... sometimes.”

No need to be ashamed about that, she thought. He was looking down, intently focused on his full backpack.

“It was at the northern edge of town, right?” she asked.

“Y... yes. We can g... get there from the car,” he said.

“Then let’s go. Everyone ready?” Jon asked.

They all confirmed, covered in bags and holding their weapons. The equipment was considerably lighter than the dozen bags of rice and cans of veggies Kate had carried before.

“Quiet and steady, there are still monsters out there,” Jon added before he opened the back door.

Kate went first, followed by Grey. As alert and silent as they could, the group continued through the quiet town. There was no sign of the wargs they had seen before, nor any other creatures. Kate glanced around and gripped her weapon. She would’ve preferred to know where the monsters were. Knowing they moved around added a lot of uncertainty to the whole endeavor. They soon reached the truck again and deposited their full bags.

Ready with more storage, the group continued to Herbert’s Corner, the store located just a few minutes away from the parking lot at the northern edge of town. It looked small from the outside, a door wedged between the entrances to a bakery and a butcher’s shop.

Kate opened the door as slowly as she could. She winced when a jingle resounded from the bells above the entrance. A breeze flowed through as she waited, no other noise joining in, no steps, or growls added to the mix. She entered. The ground floor remained lit, most of everything piled on the floor. Shelves had been toppled over, dvd cases smashed, boxes ripped apart. She had trouble finding a spot on the floor that wasn’t covered in pieces.

Grey held the bells in place after Logan had entered, closing the miraculously intact glass door behind himself.

The store was quite narrow, filled to the absolute brim with goods, in front and behind the counter. A back door led to the back of the building and a path alongside the town’s edge. It remained open, a single body lying on the ground a few meters away. Blood had collected below.

“That... that’s him,” Grey said with a gulp.

“We’ll send him off too,” Kate said. “But not now.”

“It won’t do them any good if we die in the process,” Jon said, having heard their conversation. He was looking through the shelves and chaos. “I don’t think any of this is particularly usable. The games have all mixed together.”

Grey stepped aside without a word, crouching down next to the counter before he pulled away a small rug. Below was a latch. He turned and opened it, revealing a step ladder that led downwards. The man reached below and flicked a switch, light now coming from the cellar.

“You do seem familiar with the shop,” Kate said as she walked over.

“I’ll stay up here to keep an eye out,” Logan said.

Grey gave him a nod before he stepped down, followed by Kate and Jon.

She nearly whistled, stopping herself due to the potential noise. The cellar was near four times as large as the ground floor, and just as packed if not more so. Ground to ceiling shelves were stacked with games, magazines, books, and electronics. Everything was well lit, one corner of the large room dedicated to an old blocky TV, beanbags set in front of it with a variety of consoles hooked up to the large device.

“Let’s get to work then. Anything that seems fun,” Jon murmured as he started looking through the shelves.

Grey already had his bag half full, the man reaching out with precision and speed, much like his Class suggested. He navigated the tight space with ease, choosing entire stacks of comics seemingly without consideration.

Kate watched him for a few seconds before she started looking herself. *Absolute treasure trove this place. Must’ve kept the valuable or rare stuff down here.* She grabbed a few board games she was familiar with and put them into her bag, moving on to the extensive CD collection. *Suppose we can’t use all the cloud services anymore.* She didn’t go for her own favorites and instead chose a varied selection of genres, most of it more than twenty years old at least. Kate stashed all of the CD players themselves too. Most used batteries, of which they now had a shit load. Herbert had made sure of that, an entire full box standing next to the stack of players.

Jon chuckled. “Even I know some of these books. Asimov’s Foundation,” he said and held up a copy. “Might as well start here with the collection of human knowledge, this place may as well be a library.”

“Foundation is good. Just wish there was more action in it... and the characters change all the time,” Grey said. “If you like sci-fi, you should read Ha-”

A knock came from above, Logan crouching down near the entrance. “Monsters,” he hissed through his helmet.

Kate moved to the steps and put on her backpack. They had enough games, books, and music. She got up with her hammer in hand and found Logan hiding behind the counter. She joined him with quiet steps, trying to see the creatures he mentioned. She found nothing.

“Group of Orcs, three or four, and five goblins, maybe more. Walked past and towards the town center,” he whispered.

The others joined them with their packs. Grey turned off the light and closed the hatch with a quiet click. He put the rug back and joined them, a hand on his sword’s handle.

“Are they patrolling?” Kate asked.

“I don’t know, but we should leave as soon as we can. Those were too many for us to fight,” Logan said. He looked at her through the slit in his helmet, concern obvious.

“I don’t have my skills active, Logan. I won’t run after them,” Kate said.

“We should go out in the back,” Jon said.

Kate nodded and opened the door. She checked the small path and went outside, circling around the building with careful steps, listening for monsters. She reached the road and pressed herself against the wall, slowly moving her head around the corner to get a look at the street. *What are they...*

Four Orcs and five goblins were walking down the street, one of the large beings pulling a modified door behind himself. She watched as the others moved out to collect corpses. One had already been placed onto the board. The sound of wood dragging against concrete continued as more bodies were piled onto the door, Kate grinding her teeth as she watched with her hands gripping the hammer.

“We have to go,” Jon whispered to her.

She was ripped away from the sight and looked at her three companions. “They’re taking the dead.”

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 8

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 10***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 10***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 7***
- ***Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 1***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 8***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 7***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 8***
- ***Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 1***
- ***Passive:***

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 20

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 8

Strength: 13

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 18 Haul

Jon glanced between Kate and the others. “Yes. And there are too many to deal with right now.”

She gulped, glancing around the corner again. *He’s right*. One or two Orcs they could handle, but four? It would be a gamble at best and she wasn’t about to make the same mistake she’d made before. Kate grit her teeth and wrung her hands around her hammer, crouching as she started circling back and around to avoid the monsters’ line of sight. She gestured for the others to follow.

Occupied with their task of collecting corpses, the monsters didn’t spot them, their guttural speech soon fading into the distance.

Kate put her bag onto the back of the truck, entering the passenger seat before she closed the door.

Jon started the car and they were off a moment later, the other two sitting between a haul of goods. Enough to last them a while, with food, gear, and now even entertainment.

The latter felt a little strange. Kate agreed with Jon’s assessment but with actually getting games and books, they accepted that this change wasn’t something temporary. Or at least not something overcome in a few days. She hadn’t had much time to consider it, but with every passing day that the monsters remained and the military failed to show up, it became more clear.

More importantly, she now knew that the Orcs and Goblins didn’t just leave Keilberg after their raid. They were actively doing something. Collecting corpses for food or worse. She clenched her jaw, the sound around her stilling before she started to hear a ringing sound in her right ear.

Jon touched her arm. “Are you okay?”

She glanced at him, the ringing gone. “Yes. Just. I don’t like what they’re doing.”

“I wanted to do something about it too, Kate. Trust me. But we’re not ready. Not for something like that,” he said. The man gripped the steering wheel as they drove through the forest. “But we will be.”

She turned away from him and looked outside. Kate believed him. His tone was sincere.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived back at the castle.

Bert waved at them as they parked.

Logan sighed as he jumped off the back of the truck, stretching as he shouldered his sword and started taking bags. He whistled a tune under his helmet. Grey joined him, the gates slowly opening with both Eloise and Melusine popping out to greet them and help.

Kate wasn’t quite as elated as the others. Sure, they had made it back, with a shit load of goods too but she couldn’t shake the sight of those monsters. *Are they somehow using corpses to make more Orcs? Some sinister magic?*

She shook her head. It wasn’t the time. Instead she focused on what she could do, taking a few bags and helping the others.

The cellar of the armory was chosen as their main storeroom but they distributed some of the goods into the other buildings, in case of a fire.

“We have enough of these backpacks now to equip everyone, and then some,” Logan said as they laid everything out on the ground floor of the armory.

Allison leaned against a wall to the side. She looked better but still a little battered.

“I hear a suggestion?” Jon asked, looking up from the large bag before him.

“Unified packs. Everyone will need essentials but it will help if we all pack them the same way. With specified areas where everyone can put their own stuff. But if I need a flashlight or a bandage, I don’t want to search through your entire pack. It’ll help in emergencies,” Logan explained.

Kate looked at him and nodded slowly. They had similar organization at work, and she knew the benefits and the outright necessity of such a setup, but Logan didn’t strike her as a firefighter, or even a cop.

I see. Now that makes more sense.

“You decide what to pack where then, together with Kate,” Jon said.

Kate joined the man and picked out a few things, Eloise and Celeste constantly adding more onto the respective piles, sorting everything as Grey and Jon opened the bags.

“Beans should be fine as an emergency ration,” she said. “Canned ones are cooked already.”

“It’s a little heavy, but we don’t have anything better,” Logan said.

They worked in silence, putting together a survival pack with everything they could think of. Rope, hunting knife, matches, rations, water bottle, a few medical supplies, radio, plenty of batteries, binoculars, and heat packs. The process took quite some time, the others adding in suggestions until the prototype was done.

“We’ll prepare the others!” Celeste said.

Logan looked at her and smiled, his face turning serious a moment later. “Don’t miss a thing, alright? Our lives may depend on it.”

The little girl nodded with a serious expression.

“I’ll double check every pack,” Jon said.

“So will I, after,” Kate said. Preparing, cleaning, and checking equipment had always been a part of her job. It was incredibly boring and repetitive, which meant it was good for more than one pair of eyes to go over everything. Because once shit was on fire, you needed to be able to trust in your gear. At least this wasn’t a full firetruck. They had a few hundred pieces of gear in there.

She went out to get a breather, the sky mostly clear. It was cool but not unpleasant, even without a jacket.

Logan joined her a moment later, the man still wearing his plate armor. He sat down on a chair someone had placed outside and set down his helmet and sword.

Kate had her hammer nearby too. Just in case. “Military?” she asked.

He glanced at her before he looked up at the sky. “Yeah.”

“Don’t want to talk about it?” she asked.

“No,” he spoke.

“What happened in the store...” she started. It felt wrong to pry, but if he froze up in the middle of a fight.

“It doesn’t happen during an engagement. Just... after. Sometimes,” he said, his eyes unfocused. He shook his head and looked at her. “I’m sorry. And thanks, for checking on me when it happened. I have your back. Everyone’s.”

Kate didn’t know if she believed him. He didn’t seem to make things up, which meant he had experience far beyond what most people in these parts ever see. And the reaction had happened before. *Jesus. How much shit did you see?*

They were silent for a while, until Grey joined them.

“Good idea with the b... backpacks,” he said with a smile. It looked a little awkward. At least he was dressed like some kind of assassin now. The sword looked a little less ridiculous. And the few blood splatters on it actually helped.

Kate looked at him. She wasn’t sure what to say, not exactly in the mood for casual conversation. She generally didn’t have to deal with people much longer than an initial talk, some trauma assistance, maybe a smile and a few encouraging words.

“It’s often used in emergency services,” Logan said with a smile. “Because others need to be able to find the gear quickly. Especially when it’s dark or you’re full of mud,” he said and laughed.

Grey visibly relaxed and leaned against the wall as well. “That makes sense.”

“You did well, you know?” Logan said.

Kate was kind of between them. She raised a brow as she looked at Logan.

He ignored her. “It’s quite impressive that you stayed so calm. And you know what you’re doing with that blade of yours.”

“I d... don’t r... really,” Grey said.

“No you do. You treat it like the weapon it is. Not a toy. It’s apparent in the way you hold it. I don’t think it’s just this new strange magic either,” the man said. “And you’ll get better with time. I think your muscles could use some work though. I can show you some workouts you can do with your own body. Come on,” Logan said and stood up. He looked at Kate with a smile. “Isn’t that a thing... something about working out in the apocalypse?”

“Cardio,” Grey said, smiling back.

“Cardio. Yes, that’s good too,” Logan said. “Now let me see if I can’t motivate Ethan to join in. He should be good by now.”

Kate watched him go, taking his chair instead, now that he was gone. *Found his calling, I guess. Or he was already some kind of officer in the military. Doubt it though.*

“You got back a lot of stuff,” Allison said, poking her head out from the open door. Her hair was loose now, freshly washed it seemed. She stepped out and sat down on the floor, hugging her knees as she leaned against the wall.

Here comes the next one, Kate thought with a sigh.

“Ah don’t be so bitchy,” the woman said and waved her off. “Your tough firefighter act doesn’t get to me. Did you fight more monsters?”

Kate puffed with a grin. “So very provocative. Yes, in fact, I did.”

The woman clambered up, holding on to the chair. “Really?” her face was very close. She moved back a little. “How did it feel? Did you use your hammer?”

“Yes,” Kate said.

“Can I... can I touch it?” the woman asked with a broad smile.

“Sure, if you get out of my face then,” Kate said.

“Great,” Allison said, her smile downright radiant. She hummed a tune and inspected the hammer, poking the spike bit and smelling on the blood. “This thing is heavy,” she exhaled and put it back down again. “You’ve got a Class right? Magic? Does it help with this thing?”

“A little,” Kate said, “Yes. You know... Allison. I’d be far more inclined to have a chit chat with a hot coffee in my hands.”

The woman winked and pointed at her. “I get that. That makes sense. Coffee I can do,” she said and walked off towards the kitchen.

Kate collected the hammer again, her weapon left standing a few meters away. She wanted it close. The following calm didn’t last for particularly long, three men exiting the armory a few minutes later.

Logan had his sword and helmet, a shield now too.

Grey followed with an assortment of wooden tools. Training weapons it seemed.

Third was Ethan, the man who had been unconscious or sleeping throughout the past few days. Both hands in his pants pockets, he came out and glanced at Kate. “What’re you looking at?”

“That’s how you wanna do this?” Kate asked.

He smiled, a downright wicked grin. “No issues, ma’am,” he said, giving Logan a meaningful look.

Another kid, she thought. This time she saw the scar on his brow clearly. Definitely from fire. His hair was fitting, in a cruel kind of way, red in color, mid-length and unkempt. She could tell he wasn’t exactly a slouch. Somewhat thin but his posture suggested he was quite sporty.

“We can put up some targets. Ethan, no fire until I say so,” Logan said.

Kate raised her brows.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Bosslogan,” Ethan deadpanned, giving a look to Grey. They glanced at each other for a moment before the latter looked away, Ethan in turn grinning before he shook his head. He still wore his green work pants and blood covered gray hoodie. He seemed in his late teens, maybe early twenties.

A little older than Grey and Eloise, Kate assumed. She followed his gaze and found Allison walking towards her with two mugs in her hands. She looked back to Ethan, his expression downright lecherous. *Can’t blame him. She’s got coffee.*

“Eyes front, Ethan,” Logan said.

The man ignored him and straight up whistled. “Who are you?” he asked with a broad smile.

Allison smiled back. “The woman who will cut off your cock and feed it to you if you ever look at me like that again,” she said without missing a beat.

Ethan was left with a strange expression on his face.

“Now go play soldier or whatever it is you’re doing. Hush,” Allison said, her expression more than a little dismissive.

“Bitch,” Ethan murmured and turned away, hands still in his pockets.

“Here you go,” Allison said, back with her smile. “I hope I didn’t fuck it up. You seemed really, really into coffee. To an unhealthy degree really. Are you addicted?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Kate said and took the cup. It had milk in it. *Fuck*. She tasted it. *And sugar*.

“I fucked it up,” Allison said.

“It’s fine. I forgot to specify,” Kate said. At least it was warm, and the woman hadn’t gone overboard with the white crystal. “Didn’t have to murder him.”

“No. No I did,” Allison said as she leaned on the wall. “You give guys like him an inch, they’ll never stop. Trust me.”

“Pretty experienced? Black with no sugar, by the way,” Kate said. “And thanks for the coffee.”

“Thanks for saving my life,” the woman said before she laughed in a hollow manner. “Yeah, I had my share. The big guy is pretty hot. Already taken?”

Kate raised a brow. “No, not really.”

“Hey, I don’t want you to murder me in my sleep, so be honest,” Allison said as she sipped from her mug.

“No, I meant it. I’m not exactly looking to get with anyone at the moment,” Kate said and looked over. “With the apocalypse and all.”

Allison grinned. “Your loss.”

“I think this is fine,” Logan said. He stood next to an impromptu target. A steel chair propping up a metal plate. “Let’s see if you can hit it. Try not to get any on the tree.”

The two women shifted their attention to Ethan, the young man visibly enjoying the attention.

He moved his hand in a gesture before a fiery wisp flickered to life above his palm. He grinned as the flame intensified, burning in a yellowish red color.

Oh no.

“Cool, give the idiot fire magic,” Allison said.

Ethan flicked his wrist and the small sphere flashed forward. Not quite as fast as an arrow, let alone a bullet, but it did reach the target. He missed by a few meters and the sphere hit the cobbled ground, exploding into a two meter patch of flames.

“Awesome!” Grey exclaimed, looking between the fire and Ethan.

The latter glanced to the women while he tried to ignore Grey, neither giving him the reaction he wanted. He frowned when the assassin approached, talking about splash damage and range.

“They’re gonna be best friends,” Allison murmured, taking another sip from her mug.

Kate damn near growled as she too drank from her coffee. *Fire mage.*

“Wow, that’s a sound! I mean I’m good at growling but holy fuck, I just got goosebumps. How did you do that?” Allison asked.

Kate looked over. “What do you mean? I just growled.”

“No seriously. You don’t understand. That wasn’t a normal sound. Did you get a skill or something?” Allison asked.

“No,” Kate said, shaking her head with some confusion. A tearing noise made her turn.

Grey had cut through the metal sheet with his sword, standing in a low crouch behind the target where he sheathed the weapon with a calm motion.

“Not half bad,” Allison said.

“Indeed,” Kate said. *Should see him stab goblins.*

Ethan stood with his arms crossed while Logan laughed, holding his armored stomach.

“Now you choose a weapon too, Ethan,” Logan said.

“Why? I have fire,” he answered.

“You have mana. And that can run out,” Logan said. “So choose something.”

The fire mage went and looked through the pile, finally taking a shortsword.

“Good, that works. Grey, you know some sword fighting theory? Because I don’t,” Logan said.

“I know some!” Allison said in a shrill voice as she stood up and rushed over.

How?

“Really?” Logan asked. “That’s great.”

He just trusts her. She just wants to-

Kate’s thought process was interrupted when Allison grabbed a wooden longsword and twirled it around. She stabbed and slashed the air a few times while still holding on to her mug.

“These are very light. You should train with your real weapons when you don’t fight each other. First, we’ll look at forms. I only looked at theory from medieval England, nordic styles, and some egyptian fighting, but I suppose we’ll figure out what suits you best,” the woman said and pointed at three spots on the ground. “Spread out. Grey, straighten up, you’re slouching. Ethan, take your hands out of your fucking pants, you’ll die with them in there. Logan, put on your helmet. It will fuck you over if you’re not used to it.”

Damn, Kate thought as she drank from her coffee. She nearly choked when the woman pointed her sword in her direction.

“You’re joining too, once you’re done with that coffee,” Allison exclaimed.

Where did she take that energy from? She was near fucking death just this morning!

“What’s all that noise about?” Melusine asked as she stepped outside. “Oh, Allison is taking charge. I see.” She had a genuine smile on her face.

“You’re enjoying it?” Kate asked.

“Oh but of course. She’s a wonderful addition. Did you know she makes armor? Jon thinks she’ll be a great asset,” the woman said.

“That too? What doesn’t she do?” Kate wondered and finished her coffee. She stood up and grabbed her hammer. “Do you know war hammer theory too?” she asked as she joined the group.

“Not a lot. But then, it’s a hammer,” Allison commented. “And you’re a firefighter, you’re fitter than these lads anyway. Grey wants to say something.”

“Y... you should train your skills,” he said.

“Good idea,” Allison said. “Yeah those with skills should work on them, now that no monsters are around.”

“Do you plan to fight as well?” Kate asked her.

“No. I don’t... really do violence. But good on you for adapting,” the woman said with a radiant smile.

Can’t tell if she’s fucking with me or if she really just is like that, Kate wondered. She grabbed a wooden hammer and glanced at the target.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 8

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 10***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 10***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 7***
- ***Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 1***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 8***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 7***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 8***
- ***Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 1***
- ***Passive:***

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 20

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 8

Strength: 13
Dexterity: 8
Intelligence: 7
Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 19 Flames

Kate activated reckless charge, rushing forward while holding her wooden hammer in front of her. A split second later, she collided with the set up target. One of the stands taken from the armory. Wooden splinters exploded outwards. The entire thing slapped to the ground like a rag doll, Kate moving past before she walked off the momentum.

“Wow,” Allison called out and clapped.

“You’re not sore from that impact?” Logan asked when Kate propped up the battered target once more.

She rolled her shoulders. “Can’t say I am,” she said. “I know what you mean though. I think it’s part of having higher Vitality.”

“If it affects the whole body, she would have stronger bones... muscles, skin,” Grey said. “I already notice the few points I have... Kate is at twenty.”

Kate turned around and ran at the target, using the newest skill she had unlocked. Hunting Leap activated while she prepared for a jump, the feeling of hot energy flowing through her veins as her muscles tensed. She jumped and took off, her arms and legs flailing in the air before she landed in a roll. *Two meters*. She had barely felt the impact of her landing. Instead she continued running, towards the target, switching to her forward momentum skill and once again slamming the heavy stand into the ground. She slowed to a jog afterwards, realizing she had a smile on her face.

Stop that, she told herself and schooled her expression as she turned back to the others.

Ethan had gone noticeably quiet after the others had started showing off their skills.

“Y... you’re like.... Some k... kind of terminator,” Grey said with a genuine smile, scratching the back of his head.

“It’s very sexy, yes. We get it,” Allison said and clapped. “How are you feeling after using those skills?”

Kate noticed her breathing. She felt winded but not nearly as much as after running into a burning house. She assumed it had to do with her lighter equipment, and the much more accessible clean air. “A little winded,” she said.

“You leveled Endurance too. Seems like that helps quite a bit too,” Logan said. “Those two stats should be the main focus for all of us. With whatever else is important for our Classes coming after.”

Ethan groaned. “I’m a mage. A wizard. A pyromancer! I don’t want to waste points for useless abilities when I can improve my magic.”

“Then you will die to one arrow. That hit you took already knocked you out for days,” Logan said. “Think Ethan.”

The man opened his mouth but shut it again. Logan was right after all.

“Grey, again,” Allison said.

The man stepped past Kate. He crouched down and put the wooden sword into its sheath.

Kate watched as he rushed forward with inhuman speed, stopping in front of the target before he shifted out of the way, as if moved by an invisible force. Next to his foe, he drew his sword. She tried to see it this time, squinted her eyes even, but the thing moved too quickly. Air was split and a thud resounded when the training weapon struck the dummy, neither giving way.

Grey collapsed to one knee, taking in gulps of air before he fell to his back.

“Are you dying?” Allison called out.

He gave them a thumbs up.

“Does that mean he’s dying or not?” the woman asked again, looking to the others for help.

“He’s fine,” Logan said.

Grey sat up slowly and got out a small notebook. He scribbled something down, still breathing rather hard. “That... doesn’t... no.”

“Calm down first,” Kate said. She noticed the corner of her vision blinking and checked it.

‘ding’ ‘Reckless Charge reaches lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Hunting Leap reaches lvl 2’

“The training is doing something by the way. I got two skill levels,” she said.

“I got four so far,” Logan said. “Yours were probably higher to begin with.”

Grey still looked at his notes. He finally managed to stand up and join the group. “So, I’ve got six points in Endurance. Let’s say because of that I have six points of stamina. I use between ten and twenty five percent of that for each skill use... which means no matter how much Endurance I have, I can’t use my skills more often than now. There’s a fixed limit. The same applies to say, Kate.”

“Yes, that’s how percentages work,” Kate said.

Grey kept his focus on the notes. “Yes but you can use your hammer a lot more than I can use my sword... for normal strikes I mean. That one is hard to define because there are different weights, different scores in Strength, and different passive abilities to consider... I do think a higher Endurance stat allows you to strike more often and run longer before you tire. With the skills uses though, we should be able to discover how fast the stamina regeneration is... but it doesn’t make much sense. Not if we consider it a game of sorts. It felt like we recovered at the same speed at first... but later on it doesn’t match up anymore. It’s like...”

“How does any of that help us?” Ethan asked. “You can do stuff, longer. That’s all that matters.”

“I just... t... thought it would be... interesting to figure out t... the math,” Grey said, looking past the other man and then to Kate.

Dragging me into your insecurities?

“Anything we figure out about this magic is helpful,” Logan said. “You should let Jon know about your findings too. But make sure not to take everything as evidence quite yet. Your numbers could just be your attempt to connect these stats to the differences in our endurance as is. You know... based on our training, weight, exertion. It makes sense that Kate recovers more quickly than you, just based on general fitness. If Vitality can influence how resilient your skin is, then I’m sure

Endurance can influence how fast you recover your stamina... but it would be more helpful to see your own improvements and document that, instead of comparing people with different backgrounds and stats.”

“Right... I will keep everything written down.” Grey nodded, a smile now on his face before he left to find Jon.

“The limits are worrying. More Endurance won’t mean more skill uses.” Logan said. “But I do feel your abilities have more of an impact.”

Kate shrugged. “Could just be the higher level. My higher Strength, or even my Vitality. Who knows. I can feel when I get winded. That’s the important bit.”

“We understand each other,” Ethan said.

Kate glared at him for a second until he broke eye contact. “What I do know is that these points allowed me to go far longer than I would’ve otherwise been able to. I do wonder what the other ones do. Intelligence and Wisdom most of all.”

“I’ll figure that out,” Ethan said in a self satisfied tone.

“Not until you have at least fifteen points in Vitality,” Logan said.

“What do you mean? That’s just some random number you pulled out of your ass,” the fire mage said.

“Yes. And you will get there. Same with your Endurance. Then we can talk about the other stats,” Logan said.

Ethan just shook his head with an annoyed expression. He was about to retort when he was interrupted.

“That was a good first session,” Allison said. “We will resume tomorrow. Get some rest. Eat something.” She glared at the young man until he left, muttering to himself. Allison glanced at Logan. “He’s not your son, is he?”

“No,” the man replied. “He hates his parents. But I’m sure he’ll listen... at least somewhat. He’s not stupid.”

“What are you, if not his dad?” Allison asked.

“I’m a social worker,” Logan said without adding anything else. “Kate, can we talk for a second?”

Allison glanced at them before she gave Kate a look, leaving them alone a moment later.

“Sure, what is it?” Kate said.

“The bodies. The longer we wait, the more difficult it will get,” the man said.

Right, Kate said. She knew what he meant. Most people weren’t accustomed to death, let alone corpses. “Burying is not the best idea. But if we burn them, monsters might come for the smoke.”

“We know at least that the goblins seem to prefer sleeping during the day,” Logan said. “And the forest was more active at night... based on what you said.”

“What about the group we saw in Keilberg?” Kate asked.

The man considered for a moment. “Right after sundown then. Smoke won’t be visible. We’ll have a pyre to see, in case the light attracts any creatures. And I suppose the others won’t see the bodies very well.”

“We shouldn’t let them see at all,” Kate said.

“No,” Logan said immediately. “They weren’t the last.”

Kate didn’t reply. She just looked at the man. A few seconds later she nodded. “Alright. Let’s start preparing then.”

It took them the better part of an hour to build reasonably sized pyres. The firewood supplies took a hit but only Bert complained. Kate had felled plenty of trees, and after seeing Logan use his heavy magical sword strike against a target, she didn’t think gathering wood presented much of a problem.

“Think more monsters are coming tonight?” Grey asked, putting down a last set of small logs.

“I don’t know,” Kate said.

“They came every night, right?” Allison asked. “And you didn’t kill all of them. Which means more are probably coming. They know we’re here.”

“Some do, yes. But with what I’ve seen in the valley, they could easily overwhelm us,” Kate said.

Logan grunted. “They use tools, and speak in a language we don’t understand. They’re not wild beasts, which means they won’t just send the brunt of their army to some castle in the mountains. It’s only been three days since this started. There are far more interesting targets.”

“Falstadt,” Kate said. She didn’t want to think about it. Staying here was the reasonable thing to do. They knew too little, were too weak. The hordes she had seen were proof enough. “Nothing new on the radio?” she asked.

Logan shook his head.

It wasn’t just Falstadt either. There were a few dozen villages and towns in the valley and on the various slopes and mountains. Keilberg was just one of them. There were too many places and people to consider. She took a deep breath. *Focus on what you can do. On where you are.*

“But tonight, we’re ready,” Logan said. “Grey, Ethan, myself, Jon, Bert, and Kate. With the others helping, if anyone gets injured. They don’t know what’s waiting for them.”

Kate smiled lightly. *Wish I had that kind of confidence.* She didn’t say anything. Kate could tell he had left an impression on the two younger men, and the overall mood. She would fight with all she had either way. She didn’t need Logan to give her an inspirational speech.

“Get your packs and gear in order before dinner,” the man said, finishing up the second pyre.

Both Grey and Ethan nodded. Jon smiled, as did Allison. The latter with a bit of a hungry look in her eyes. Maybe it was just Kate’s imagination. The two younger men left, their backs a little straighter.

“That was meant for you as well, Kate,” Logan said without looking at her.

She didn’t miss the slight grin on his face. “Shove it up your ass, Paladin.”

Kate was already prepared. After what she'd been through the past few days, she didn't plan to be caught without her gear and weapons ever again. So she went to the kitchen and brewed herself a cup of coffee. Long nights weren't new for her, but the appropriate fuel had to be ready.

Eloise had a few pots already set to cook, putting away dried dishes while Celeste looked through the board games they had gotten.

Kate leaned against the counter and glanced at the sitting Bert, his eyes closed as he snored. The smell of various spices filled the kitchen, garlic and onion more pronounced than the rest. Coffee soon joined in, the hot cup warming her hands. She looked down and smiled. *Seems like the heat is a little less of an issue too.* Normally she wouldn't have been able to hold the steaming mug for as long as she did.

Melusine and Allison soon joined them, the two starting a game with Celeste, laying out cards and little figures on a colorful board.

If it wasn't for the hunting knives strapped to her belt and the hammer leaned against the counter, Kate could see this being some kind of skiing camp experience. She sipped on her coffee and smiled. *Jon was right*, she thought, looking at the smiling Celeste. Her joy was infectious too, Eloise soon joining. Ethan of course refused, muttering something about children's games. He joined as well after some pestering from Allison and Melusine.

Jon sat nearby, reading a book on medieval defenses.

Kate raised a brow. "Where'd you get that?"

He glanced up. "Oh, the game store. There were a few. Some survival and camping ones too, though I'm not entirely sure which ones are serious. I know that one isn't," he said and pointed at one small gray booklet with half a skull on it.

She nodded along, letting him read. *Seems useful. I should probably read some of them as well, some survival bits could be helpful. Not that we're exactly stranded on a deserted island without any technology.*

"I'll switch with Grey," Kate said after she had finished her coffee. She took her hammer and left. The air was cool outside, the evening sun hanging on the horizon, illuminating the distant mountain tops. There were no clouds. A few strands of red hair brushed against her cheek as a gust of wind moved past. The medieval walls, ready pyres, and the lack of any lights other than from the home behind her made Kate sober up rather quickly.

Back to... take guard. She felt the weight of her hammer and glanced at the castle gates, the walls around. *Hunting Leap isn't quite there yet.* The walls were about four meters high and the second level in the skill got her up to two and a half meters. Kate wasn't exactly a fan of stairs, or ladders, despite her extensive experience with both. Soon enough, she hoped, neither would exactly be necessary for her. Of course the twenty second cooldown between jumps would still slow her down but she still liked the idea of just hopping up onto the walls. Or perhaps even a building.

The rest of the evening passed without an incident. Kate kept her eyes and ears open for any monsters but the only thing she heard were birds and crickets. The binoculars revealed little of the happenings down in the valley, the dark copses and rivers as boring as they had been a few weeks prior.

"Kate, it's time," Logan said from the yard.

Bert muttered curses as he came up to the battlements. "I hate guard duty."

“Agreed,” Kate said as she walked past him. She joined Logan down in the yard before they made their way to the old barracks. They both covered their faces with a few layers of cloth.

Hammer in hand, Kate unlocked the door and went inside. She turned the switch near the door while Logan used his flashlight to help. A bulb flickered above. Pale light illuminated the depressing hall of cramped bunk beds, two human bodies lying between the line of furniture. Unmoving. White skin. Bloodied clothes.

She walked closer, tapped one of the beds with her hammer to create some sound. Then she lightly kicked the shoes they still wore. Nothing happened. Kate put her hammer aside and grabbed one of her knives, just in case. She turned the bodies around and they remained unmoving. A sigh escaped her. “We should get moving,” she said and sheathed her knife, grabbing one of the bodies in a princess carry.

Logan did the same with the other.

Peter and Chloe. Kate looked down at the woman, her face peaceful, quiet. Blood had seeped through most of her shirt and denim jacket, dried now. She walked to the first pyre and set her down with a careful motion. She looked at the woman for a moment before she checked on Logan, then went to get her weapon.

Ethan didn’t say a word as he crouched next to the pyres, a flame flickering to life above his palm before he touched the wood.

Smoke soon rose to the horizon, the quickly fueled fires the only light in the yard of Keilberg castle. Two bodies once living, now enveloped in rising flame.

The young man joined back with the others, the survivors standing in a half circle around those they had lost.

Kate felt the weight of her steel weapon. She grit her teeth and watched. The familiar flickering fires. For once they were comforting. *We shall stand.* They remained in silence as the flames consumed the pyres.

The fires still burned when a shout resounded from the battlements. “Monsters!”

An arrow whistled past through the darkness, landing with a thud in the soft earth near the single tree inside their walls.

“It is time,” Logan said and put on his helmet. He raised his sword to his shoulder. “We fight, for their memory. We fight, so that we may live.”

Kate remembered the shocked face of the man she had seen back on the first day. She remembered the savage sword of the orc. She felt the cool breeze of autumn air, an arrow whistling past a few meters above her. She turned and joined the others. Figures dressed in gray and black, flickering light reflecting off of Logan’s armor. *We shall fight.*

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 8

- **Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 10**
- **Active: Furious Dance – lvl 10**
- **Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 8**
- **Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 2**
- **Active:**
- **Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 8**
- **Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 7**
- **Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 8**
- **Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 1**
- **Passive:**

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 20

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 8

Strength: 13

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 20 Human

Kate moved into a jog, her hammer and knives ready as she rushed up the stairs right behind Logan. The early night was clear but once the pyres were out and a few clouds would move through above, she knew visibility would become a problem. “Headlamps,” she said, once they had reached the battlements, more arrows whistling past, Bert grumbling insults while fiddling with a crossbow. Strange gargled shouts and excited guttural sounds came from the trees down below. Kate already saw a few torches.

The others followed suit, opening their packs and pulling out the headlamps from the same compartment. She looked down and flicked it on, turning it off again a moment later.

“Leave it off if you can. It’s an easy target,” Logan said as he put his on top of the knight’s helmet. He grabbed his sword and walked out from the guard tower and towards the roofed section right above the gate, crouching to avoid projectiles.

Kate looked back and saw Grey with a steady hand on the hilt of his sword. He looked back and gave her a slight nod. Jon checked his headlamp. Ethan had moved close to the stone wall, his face pale.

It’s good that it rained. She turned and followed Logan, glancing over the low stone wall to see the torches. There were over a dozen, held at the height of a human, the light illuminating green tusked heads, small creatures moving past below. Arrows clattered against the stone, more flying past above. Kate reached the wood covered part of the battlements right above the castle gate. She watched Bert try and come out of cover, arrows striking the wooden structure with dull thuds, forcing him to crouch back down.

She took one of the crossbows and set down her hammer. “Bert, you load, I shoot,” she said and activated Mindless Ferocity. Her perception changed. She took a deep breath, could feel the blood rushing through her body, the beating heart in her chest. She was calm. Ready. Kate took a few steps to the side, came out above the wall, aimed and shot. She hadn’t trained with the weapon but it wasn’t exactly rocket science. The string shot forward with a loud twang, her arms remaining steady as the bolt was released.

Kate didn’t stay to see if she hit anything, crouching again and handing the weapon back to a pale Bert. Logan aimed and fired next to her, Jon and Grey doing the same a little farther to the left. She watched how the old man loaded the crossbow and tried the same. She found herself able to pull back the string with ease, putting in another bolt. Kate stood up, moving her head to the side when she heard an arrow whistle towards her. She aimed again and fired, two more arrows hitting the stone at the height of her waist.

The sounds became more frantic at the treeline. Kate couldn’t tell how many monsters there were but they had plenty of bolts. She turned back when she saw rope fly up and catch around a part of the battlements. “Ropes! They’re coming up!”

“Grey, Kate! Take care of them and give us cover!” Logan shouted.

She dropped the crossbow next to the focused Bert and grabbed her hammer. She moved in a crouch towards the first rope, both hands on her weapon as more ropes caught around the battlements. Her hearing focused. She came up and swung, a dull impact flicking the goblin off the wall with a spray

of dark blood, illuminated by the many torches. Two more had jumped down onto the narrow path on the wall, crude knives in their hands as they looked around with excited grimaces.

Kate looked at them and growled, the sound produced decidedly inhuman. She watched their expressions change as they took in her armed form. She didn't use reckless charge and instead just walked three steps forward. Kate feinted, making the goblin dodge to the side, a jab of her hammer crushing in its face. She heard the second one charging with a wild screech, using an upward swing to silence the creature in an instant. She heard whimpers from the first one, turning towards it before she stomped down with her boot.

It stopped moving.

More crossbow bolts were fired.

She glanced left and saw Grey slice past the neck of a goblin, its body collapsing before its head slid off. Ethan and Melusine came out of the tower behind them, the latter moving in a fast crouch.

"Logan! They're coming up on the other side!" she shouted, pointing to the yard.

Kate turned and slammed her hammer into a goblin that reached the top. She took a few fast steps to avoid the few arrows that still came at her, the momentum of her third step coming down onto the last climber with a strike of her hammer. It screeched with a crushed shoulder, sent flying down the cliff and towards the river flowing below.

A glance back showed the dying flames of the pyres, small critters illuminated beyond.

"The kids are in the armory!" Melusine shouted. Grey had moved past them and stabbed through a goblin that came out of the guard tower.

"Logan!" Kate shouted and watched him look her way. "Have some coffee ready," she said and gripped her hammer.

The armored man gave her a light nod and moved up to shoot another bolt.

She ignored the others and activated Furious Dance, the sounds of battle turning into a rush. A calling. A pulse. She felt herself grinning. She had never felt this alive. Kate turned towards the yard, took a step forward, and jumped. Her hammer held close, she landed with a crouch and rolled, the impact hardly registering as she used the momentum to run forward. *Silent*.

Her enemies were overconfident. They were stupid. They didn't know she was here.

Three goblins near the pyres turned her way but it was too late. The first barely got up its shortsword when she delivered the head of her hammer in a horizontal blow, its head exploding in a splatter of bone and blood.

Kate didn't stop, feeling warm blood against her cheeks as she swung her hammer back. One of her enemies dodged but her weapon struck the second one, the spike embedded deep into its skull. She walked a step towards the last goblin, her teeth gritted as she growled, the sound deep, barely audible.

She saw the creature take a step back, unable to avoid the hammer that broke its arm and some of its ribs.

Kate heard bones crack and ended the pained existence of the monster, looking up at the goblins that had spread out onto the yard. An explosion resounded behind her. The fire mage had finally

started using his magic. It didn't matter. She looked at the group of nearby goblins, two of them raising up bows with shaking arms as she ripped the hammer out of the corpse.

She could've screamed, could've shouted, or laughed, but the moment was perfect. She was one with existence. One with battle itself. It felt like the world paused in that split second, the yellow eyes of her enemies looking on with fear. And then motion returned. Reckless Charge made her shoot forward, the arrows aimed at her previous position whistling past before she brought her hammer onto the first of her enemies. She didn't stop, swinging wide and into the side of another. The critters tried to surround her but she kept her momentum going, her boots pushing against stone, her entire focus on the archers now. She felt resistance as she moved past two of the small goblins, hot pain in her side as she slammed her hammer into the first of the archers. She dodged to the side, an arrow striking her left leg but she kept moving. She struck her weapon against the creature's chest before it could fire again, the air pushed out of its lungs as it fell on its ass. Kate walked past, stomping down on its head three times before she ripped out the arrow with a growl and looked at the remaining goblins.

They ran.

A mistake.

She ran after them, first in a slight limp, the pain in her thigh still fresh and the wound bleeding. It lessened when she struck down the first of them. She could hear their breaths, could smell their fear. Death would come for them. Ten seconds passed and the last of them fell. Kate could no longer hear any monsters in the yard. They hadn't gotten to the buildings. She turned her head when a loud bang resounded. *Shotgun.*

Light now flickered beyond the wall, screeches and screams of monsters sounding out from beyond as fire must've exploded in their midst. She rushed towards the tower when the gate exploded inward, an ogre pushing through while crouched. Splinters and chunks of the wooden beam flew to the side. Orcs and goblins moved past, some of them on fire, others with bolts stuck in their bodies. The large creature too had flames sticking to its back but it simply growled, looking around in the yard until its eyes found Kate.

She held her hammer and crouched, a grin on her face. *More.*

The monsters spread out, talking in their guttural language when a loud noise overshadowed everything. Roars from the sky. Low and fast. The creatures crouched and looked up, trying to figure out what kind of being had come to challenge them.

Kate was familiar with the sound. She saw the lights flash through in the sky kilometers above, too small and fast to be commercial airliners. Even in her state of battle, she stood and watched, her eyes wide as the distant fighter jets flew past the faraway mountain range on the other side of the valley. Both herself and some of the monsters started turning back, when a bright flash turned the horizon from night to day. A second flash followed, Kate closing her eyes as she let herself fall to the ground. She covered her head with both hands when the sound came rolling past the mountain range and through the Maar valley.

Everything was drowned out, the castle walls and the very earth shaking as strong winds moved past. Kate kept herself down and pressed against the ground, the effects of her spells gone as she prayed that they were out of range of whatever weapon had been used. Her heartbeat had sped up, her breathing fast and frantic. She felt tiny. Insignificant. Kate turned her head to the side and saw the distant plumes rise up, illuminated by the inferno she knew to be there. She understood

intellectually what had happened, but seeing it, hearing it, feeling the vibrations, the sheer power. Nothing could have prepared her.

The ogre.

She forced herself to get up, despite all the thoughts going through her mind. Her legs were shaking, her arms feeling light. Her vision blurred just a little. She looked at the group of monsters, frozen and staring at the distant phenomenon.

Kate raised her head. *You have invaded our world.* She grit her teeth and held her hammer.

Some of the monsters started to turn, refocusing on the reason they were here. Flames burned beyond the open gate, lazily moving from side to side. The creatures remained numerous, savage, armed, and on the hunt. But the dynamics had changed.

Kate took her hammer into both hands and started walking towards them. *We will not go quietly into the night.* Her magic reactivated, her enemies once more becoming the only thing that mattered. There were seven orcs, twice as many goblins, and the ogre.

A bolt was fired from the battlements above them, punching through the head of an orc. More followed a moment later, the yard exploding into chaos once more. A sphere of flame flashed down, exploding between a group of goblins.

Kate ignored everything except for the ogre, running at the large creature that turned to face her, a massive crude mace held in its hand.

One of the orcs stood in her way, twirling its sword as it uttered words she did not understand.

Kate didn't stop. She watched as the ogre stepped forward and struck sideways, the orc between them hit with the chunk of spiked metal at the end of its mace. The body was flung to the side, the mace impacting the roof of the barracks as the orc landed on the ground with a wet sound.

The ogre growled more strange words as it raised its weapon to strike her.

Kate jumped to the side as the weapon came down, rolling as the ground shook. She stumbled but caught herself, rushing forward. She heard the mace grind against the cobbled yard as her enemy attacked her with a horizontal strike. Hunting Leap activated when she was in range, her legs charged with power before she jumped off. Kate felt the rushing air below, the spike of her hammer slamming down and into the wide eyed monster's skull. She hung on as it shook its head and roared, her legs finding purchase on its shoulder. She held the hammer with one hand, unsheathed one of her daggers and stabbed down, aiming for its eye.

She felt the resistance but punched the blade through, another roar resounding. Something strong gripped her leg, squishing down before she was flung aside. The hammer came with her as she flew, the world spinning until she impacted the ground, her weapon clattering down as she rolled three times and hit a wall, all the air in her lungs pushed out. She slid down to her side, unable to feel her leg. One of her arms was twisted in an unnatural way but she hadn't heard any bones breaking. Her magic remained active but the pain started to push against her focused mind.

Kate watched the ogre roar, taking stumbling steps as it reached for its eye and head, going down to one knee.

She looked up to see an orc approach with its jagged sword in both hands. The monster uttered something as it stepped closer and raised its weapon.

Kate braced herself and activated Reckless Charge while still lying sideways against the wall. Her body was pushed forward, her arms impacting the legs of the orc with all the momentum generated by the magical ability. She came to a stop and coughed up blood, the orc having fallen to the ground and now behind her. She crawled up and grabbed another dagger, stabbing down on its leg as it recovered from the fall.

Kate pulled herself closer with the weapon. She ripped it out and stabbed down again, this time near his groin. Again she pulled. He struck her head with his fist but the impact was laughable. Her left eye went out when he punched again. Kate groaned, stabbing down with wild strikes as he tried to stop her arm. She screamed as she went for another blade with her twisted arm, stabbing down as the orc struck her again. She didn't have any strength in her left arm but the blade found his stomach, so she fell down with her chest, her jaws slamming shut at the blinding pain as her weight pushed the blade into her enemy.

The orc tried to get the weapon out, his focus on her good arm waning.

She didn't waste it and stabbed upward, the blade cutting into his throat before she ripped it out and slammed it down on his tusked face. She twisted the blade while crying from the pain. She knew her spells were the only thing keeping her conscious, Kate feeling energy return to her, some feeling now back in her leg. She felt the heat of fire when a sphere exploded nearby, forcing another orc back. She looked for and found her hammer, crawling forward until she had it.

It took everything to stand, her left eye still out as she looked at the burning form of the stumbling orc. A bolt struck its back. She stood close now, her hammer swung with one arm and spike forward, the orc falling with her in turn. Her breath was ragged, the pain lessening once more. Her arm wasn't right. She rolled to the side, letting go of her hammer before she grabbed the injured elbow and twisted it. A scream reverberated but it didn't matter. There were more enemies. Her body felt numb. Standing was difficult. *More.*

Kate found four goblins near the gate, unsure it seemed, if they should get out of cover. She grinned. *More.*

Reckless charge slammed her into one of them. Her hammer struck with wild swings, broken corpses all that remained of the creatures. She took in a deep breath, flames clinging to the corpses in the yard and out towards the forest. Her leg felt steady once more, and her arm could carry some weight. Her left eye remained shut. She watched as bolts cut down the last remaining goblins, the sound of steel striking flesh coming from above where the others fought.

She crouched and breathed out, her eye focused on the stumbling and enraged ogre. *Injured. Weak.*

Kate took a step forward. Then another. The ogre turned when she was halfway there, its crude weapon gone when it charged at her. Bolts struck its chest but it didn't slow down. She waited until the last moment, activating Reckless charge while turning to the side. She shot past its leg as it slammed into the castle wall. Both arms raised high, she struck down on its right knee, breaking bone. She jumped back when the ogre swung backwards with its arm.

Another bolt struck its back. It roared and stumbled backwards, turning to face her. Kate watched a dark form land near the ogre, rolling to absorb the impact.

Grey stood and crouched, one hand on the handle of his sheathed blade before he rushed forward, glinting light flashing up before he came to a stop past the large monster, his weapon sheathed once more.

The ogre fell forward, the tendons in its legs cut through. It roared, stopping its fall with its arms but Kate had been waiting. She swung her hammer with a scream, the weapon crashing down against its skull with all the strength that she could muster. Both the large head and her hammer were pushed back as she felt the impact reverberating through her arms.

The ogre swung forward but its movements were sluggish now.

Kate stepped back and watched the large creature collapse, its one uninjured eye cloudy and unfocused. She walked up to its head and slammed her hammer down. The skull cracked. She struck again, the metal of her hammer sinking into its head. *More.*

She struck again.

A cloud of brown something hit her face. Kate blinked. She smelled something nice. The enemies were gone. They had prevailed. Her magic deactivated as she rubbed at her face. *Coffee.* Kate staggered back and collapsed, her vision going dark.

Chapter 21 Magic

Kate woke with a start, taking in a deep breath before she started coughing. She whined a moment later when the pain hit her like a truck.

“Keep her down,” Melusine said from somewhere to her side.

Strong arms held her shoulders.

“Bite down,” Melusine said, now visible as she bent over and placed something into Kate’s mouth.

She felt the wood and bit down, breathing faster when she felt someone grip her arm. She tried to move up to see but Logan was holding her shoulders, his armor covered in blood, light from nearby flames reflecting off him. Something cracked. She screamed.

Kate passed out when another bone was set but she woke up again a moment later, cold sweat all over as she felt a strange energy flow through her. Stronger than the most intense painkillers she had ever taken. She had goosebumps all over, an itching sensation coming from her eye, arms, her legs, stomach, chest, and her face. It felt both horrible and amazing, her teeth biting deep into the wood as she tried to handle the sensations.

“Kate, talk to me. Who am I?” Melusine said, shining a bright light down and into her blinking eyes.

“Pweath of fuckim woob,” she said, still biting down on the thing.

“Think you can handle it, if I remove it?” Melusine asked.

Kate shook her head.

“I think she’s fine,” Logan said in a tired voice. “Back to Ethan.”

Something soft was pushed below her head and knees. “Try not to move. I’ll check on you later,” Melusine said.

Kate closed her eyes, her body twitching from time to time, sending waves of pain through her but it felt strange. Confusing. She trusted the woman and simply lay there, trying not to move her head. Looking up, she could only make out some flickering light around her. She both tasted and smelled blood, and wood of course. That and burnt flesh and hair, not a combination she died to wake up to.

But I didn’t die, she thought with a sigh. Her spells had ended, or was she interrupted? She knew on a downright instinctual level that there were no more monsters close by. None she could’ve heard or seen. The ogre had been the last one alive. Running steps resounded around her, the creaking of a closing gate right after.

“He’ll make it,” Melusine said. It came from somewhere farther away and up, likely on the wall.

“Put out the small fires!” Logan called out, “Get blankets!”

I should be the one to do that, Kate thought, trying to move before she remembered the nurse’s command. *Fuck*. It didn’t smell or sound like anything major was on fire yet. The castle wouldn’t burn easily. Not with what little fire she had seen.

Her eyes opened wide.

What was that light?

A bomb like that... a nuke? In Austria?

Monsters she could believe but nuclear explosions? She had expected the worst, but she wasn't prepared to actually see it. *What made them use it? What did they attack? Beyond the mountains. It could've been in Germany. Nato? Do we even have nukes? Or was it another type of bomb?*

She hoped it was, and either way, the implications were vast. Monster attacks were one thing, but to push the military to use a bomb like that, nuke or not, it was a bad sign. Already, she could feel her breathing getting faster.

Kate tried to think of something else, noticing herself panic. Getting up and doing something was a bad idea until she knew she wouldn't bleed out or break something, not without an immediate emergency. So she instead focused on her breathing, closing her eyes when she noticed the blinking notifications in the corner of her vision. *Levels mean more options, and possible Vitality.*

Kate noticed the pain had lessened quite a bit, the strange feeling slowly subsiding.

'ding' *'You have defeated [Goblin Rogue]'*

'ding' *'You have defeated [Goblin Archer]'*

'ding' *'You have defeated [Goblin Archer]'*

...

'ding' *'You have defeated [Goblin Scout]'*

'ding' *'You have defeated [Ogre]'*

'ding' *'Berserker reaches lvl 9'*

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

'ding' *'Berserker reaches lvl 10'*

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

That's good. Four more points.

She didn't spend them yet, not feeling like she was on the verge of dying.

'ding' *'You have unlocked the passive skill: Intimidating Presence – lvl 1*

Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 1

Your enemies will know your wrath. You have bathed in the blood of those who stood in your way. Beings will instinctively be wary of your presence, should you will it so.

Kate instinctively knew how to activate this new thing. She didn't know if it used up any mana but decided it may come in handy. So far, it had been somewhat difficult to avoid a battle but if there was an option not to nearly die every night, she would certainly take it.

'ding' 'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 12'

'ding' 'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 12'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Reckless Charge reaches lvl 9'

'ding' 'Reckless Charge reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Hunting Leap reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 9'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 8'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 9'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 9'

'ding' 'Unrelenting Carnage reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Unrelenting Carnage reaches lvl 3'

That's a lot of levels. Wait, what's this?

'ding' 'Support Class Requirements met [Berserker] – Show possible options'

Sure.

'ding' 'Requirements met for Support Class acquisition [Berserker]: Flame Wielder'

Let them burn. You have fought overwhelming numbers surrounded by flames. You have killed three or more burning creatures. You have sustained heavy burns and survived. You have run into the flames without regard for your own safety. You have wielded a weapon wreathed in flames.

The Flame Wielder is an instinctual fire mage with a deep connection to heat and fire. They wreath their weapons in bright flames to intimidate and maim their enemies, using their magic to set aflame their surroundings. Their rage burns ever brighter, unstoppable in their pursuit of victory, blood, and death. Return to ash, those who would stand in your way.

Unique stat: Torment

Would you like to acquire the Class: Flame Wielder?

When did I? Oh... my fire axe. I guess it was on fire that one time. No... two times. Also means that past achievements are taken into account. How does this system even know about that?

She read through the description and sighed lightly. *I won't choose fire. And whatever Torment is, I don't want it.*

'ding' 'Requirements met for Support Class acquisition [Berserker]: Silent Striker'

Quiet rage. You have slain five or more creatures with single melee blows before they noticed your presence. You have fought your instincts to attack at an opportune time, despite present enemies. You have used your vocal ability to strike terror into the hearts and minds of your foes. You have remained calm in life threatening situations.

The Silent Striker wields the elusive magic of sound itself. They inspire primal terror in the enemies they face but prefer to kill them in perfect silence, long before their chosen prey has noticed their presence. A fighter equipped with exceptional hearing and strange, disorienting spells. A cold fury in their heart and mind, they are both calculating and ruthless. Fear, the still Berserker.

Unique stat: Serenity

Would you like to acquire the Class: Silent Striker?

Sound magic? It seems... strange. Taking out monsters before they even notice me, that does sound up my alley. Exceptional hearing could be a life saver too. And it might work well together with the new Passive skill I just got. Cold fury... calculating... that sounds much better than the mess I am right now. If I use all my abilities that is. And Serenity at least sounds nicer than Torment.

'ding' 'Requirements met for Support Class acquisition [Berserker]: Hammer of Justice'

The righteous warrior. You have slain ten or more foes in an effort to protect or avenge your allies. You have chosen the hammer. You have cracked seven skulls with strikes using a hammer. You have sworn revenge on the atrocities done to your peoples.

The Hammer of Justice wields their weapon with impunity. All those that stand in their way shall fall to their heavy strikes and brutal executions. Their strength is well known, both to their allies and to their enemies. None shall stop their unrelenting rage as they enact justice. Burn with rage. Burn with fury. Until it is done.

Unique stat: Brutality

Would you like to acquire the Class: Hammer of Justice?

Third and last option. Seems the safest. But again, it's just rage rage rage. More hammer abilities and maybe an increase to my strength would be very helpful but right now I'm not sure if I should choose Brutality over Serenity.

Plus magic sounds cool.

She didn't want to admit the latter to anyone, even to herself. *Sound magic*. It just felt right. Kate read through all three again, at first considering sharing the options with the others but her gut gave her a clear answer. And she couldn't find a reason to reconsider. The potential benefits were clear, and getting in even a single strike on a monster before it noticed her would make a massive difference.

The main thing however, was the potential effects on her state of mind while using her skills. She had ran off and nearly died in the forest. Grey had gotten injured, because of her recklessness.

The other support Classes may be stronger in a direct confrontation but she wasn't exactly looking for that in the first place. With long term considerations in mind, she only saw one option.

She tried for a while to get more detailed information on the choices but failed to find anything. *Alright, let's see what this is about.*

'ding' 'New Support Class [Berserker]: Silent Striker'

Unique stat acquired: Serenity +1

Skill slot acquired [Silent Striker]: Active +3

Skill slot acquired [Silent Striker]: Passive +3

Skills gained in Silent Striker:

Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 1

Use sound magic to produce a growl. Enemies who can hear the growl may find their minds and bodies stricken with fear. The nature of this spell makes it difficult to locate its source.

Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 1

Your ears are far more sensitive to the sounds around you. You learn to focus on what you are looking for, to tune out unnecessary sounds, and to be alerted by creatures long before your other senses may pick up on their presence.

Well. Seems a little underwhelming. I guess it depends on how... oh. She immediately started hearing the steps of everyone around her, their conversations, even their breathing. She could tell that two of them were in bad shape. Everyone was exhausted. She could hear the remaining flickering flames, and the river flowing past below. She could hear the wind, the leaves rustling in the trees both within the castle and out in the forest.

Kate had to close her eyes at the sudden influx of new sensation, quickly figuring out how to tune out certain things. She spent a few minutes fiddling with the strange magic she felt connected to, the ability adjusting as she wanted, far more flexible than she had feared initially.

She sighed, refraining from using her growl right now. There were more important things to worry about. She did check the new stat she received from the supporting Class.

Serenity - Wisdom specialization. Increases your ability to stay in tune with your mind. You choose the path ahead. Slightly increases spell and weapon aim.

Well my Wisdom isn't particularly high. Is that going to affect the stat? Or is it a separate thing entirely?

She didn't exactly notice the difference but she wasn't using any of her active spells at the moment, nor was she engaged in battle. *Is the aim bonus going to help with attacks in melee range?*

Melusine returned a few minutes later, sitting down next to her. She sighed, a strange glowing light coming from her hands. "You... I thought it was worse. You didn't look well, Kate."

Kate huffed. "I was... hanging on."

"Try using both arms next time," the healer said. "You can move again. Barely any lasting injury. Bones were still there. You did lose a lot of blood... I don't know how well my magic restores that. I would suggest rest but... well, given the situation. Just, do your best."

Kate sat up and looked at the mangled corpse of the ogre a few meters ahead. "That was my best."

"It was very bloody," Melusine said. "I decided I prefer movies to the real thing."

"I don't disagree," Kate said and stood up slowly, checking her limbs before she moved her head from one side to the other. Everything seemed in order, though she did feel tired. "Thanks, Melusine. I thought I was dead."

The woman just raised her thumb and index finger. "Close. Very close. Any other human would've died five times over."

"Think the magic will help us against a nuclear bomb?" Kate asked, looking towards the mountain range in the distance. Noticeable light still emanated from beyond, though far less than what she had seen before.

"Let us hope we don't have to find that out," the woman said. She remained sitting on the ground.

"Are you okay?" Kate asked. She saw the gates had already been closed. The light from over the castle walls had faded by now, none of the fires managing to set alight the forest. Logan carried Ethan, nodding her way when he saw her back on her feet.

Jon and Bert stood atop the battlements. Grey walked around and piled up corpses.

"I just need a minute. Using magic is... exhausting," Melusine said.

"Coffee?" Kate asked.

"No, thank you. I don't know if I can sleep as it is," she answered.

"Hot chocolate then. I'll go make a few," Kate said. She was in no state to pile up corpses, dead tired as she felt. But she wouldn't be the first to go sleep. She never was.

She walked past the monster corpses littering the yard. *How many did I kill?* She smiled, shaking her head. *Could just check the list in your mind, dummy.* The thoughts embarrassed her. Taking everything so lightly. *I'm just tired. Cut me some slack, myself.* She opened the door to Bert's home, hitting her shoulder on the door frame. "Strange," she murmured, flicking the light switch. Kate found she had lost her headlamp at some point. Instead she checked her belt and found one of the flashlights. Turning it on, she walked over to the fridge and opened it.

The light didn't turn on. Nor did she hear anything running. She did hear the others moving around outside, despite the distance. *I could hear a rat running around in the walls. Fuse might be busted.* She walked up the stairs, her vision blurring a little as she took the third step on the small stairwell. Kate shook her head which only made the feeling worse. She kept walking and tripped, her knee hitting the wood with a heavy impact. It didn't exactly hurt but she failed to get up. *Fuck. Come on. Mooove.*

Her hand went for the railings before she pulled herself up and continued. She found the small breaker box and opened it, flashlight between her teeth. She flicked the switch but nothing happened. Every room remained dark. Checking the bathroom lights brought the same results. *Doubt anyone has added anything that would cause a short.*

She blinked her eyes and rested against the nearby wall, sliding down slowly until she hit the floor. The ground was comfortable enough. She closed her eyes.

A bright light shined into her eyes.

"Kate, talk to me," Melusine's voice resounded.

"Wh... why... don't," Kate stammered out with her hands moving in front of her face. "Why do you keep doing that?" she demanded, robbed of her rest as she turned away, still on the floor.

"Because I keep finding you passed out in strange places," Melusine said. "Where are you, who am I?"

"You're Melufuckingsine and I'm on the first floor. A good floor I might add. To sleep," Kate said, already feeling herself fade out again.

"No it isn't. You're going to have back pain. Come, we will stay in the armory. In case of more attacks," Melusine said.

"I'm fine here," Kate murmured.

"Then where is your hammer?" the woman asked.

The hammer. Her eyes opened wide, Kate forcing herself to sit up before she blinked at the flashlight. "I..." she got up slowly, nearly stumbling. Melusine supported her as her vision blurred again. Her hand was gripped before something cold was placed into it.

"Here is your hammer. And now you come to the armory. Slow and steady. I did mention the blood loss, I believe?" Melusine asked, grabbing her arm and lightly pushing her forward and towards the stairs.

"Right... the blood," Kate murmured. She walked down the stairs, taking a break near the door before they continued out into the entirely dark castle yard. Kate stopped and looked up. "I can hear them... hunting... growling in the night. Six... no seven, four legs. One is injured." She turned her head another way. "A rabbit or squirrel... hiding. Shivering with fear."

Melusine shined the flashlight into her face again, using two fingers to pry open one of Kate's eyes. "Maybe you did get hit on your head."

“Stop doing that,” Kate growled, grabbing the flashlight. It was terribly bright. “I’m tired,” she said, gripping the woman’s arm.

Melusine stood wide eyed, her lips quivering, heart pounding in her chest. Her hands were shaking.

Kate focused. “What’s wrong?” She tried to see or hear if there was anything around but it was just them.

Melusine started breathing again. “Y... you... what was that?” she asked. “That sound...”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Kate said.

“You... growled... or something.”

“Oh...” Kate said. “I did?” She calmed down. It had only been her. “Sorry. I’ll... explain tomorrow. New magic.”

Melusine raised a finger while grabbing her arm. “Well don’t use that on me! Now come, before you pass out again.”

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 4

Class: Berserker – lvl 10

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 13***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 13***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 10***
- ***Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 3***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 11***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 10***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 9***
- ***Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 3***
- ***Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 1***

Support class: Silent Striker – lvl 1

- ***Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 1***
- ***Active:***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 1***
- ***Passive:***
- ***Passive:***

Status:

Vitality: 20

Endurance: 14

Perseverance: 10

Strength: 13

Dexterity: 8
Intelligence: 7
Wisdom: 10
Serenity: 1

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 22 Moving Forward

The armory smelled sterile, the underlying stench of blood ever present. Kate dragged her hammer behind herself until she fell on an empty bedroll. She turned to the side and closed her eyes, sleeping in mere moments.

No dreams plagued her for the rest of the night, nor did anybody wake her up from her deserved rest.

She woke up when she heard the chirping of birds, a strong wind whistling through the cracks of the medieval structure. Blinking her eyes, she pulled the three blankets covering her closer. She didn't remember how she got there. What she did remember was the fight. Gruesome bits and pieces of violence that still stuck to her mind. A long battle. Her teeth ground as she remembered the pain, the dull sounds of her strikes, the corpses strewn about.

What is this itching?

Get up. She didn't want to think about any of it, instead eager to do what she could. The mess was surely still around. Her eyes blurred when she sat up, her body feeling like lead. Itching lead. She pushed harder but found her vision worsening, her heart beating faster, and her breathing picking up. *Fucking. Shit.*

Kate layed back down. *I feel like a corpse.* She turned to the side again and this time saw the young man sitting on the only actual bed in the room.

Ethan looked at her with two open eyes, arms hugging his knees as he pressed himself against the wall. Bits of blood clung to his hair, his hoodie clean however.

She blinked her eyes and closed them. *What's all this?* She heard people shuffling around outside, heard the slight movements of Ethan. She could even make out the individual birds. *Turn that off.* The new skill was not something she wanted for a hangover. Deactivating the enhanced hearing just made her perception go back to normal. She sighed, warm and comfortable for a split second before the itching returned. She opened her eyes, once again seeing Ethan's stare. "What?"

"Y... you... sorry," he murmured, looking away.

"Is there something on my face?" she said and touched it, rubbing it before she looked at her hand. It was clean. "God, what the fuck is that itching?"

"It's eh... the healing. The lady explained it earlier. I have it too, on my legs," Ethan said.

"It's infuriating," Kate murmured, turning onto her back. She frowned. *Still there.* "How can anyone sleep like that?"

"I couldn't," Ethan said.

She looked at him.

He gestured to his face. "You were... messed up, ma'am."

"Ma'am?" she asked, raising a brow. She glanced his way and saw him gulp, a smile coming to her face as she looked up at the stone ceiling. *No respect whatsoever, but show a man how you smash in a monster's skull with a steel hammer and suddenly you're worthy.*

“How the fuck are my bones itching?” she murmured, scratching herself now but it didn’t help. Not in the slightest.

“It gets better after a while,” Ethan supplied.

I would fucking hope so. She closed her eyes but that just made the sensation worse. *I can’t.* She tried sitting up, this time much slower than before, careful not to overexert herself. *Blood loss, right. And whatever else this magical healing does. I did get hit quite a few times, and used my magic to heal. Without that, I would be out there with the others.*

She activated her heightened hearing again, focusing on the different people. It was strange, almost like squinting an eye or taking in a deep breath. A muscle of sorts, something she could control, though not particularly well as of yet. At the very least she could filter out the wind and birds to an extent, the two hardly important to her. Looking down on herself, she found that someone had stripped her of the jacket, the shirt below only showing marginal damage. Her pants were pretty torn up but not to an unwearable degree.

Still have four stat points. Maybe they could help against the itching.

The fight had shown that she could survive. Not without her skills but she could survive. *Strength and Endurance to fifteen, and one point for Vitality.*

She confirmed the selection and grit her teeth as a strange hot feeling washed through her. She shivered and pulled the blankets closer. The muscles in her arms were tense. She felt both weak and strong at the same time. As if she could lift a truck but only for two seconds before blacking out. The itching remained. Kate looked around until she found the crutches, left in the room for those who would need them. Which, to her annoyance, was her.

Slowly standing up, she moved a hand to her head as it started to pound. Her vision darkened but she managed to step over and stabilize herself against one of the cabinets. The crutches were right next to her. *Good. Well done.*

“I think... you should rest,” Ethan said in a downright whisper.

“I don’t,” she answered, the man twitching slightly at the unexpected reply. *I need food. And coffee.* She looked down at her hammer. “Can you help me for a second?”

Ethan nodded quickly.

She glanced around the room. “The sling on that bag, can you take it off and tie it to my hammer?”

He got up and walked over, doing as she asked with slightly shaking movements.

Kate only now realized that the top bit of her weapon was near fully covered in half dried blood. “Sorry. I didn’t see it,” she said, receiving the thing whilst leaning against the cabinet. She slung it around her shoulder and moved it to her back.

“It’s... okay,” he said and nodded, stepping back until he sat down on the bed, his breathing ragged.

“You got fucked up too?” she asked.

He looked up, his mouth quivering slightly.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m not in a state for conversation. Get some rest,” she said, nearly stumbling on her first step. She managed to shrug it off and continue towards the closed door. *I heard all that through a closed door?* She tried to focus on it when something new lit up in the corner of her vision.

'ding' 'Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 2'

Sure. Kate opened the door with slow movements. She assumed the exertion was only possible due to her high magical stats. *Vitality, Perseverance, Strength, Endurance. What else could I want?* She smiled to herself as she walked down the stairs with slow and steady movements.

Allison sat in a chair on the ground floor, legs crossed, with a book in her hand. She glanced up and frowned. "Your coming was foretold."

Kate stopped. "What kind of greeting is that?" She looked outside, the truck standing in the yard with bodies piled onto the back. She could just glimpse Logan and Grey scratching their heads near the massive Ogre's corpse. By now she could hear the rushing water of the Willow, and tuned it out.

"I've been reading, fair maiden," Allison said and turned the book to show the cover. A large muscly man brandishing a glowing sword, two toned and skimpily clad women clasping at his legs.

"He won't be fighting well with those women hindering his movements," Kate observed.

Allison raised a brow. "Oh for you see, perceptive one, they are in cahoots with the dark wizard. Also you should rest. Melusine said you would try to get up."

"It's itchy," Kate said.

"Then maybe touch yourself?" Allison suggested. "I won't help. Maybe. If you ask very nicely." Her tone was dry.

"Jesus fuck, Allison," Kate said and touched her pounding head. "I need a coffee, and you won't stand in my way."

"True, I won't. Not sure if even this guy could stand in your way," she said and tapped the cover, her focus back on the pages.

Not without armor, Kate thought absentmindedly as she stepped out onto the yard. It was cool but the sunlight made the autumn air bearable. She stopped at the carnage, gagging once before she took in a deep breath. Most of the bodies had been cleaned up but there were still bits and pieces of flesh here and there. And the smell lingered. Burnt hair, burnt flesh, burnt clothing. She shook her head to get rid of the memories, both from the last few days and older. A part of the barracks lay collapsed, the roof broken into with debris collected near the ground.

She looked at the two men, their faces covered in cloth masks. *Yeah. Let's not do that.* Instead, she turned and slowly made her way to Bert's home.

Her crutches krangled against the door before Celeste opened it from the other side and looked up at her with wide eyes.

Celeste squinted her eyes and pointed at her. "You have to rest!"

Kate stared back, Unrelenting Carnage helping her win the long battle when the young girl apparently lost interest in the fight.

"Good morning," Jon said, looking up from his notes and books for a moment.

Eloise sat at the table as well, adjusting the flame of a small gas cooker.

"Who's the old one now?" Bert asked from his armchair, cackling to himself before his laughter turned into coughing.

Kate just watched him before she went over to the kitchen.

“Power is gone,” Eloise said.

“Right,” Kate said, flicking the switches. “Did someone check the... wait no, I did that last night.”

“I can make you a coffee though,” Eloise said and stood up. “The water still works.”

“We need tanks, and gas,” Jon added. “You don’t look as bad as Mel said. But after last night, it’s a wonder you’re still alive at all.”

“You don’t seem particularly surprised,” Kate said as she prepared the french press. She watched the girl heat up water in a small pan, her blonde hair in a nicely done bun.

“Well, after what we saw last night, I don’t think your recovery is at the top of my list to process. Iodine... hmm... hardly makes a difference,” he murmured, scratching his head.

Kate nearly froze up. *The light*. She moved a hand into her hair. “Nuclear...” She looked at Celeste, the girl glancing up from her game boy.

“You should drink your coffee,” Jon said. “And the answer is, probably not. But we’re not sure.”

If any of that makes it over the mountains...

She didn’t want to think about it. Just the fact that someone had used nuclear weapons or anything close to it was concerning enough. More than that really but Jon was right, she needed her coffee.

Kate focused on the water pouring into the press. She made her coffee in an almost mechanical manner, finally smelling on the brew and sighing. The implications remained terrifying, but at least she could distract herself.

She sipped from the brew and closed her eyes. “What’s the next step?”

“Generators... and power cables... no matter what it was, an emp apparently didn’t reach our castle. Radios and phones still work, despite the power outage. Your next step is to rest up, Kate,” Jon said. “There’s little we can do right now. Once everyone is fit again, we can think about what to do next.”

“World is lost if they use weapons like that... man was not made to wield such destruction,” Bert murmured.

“Destruction!” Celeste exclaimed, pumping her fist into the air before she resumed her game.

Kate sipped from her coffee and moved to the couch. She finished the brew and lay down, quite tired after her adventure to the other house. Her stomach rumbled when Eloise brought her some crackers and cheese.

“The fridge isn’t working. Eat before it goes bad,” she said and handed her a few packets of cold cuts too.

Kate ate a bit before she fell asleep, the itching not quite as bothersome anymore.

She woke up in a warm cocoon of blankets, the food sadly gone. Kate pulled the blankets closer. *It’s cold*, she thought, hearing a set of voices talking behind her at the kitchen table. She moved up

slightly, blinking as she took in the group of people. Everyone but Bert, Celeste still playing her game, the sound slightly audible.

“All I’m saying is they’ve consistently attacked... every night. It was close, Logan,” Jon said.

“We did... see them... bring away b... bodies,” Grey said, his voice quiet.

Logan wore a simple shirt now, his armor set aside for the time being, the hint of a beard on his face. He looked tense, lost in thought. “We don’t understand those creatures. What if it gets worse?”

“Worse than that?” Ethan exclaimed as he took his hands out of his pockets, settling against the wall a moment later.

“Kate saw the hordes. We attract some of them, yes, but if we become an aggressor, a larger group may focus on our presence here,” Logan said.

“It’s an assumption, yes. It’s also an assumption to think they will attack again tonight, but it’s clear they know where we are, and one group or the other has chosen us as a target,” Jon said.

“I’d like to know what they did to those bodies, and I don’t think they will stop coming. Not until we do something about it.” Kate said. The pounding was gone, her leg and arm still a little itchy. “It feels like they’re treating it like some sort of hunt, but I won’t sit here and take that.”

“Get up first,” Allison said.

“I am up,” Kate said, taking her hammer as she tried to sit. She still felt winded. Not as bad as earlier.

“Allison tracks the ones that came here, we go find out where they’re coming from, and if it’s close by or near Keilberg, we attack?” Logan asked.

“That’s the idea,” Jon said. “We need to find out what these creatures can do, why they’re coming here every night, and yes... we should find out what they’re doing with the people of Keilberg. Now that it’s still daytime.”

“But you read the list earlier. There are so many things we need. If we plan to become self-sufficient,” Logan said. “I don’t think you quite understand how dire the situation is if the military is forced to use this kind of weaponry.”

“It’s the reason I’m voting for Grey’s suggestion,” Jon said. “Otherwise I would suggest gathering supplies and hunkering down for as long as we can. Knowing how dire things are... or how dire the military thinks things are, I think we have to prepare. Not just for the next few weeks. Kate has shown us what is possible. You too, and Mel can heal... with magic,” Jon said.

“I can summon fire,” Ethan said with a smile.

“Yes, that too,” Jon said. “We have to adapt, Logan. I don’t like it one bit but I think it’s necessary. We can’t sit here and wait until they overrun us.”

The large man tapped his pants, a frown on his face. “If the tracks lead towards Keilberg. And if we don’t find anything, we look for more supplies.”

“Of course,” Jon said.

“Who’s going?” Logan asked.

“The kids and Bert stay here. The radios don’t have enough range but so far there were no attacks during the day, and they will wait inside the armory,” Jon said.

“Dad, I’m as old as Grey,” Eloise said.

“Yes, but you’re not fighting with a sword. Mel is there for her healing and Allison is only coming because of her tracking skills,” Jon retorted.

“Tracking skills? Did I miss something?” Kate asked.

“It’s a hobby,” the woman said with a shrug.

“You have strange hobbies,” Kate said.

“Useful now. Isn’t it?” she said. “It’s great when you’re looking for animals. So judgy.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Kate said.

“Do you feel up for it at all, Kate? There might be another fight, but I’d like to have your new hearing there,” Logan said, looking at her.

“You don’t look perfectly ready either,” Kate retorted.

“That doesn’t change the question,” he said.

“Fair enough. Yeah, I can walk. I can lift my hammer. I don’t think it will matter much, once my magic is active,” she said. “What about everyone else?”

“I’m good,” Grey said.

“Not like there’s much of a choice,” Ethan said.

Melusine nodded.

Jon moved a hand through his hair and sighed. “Everyone in favor then?”

Kate stood with her hammer in hand, nodding lightly. The others gave their assent too, none of them particularly enthused. *Tired and battered*. She grinned. “Into the flames,” she murmured, getting a look from Eloise.

Logan moved away from the wall. “It’s three in the afternoon. You better get your packs ready. We leave in ten.” He looked at Kate. “Fifteen.”

“Thanks,” Kate said, raising her hammer. She would need a few minutes to get a fresh set of clothes and gear ready.

Eating a little more food, Kate soon returned to the armory, grabbing pants, new thermal underwear, a shirt, and a jacket. Everything fit rather well, their stock of supplies still quite extensive. *How long will it last, if I have to get a new set after every night?*

She didn’t think too much on it, taking one of the prepared packs and moving the flashlights, knives, and radio from her damaged clothes to her new ones. Kate took a deep breath when she stood up, some of the others checking their equipment as well.

Logan gave her a look but then nodded.

She was glad he didn’t ask if she was fine for a second time. They both knew she wasn’t. But that didn’t change anything. *Trusting some strange magic I got less than a week ago*. She looked at her

hammer, dried blood still sticking to the top bit. She didn't much care, nor it seemed, did anybody else. She checked her knives again, tested her lights, and secured her belt.

Their group slowly gathered outside, all of them dressed in the same grayish colors now, faces serious, and weapons ready.

Our turn.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 10

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 13***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 13***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 10***
- ***Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 3***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 11***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 10***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 9***
- ***Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 3***
- ***Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 1***

Support class: Silent Striker – lvl 1

- ***Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 1***
- ***Active:***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 2***
- ***Passive:***
- ***Passive:***

Status:

Vitality: 21

Endurance: 15

Perseverance: 10

Strength: 15

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Serenity: 1

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 23 Tracking

Kate looked at the leaves moving in the wind. She checked the straps of her backpack and rolled her shoulders. *Barely any weight.* A glance at the others suggested they didn't quite share the same sentiment. Everyone had the same pack, the same gear, besides their weapons of course. They stood in front of the castle, burnt bodies from the night's battle littering the gravel and earth beyond, unmoving now, serene.

She didn't think the scene gruesome, only glad that the monsters were dead.

She glanced back to the open gate when she heard it move in the wind, the creaking sound downright piercing. Jon and Melusine joined them after a few minutes with their kids. Kate gave Logan a glance but his face was hard. The parents had made their decision. They would join them, even knowing what it could mean.

Kate whipped her head to the side, raising her hammer when she heard steps, fast, pattering. She watched, seeing a squirrel rush up one of the trees, vanishing behind the brown and yellow leaves.

Jon and Melusine closed up the gate, Bert on the other side giving them a last nod before they left.

"I found something," Allison said, the woman crouching a few meters away. She moved a few branches aside and pointed at a spot in the dirt.

Kate walked over, Grey and Logan joining them.

"I don't see anything," Logan said.

Kate couldn't see it either.

"No, you're looking too close," Allison said and stepped back, gesturing with her arms to suggest a large creature.

"Ah," Grey exclaimed.

"Right," Kate said. "The Ogre." The shuffling step was obvious now that the woman had pointed it out, much of the surrounding weeds and leaves flattened or pushed aside. She would've just thought it a bit of a dry patch on the forest floor. "Is that the easiest one to follow?"

"By far," Allison said. "The goblins might as well be rabbits. They're nimble. If you think it's the best idea?" she asked, looking between Kate and Logan.

"They were together. Just keep an eye out for any other tracks," Logan said and grabbed his radio. "To Jon, Logan, check."

"To Logan, Jon, check back," came Jon's voice, through everyone's radios.

Logan checked with everyone else to make sure they were working. "Kate and Grey, you two stay with Allison at the front, followed by Jon, Ethan, and Melusine. I take the rear. Only use the radios in an emergency. Try to signal for people to stop instead of speaking, and stay calm, no matter what you see. Everyone ready?"

The others nodded, none of them speaking.

Kate noted the slight smile on his face. She was glad too, even Ethan had understood the gravity of the situation, probably due to their experience in the previous night. She blinked, taking a steadying step and a deep breath. *Focus.*

She felt tired. In a way that only too long shifts back to back made her feel. And she still felt the itching sensation of Melusine's healing magic, albeit less pronounced by now.

"Kate, if you hear anything, let us know. Allison, if you see anything strange, the same," Logan said. "Let's go."

Kate expected Allison to take time to follow the tracks but the woman just started walking, looking around before she stopped and glanced back. "Are you coming? I can't exactly defend myself," she said, awkwardly holding the spear she had more or less been handed.

Grey joined her side, his sheathed sword held in one hand.

Kate nodded and went to her other side.

"Great, now I feel like a fucking Princess," Allison murmured.

Kate didn't comment, instead focusing on the many sounds around them. Birds, small critters hiding or running away at their approach, the rustling leaves, the loud steps of her companions, their breathing. She focused on adjusting, tried tuning out the sounds that weren't important. But then what did she have to focus on? What could offer her insights into her surroundings? She had never heard like this, the sense enhanced to something near overwhelming. She assumed mostly due to the unfamiliar feel. Eyesight had always been the focus. Sure, sounds were important too, the creaking of a burning support beam above, a falling tree, shouts for help from people trapped by the flames or debris.

But her eyes led her through the houses, let her see the fires, let her aim the hose, and her eyes were how she oriented herself among her team. But now, she could hear the steps, she could hear creatures in the underbrush that her eyes would have never spotted. It felt strange. Something she would have to get used to. She was glad the ability was magical in some way, adjustable and not simply heightening her ability to hear sound.

More impressive, she thought, was Allison's ability to track the Ogre's steps. The woman did describe it as following an escaped crack-addled elephant through Neverland, something she whispered to herself after they had traveled for about twenty minutes. Kate decided not to comment on it, her lack of tracking knowledge not enough to consider the comparison in any meaningful way. Allison did more or less walk through the forest at a normal pace.

Kate stepped ahead of the two others, holding up a hand. The birds were gone. It was quiet. Not a single critter in the vicinity.

The others stopped behind her, Logan moving up to the front as everyone prepared their weapons.

Breathing, shuffling, heavy steps from Logan. She couldn't focus. Kate glanced back and glared, raising a finger to her mouth. *Quiet. The fuck. Down.*

They tried. And she listened. To anything that seemed out of place. One minute passed. Two. Scratching. A slight sound, just ahead and up, quite a ways up. She followed the noise with her eyes, coming up with a blank.

She shook her head and looked at Logan.

"What do you hear?" he asked in a whisper, slowly moving closer, his large sword at the ready.

“Something in the trees,” she whispered when she heard more. Scratches from a few trees nearby, then dull impacts, light and masked by the rustling leaves. “They’re around us, in the trees.”

It was just enough for everyone to look up and prepare, the group forming a circle with the melee fighters stepping up to protect the others.

Something jumped down from the trees. A small creature, large claws on its arms. It aimed for Grey but he was ready, moving to the side with a strange sliding motion before his blade flashed out towards the landing creature. It collapsed into two pieces, dark blood staining the dead leaves around its corpse.

Kate saw one of the critters move around a tree ahead of her before it jumped, aiming for one of her companions. She heard the twang of a crossbow and a heavy impact from behind, activating Mindless Ferocity in turn. She raised her hammer and slammed it into the jumping critter, the thing near exploding in a mess of gore, dark blood splattering on her face as she turned, her focus now entirely on the battle. She saw one of the monsters rushing towards Ethan, the man’s arm shaking as he aimed a fire spell. Reckless charge let her intercept the thing, her knee slamming into its side. She followed the flying critter with fast steps before she stomped down on its head, the impact heavy and wet. It felt good. She felt good. Better.

Logan fought off two of the monsters, the same ones she had faced two nights prior, large claws scratching against his medieval plate armor. He threw one of them off.

Kate brought her hammer down before it could regain its bearings, the sound of the impact reverberating in her ears. She heard its bones breaking, its insides turned to mush, and she felt a surge of energy flow into her. A deep breath. Logan was fine. She circled around the chaos, Jon grasping his leg, one of the creatures running at him with nimble steps. Reckless Charge brought her forward, between the two. She watched the creature come and crouched, gripping her hammer as she growled. The sound was strange. Barely audible, but present, heard not only by her ears but felt in her spine.

The creature hesitated. She didn’t.

Her horizontal strike impacted with a clinking sound before the creature hit the ground near instantly, unmoving and dead. She didn’t stop, instead turned around and looked for more but the battle was over. Kate looked up and listened, turning her hammer as she ignored the pained moans from Jon, the fast shuffling of Mel, heavy steps from Logan. *Distractions.*

The fight is over.

She blinked, taking in a deep breath as her magic deactivated, just now noticing the bloodied leg of Jon and his pained expression, panic and fear in his eyes.

“The Bograth I told you about. It should wear off in a few hours,” she said as she walked up to the others.

Melusine stopped the bleeding, her hand covered in a strange glow as she talked to her husband in a calm voice. She opened her pack and grabbed the first aid kit, cleaning and disinfecting the wound before she started testing his leg with a needle. “Useful side effect,” she murmured. “Might be usable as an anesthetic. You don’t feel anything at all?”

Jon looked away, shaking his head. His face was pale, lips quivering.

“It’s going to be fine. The cut went to the bone, but it was clean. My magic took care of that,” she said.

“I don’t n... need to know... that,” he murmured in a pleading tone.

“Oh shush, dear,” Mel said with a smile. “Healing magic is wonderful,” she added with a smile, finishing off the stitches before she applied a bandage. “Someone will have to carry him if we continue.”

“Short break, take a breather. We’ll continue when you’re ready, Jon,” Logan said.

“It’ll take hours to wear off,” Kate reminded them.

“I doubt it had much time to spread or linger,” Melusine said. “I can tell he’s already recovering.”

“This should be the venom gland. Maybe,” Allison said, a blood covered hunting knife in one hand and a piece of flesh in the other.

Ethan puked up his breakfast.

“Ew. At least go to the bushes,” Allison said, wiggling the small organ. “Grey, get me a container.”

“I... j... just have the sandwich... one,” the man stuttered, blood covered blade in hand, some splatters on his clothes.

Allison raised her brows. “He just puked. Sandwich for him, container for me.”

The man followed her instructions as she started cutting into another one of the small Bograths.

Kate glanced at Logan but he just slowly shook his head.

“You didn’t get injured?” Melusine asked, now glancing her way.

“Doesn’t feel like it,” Kate said, looking down on herself. If anything, she felt better, some of the deep rooted fatigue from before gone entirely.

“All their blood?” Mel added.

She nodded. “I think so.”

Kate glanced at the notifications in the corner of her vision as she collected the other corpses and brought them to Allison.

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

...

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

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 14’

‘ding’ ‘Reckless Charge reaches lvl 11’

‘ding’ ‘Toll for the Living reaches lvl 12’

‘ding’ ‘Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 10’

‘ding’ ‘Intimidating Presence reaches lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Silent Striker reaches lvl 2’

Serenity +1

'ding' 'Frightening Growl reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 2'

No distributable stat points from the Support Class then? She frowned, stacking the smashed corpses next to Allison.

The woman gave her a look.

"Sure, you're not a psycho?" Kate asked.

Allison dug her knife into flesh. "Who knows, really?" she said. "Not the one who killed these funny little creatures with a hammer and a smile on her face. That growl was quite... interesting," she said, biting her lower lip before she continued.

"Funny little creatures?" Jon asked in a pained groan.

"You don't feel your leg, you don't have to act injured," Allison said without looking his way.

"Jesus Christ," the man murmured and rested his head on his pack.

"My Support Class leveled up, gave me one stat point in Serenity, but nothing to distribute myself," Kate informed the others, Grey nodding in a thoughtful manner, still holding the sandwich in his free hand.

"Would've been nice," Logan said, patting Ethan's back as he still retched. "We should move on soon. The blood might attract predators."

"It's certainly a stench," Allison said, moving on to the next body. "This is unworkable," she murmured, moving the bits and pieces still stuck to the vague outline of a spine aside. She gave Kate a look.

"What?" Kate asked.

"Absolutely nothing," the woman answered in a deadpan voice. "Impressive hammer."

Kate didn't reply, back to her surroundings as she listened for other creatures.

Nothing showed up.

A few minutes later, they continued, Ethan supporting Jon with the others in the same formation as before. Melusine considered the injury negligible at this point, the venom's effects the only thing causing some trouble. The others agreed it was not enough to return, Jon included.

Kate wondered at the introduction of healing magic. Not just to their group, but to the world. Others must've received the same boons. *It would change everything.*

Maybe there's a chance with this. He would've been out for weeks, and his leg might've not been the same for the rest of his life.

She grit her teeth when she thought back to the bright explosion from the previous night.

Their pace slowed down a little as they followed the tracks, the trail soon leading them vaguely southwards and up towards the mountains.

Allison stopped and looked around, murmuring to herself as she raised bits and pieces of the underbrush.

Kate waited and let her work, an intense look on Allison's face as she stepped from left to right, crouching down a few times. She returned. "There was a fight here... I found blood in various places, some of the dried pools suggesting heavy injuries. A group of pawed creatures attacked the Ogre and whatever was with it."

"Pawed?" Kate asked.

"Yeah... wolves maybe?" Allison suggested.

"Shouldn't be many in the region," Kate said. "It would've made the papers if an entire pack was around."

"Pawed monsters," Logan said. "We know orcs and goblins aren't the only thing around. This is good news."

"How are more monsters good news?" Ethan asked.

"It means we're not the only ones fighting to survive. Might be a territorial dispute, might be they just eat each other, or there's more to it," Logan said. "We should continue. No corpses means they're still around."

"Or they ate the corpses," Allison said, giving him a look.

"Or that," he said.

They continued for another twenty minutes, following the slope. Kate soon spotted a bench in the distance, a resting spot she had stopped at more than a few times in her expeditions. One of the last easy to reach locations before more appropriate mountaineering gear became necessary. They found it untouched, the road to Keilberg castle indicated far below by the split in the forest. Keilberg itself was visible too, the houses kilometers away, tiny and serene. Farther out extended the Maar Valley, various rivers, isolated farms, and villages spread throughout.

Smoke rose from more than a few places, tiny pyres visible in the distance. Kate took out her binoculars and had a look, some of the others doing the same. She soon spotted the first groups of beings, mostly thanks to the large creatures in their midst. Ogres and some even larger.

"I suppose quite a few of them do move by day," Kate said.

"What are they doing?" Logan murmured.

"Pillaging?" Jon suggested. He hopped over to the bench and sat down, tapping his leg before he moved it a little.

"It's chaotic, unorganized. Some of them are fighting each other," Logan murmured. "Is that... a dragon?"

Kate tried to follow his line of sight and soon found what he had seen. A yellow winged creature, though it was difficult to make out any specifics. It was smaller than some of the Ogre-like beings and one of its wings seemed to be bent.

"They're hunting it," Logan said.

“Terribly sorry to interrupt your creeping, but I think I found what we came for,” Allison said, pointing along the slope and to an outcrop of stone, a cliff side leading up at a steep angle.

Kate walked over. “There’s nothing th-” She stopped talking and looked through her binoculars. “What the fuck is that?” She saw a small outcrop at the bottom of the cliff, the forested area she had seen many times before now adorned with a large cavern entrance. Nearly twenty meters wide and at least five meters high, not something she would’ve missed before. If anything, it would be a tourist attraction for Keilberg. “That shouldn’t be there.”

“Yeah. I would’ve had pictures taken there before,” Allison said. “That probably looks fantastic at night.”

“Goblins standing guard,” Kate said.

“Just two of them,” Logan added, having joined them. “We should go back to the tracks, to make sure that’s the place.”

“I’m more interested in how a cave entrance just suddenly appears,” Kate said.

“How do monsters suddenly appear?” Ethan asked.

Grey walked over and looked through his binoculars. He gulped before a smile blossomed on his face. “I think... that might be a dungeon.”

“Where you assumed the monsters come from?” Jon asked as he limped over to see.

“It could be. I mean why did only a few come in the first night? Then more and more?” he asked.

“There could be many reasons for that,” Logan said. “Anything we should know about it?”

Grey looked at the ground when he realized their full attention was on him. He scratched the back of his head and smiled in a bit of an awkward manner. “I... it’s usually... a difficult area. Sometimes with puzzles... or a boss monster, like a very powerful variant of whatever creatures are there. There’s usually loot too, but so far things have been... well not quite like I expected.”

“So it might just be their lair, or a place where they hide during the daytime. Or there’s more to it. Let’s see if the tracks lead there,” Logan said.

It didn’t take long for Allison to confirm the location, the group of creatures that had attacked Keilberg Castle the previous night came from the cavern entrance Kate was pretty sure shouldn’t exist. But Ethan was right, the same was true for the monsters themselves.

“We’re really going in there?” Melusine asked.

“We know they came from there. Either we wait at the castle and hope they don’t send more of their creatures, or we catch them while they sleep, and make sure no monsters come out of that cave ever again,” Logan said.

“Jon, how’s your leg?” Kate asked in a low voice, her eyes on the still distant goblins.

“I can walk, more or less,” he said. “Good enough.” He raised his crossbow.

“Then let’s find out what’s in there,” Kate said as she gripped her hammer.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 10

- **Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 14**
- **Active: Furious Dance – lvl 13**
- **Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 11**
- **Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 3**
- **Active:**
- **Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 12**
- **Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 10**
- **Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 10**
- **Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 3**
- **Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 2**

Support class: Silent Striker – lvl 2

- **Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 2**
- **Active:**
- **Active:**
- **Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 3**
- **Passive:**
- **Passive:**

Status:

Vitality: 21

Endurance: 15

Perseverance: 10

Strength: 15

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Serenity: 2

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 24 Darkness

Kate approached in a crouch, her team spread out throughout the underbrush all around as they closed in on the massive cavern entrance. She stopped behind a moss covered tree stump, leaning against it with her hammer in hand. Glancing over, she could see the goblins standing at the entrance. Well, one of them was standing. The other one had chosen to sit, the creature hitting the ground with its small knife in a repeating pattern.

She couldn't spot anything in the dark cavern behind, other than the sheer size of it. Close to the opening however, she could see two stakes, one adorned with a massive wolf's head, the other one with that of a human. Kate grit her teeth as she moved her head back behind cover. Had she known the person? She heard a clicking sound and watched again, the twang of a crossbow resounding a few meters away, the bolt rushing out before it struck the sitting goblin in its chest. She got up and rushed forward, seeing a gray flash a few meters to her left where Grey rushed out, a clean slash of his blade cutting through the other goblin's neck.

Kate reached the stumbling creature. It had let go of its blade in favor of clutching the bolt in its chest. Reckless Charge brought her close before she slammed her weapon down, making sure the creature couldn't cry out or call for help. She looked over to Grey, the man looking back. A slight nod. She walked over to the stake on her side of the entrance while the others joined them.

The person had indeed been someone she had known, albeit in passing. An older woman who used to buy tons of vegetables in Lars' shop. *Always wondered how she ate all that alone... half of my veggies go bad in a week.* The stake was a thick piece of wood, rammed deep into the ground. Kate ripped it out with a single pull, removing the head before she closed the woman's eyes. She looked at the thing for a few seconds before a hand touched her shoulder.

"Later. We have a job to do," Logan said, carefully taking the head out of her hands.

Kate still looked at her hands before she shivered. She wanted to say something but her mouth didn't open, instead she ground her teeth.

"This isn't a normal wolf," Allison murmured.

"Focus. Get your headlamps. Kate to the front," Logan said before tapping her shoulder.

She nodded, putting on the lamp before she flicked it on. *Into the den of fire.* She heard the words of her friend, wringing her hands around the heavy steel handle. "Try to keep up," she said to the others. Mindless Ferocity activated as she took in a deep breath. Grey was next to her, Jon close behind. Logan was at the end of the formation, but she looked ahead, and walked into the depths.

She soon started hearing the dripping sounds of water, plenty of small alcoves and hiding places around but none of them occupied by any creatures. Taking out the guards in relative silence had certainly helped. Storming this place with an aware group of defenders would be a nightmare. Kate stopped a minute later, holding up a hand to the others. She glanced back and turned off her headlamp, looking at the group of humans standing in the tight corridor between stone walls.

She talked in a whisper. "I hear creatures sleeping... wait here, and come when you hear fighting."

Gray nodded and relayed the information to the next person in a whisper.

Kate was already gone, very slowly moving through the darkness as she kept one hand on the wall. They knew the creatures were light sensitive and she didn't plan to wake all of them up the moment she walked into that room. She could feel the tunnel opening up after the tight section they had just been through but she trusted her hearing. There were no guards. Their enemy didn't expect intruders.

Silent.

Slow steps. She was getting closer. Another somewhat tight section. She was careful not to let her hammer scrape against the side of the wall. And she was inside, hearing dozens of sleeping creatures. Kate didn't hesitate. She could hear the different pitches of the snores, going to the closer goblins first before she crouched down. She couldn't see much of anything but based on the sounds she could make out where their faces were, based on the slightly shifting bodies, she could make out where the rest was. It took her a minute to make sure she wouldn't step on anything and wake the creature. When she was sure, she slammed down the knife using both her hands, one still gripping the hammer.

A wet sound. Steel piercing flesh, crunching bone. She waited. And moved on to the next. First, she focused on the more isolated creatures. There were a few groups she didn't want to risk as of yet.

Time passed. She had killed all the isolated ones, two of them even orcs based on the sounds. She didn't check the messages yet, instead sneaking back to the others. Kate had to cover her eyes with a hand when she walked into the shining lights of their headlamps. "Grey, Logan, there are three groups still in there. Seven orcs in total, six more goblins. They're too close together for me to kill them silently."

"Can you lead us there without light?" Logan asked. "If they're sleeping, we'll all prepare and turn on the lights at once," he said in a whisper. "Ethan, no fire down here."

"Form a line and hold your hands. Move very slowly. Keep your feet close to the ground, there are corpses inside. When they wake up, you turn on the lights and finish whatever is left standing," Kate said and grabbed Grey's hand. He did the same with Jon's, the line quickly forming. They were moving half a minute later.

Kate winced at their steps and scraping jackets against stone, but they managed to keep their weapons close, their breathing controlled. And soon they stood in the same cavern she had just been in. Kate removed Grey from the line and slowly moved with him to an unoccupied space near one of the groups, careful not to step on any of the corpses she had already left behind. Next was Jon, then Logan, and so on.

She chose the smallest group and unsheathed her bloodied knife once more. Close to one of the orcs, she hovered over its head and pushed down the weapon with all the strength she had. Again, the metal penetrated with ease, slamming through the skull with a wet crunch and killing the creature instantly. She didn't wait this time, leaving the blade inside as she unsheathed another one of her hunting knives.

Another orc died and then a goblin. The creature's leg twitched slightly, hitting the ground a few times in its death throes. The last goblin in the group woke up. It made a confused noise before a blade slashed into its face.

Kate didn't get the angle quite right as the creature was moving. She did pierce its flesh but it cried out in pain, the other beings now rousing from their sleep. She let go of her knife and swung her hammer in a horizontal arc, striking the goblin down where it crawled.

Lights flashed in the dark cavern, confused guttural noises resounding from the two remaining groups as the monsters got their bearings, some reaching for their weapons.

A crossbow was fired, swords came down, and Kate rushed forward. She reached the next group where injured beings shielded themselves against the light. Her hammer cracked a knee, bringing down an orc before it blocked another hit against its skull. She kicked it down and struck a confused goblin in the back of the head, cracking the bone.

She saw a broad greatsword cut halfway into the neck of an orc. Kate activated Furious Dance when she saw the remaining creatures grouping up, with their weapons ready. She reached the crawling orc, one hand clutching its leg as it cried out, roaring when it turned around and saw the hammer coming for its face. Three strikes and she left it unmoving. The spike of her hammer was ripped out, bloodied and wet. Kate turned to look at the illuminated group, her allies circling around as the enemies roared out.

Loud.

A bolt struck one of the orcs in its face. There were two remaining, and three goblins, the small creatures trying to hide behind the orcs.

One of the large ones was aware of all the attackers, its jagged sword held in a defensive stance. The other one was more aggressive, focused entirely on Grey.

Kate watched the latter one. *Patience.*

Silent.

She crouched slightly, waiting. A few seconds and the orc made its move, going for Grey with a few bold swings. Reckless Charge brought her close, her hammer held close as she slammed the head into the monster's jaw. Three more hits and it stumbled. She ignored the slash it managed to get in on her shoulder, seeing Grey's thin blade slice through the large orc's neck as she stepped back to avoid one of the goblins.

Logan kept the other orc occupied with his long sword, a bolt striking the large creature in its leg.

It stumbled and growled.

Kate growled back, hitting the goblin before she splattered its head against the nearby wall. She saw the last two shiver in fear, their blades clutched close as they tried to get away from her. They reached the wall of the cavern. She didn't stop.

Looking up, Kate saw the last orc had fallen to the combined efforts of her team. But she heard more coming, her skills pushing her forward.

"More..." she said. Her mouth moved. She wanted to say more but it was hard to focus. "A..." she gulped, walking closer to the entrance. "Ambush." She grinned. *Silent.*

Patient.

Kate heard her allies say some things, the bright lights going out as they moved closer to the walls. *Hiding. Bait?*

She prepared to turn on her own lamp. She knew what they were planning. *Monsters. Approaching.* There were dozens of steps, some larger, some smaller. She waited, with her hammer ready. In an effort to protect herself, Kate grabbed one of the larger bodies and raised it up by the simple leather armor it wore.

Her enemies entered the cave. She heard their snarls and noises. She growled, the fast steps turning more wary, fanning out. Two of the creatures carried torches, illuminating the surroundings. Kate switched on her headlamp in turn and rushed forward, two arrows striking the body she held before she let go of it. Her hammer swung and struck a goblin's head, teeth and blood flying to the side. Her allies joined in but she focused on the next monster, the next creature that stood in her way or slipped up.

Bones cracked and flesh tore. She lost herself in the battle. Lights swung around, shouts resounded, reverberating in her ears. She stumbled, the bloodied orc in front of her once again hitting her with his fist. The sword came down and she blocked it with the handle of her hammer. Her own fist struck back, the steel entangled. Reckless Charge activated, slamming her into the monster, the momentum and weight making them stumble and fall. She let go of the hammer and grabbed two knives. Kate ignored the hits, stabbing down with reckless abandon, cutting flesh and armor as the orc tried to stop her.

Her enemy's efforts weakened as she continued, a nearby goblin running her way with its blade aimed for her head. She slapped it aside and stabbed the creature in its skull, leaving the knife in there and taking the monster's weapon. She felt a sharp pain and looked down. The orc had taken one of her own knives and stabbed it into her stomach. She grit her teeth and dug her blades into its head, pushing down until she could feel the metal scrape against bone.

Kate wanted to rip out the blade but she stopped herself. *Leave.* She stumbled up, her vision slightly blurry. *Hammer.* She found the thing after a few seconds of searching, the battle around her still ongoing. She could hear pained noises, breathing, steel hitting stone and metal, a crossbow being fired. An arrow. She felt the thing strike her arm, the impact nearly making her stumble. Instead she found the goblin, growling once more before she ran at it, her steps quickly reaching the thing as it tried to fire once more. She struck its face with the butt of her weapon, a direct strike following after, the impact making the small creature slap against the stone floor. She went to one knee, breathing hard as she forced herself to get back up.

She took three steps and grabbed onto the arm of an injured orc, its head stabbed through by one of her allies a moment later. She let go and nearly fell with the dead creature. One last goblin fell when a large sword cut through its entire form, two halves falling to the blood covered stone floor, illuminated by torchlight and headlamps. She tried to hear, but her head swam. Something came up. Kate retched as she went down to one knee. There were no more enemies, though a few lay dying, gargling as they spattered out blood.

"Don't move," someone said, reaching her side.

She recognized the voice. *Ally.* She knew she could trust her. At the same time she knew there were more enemies down in the cavern. Somewhere. There had to be more.

"Bite down," the voice said and put something into her mouth.

Kate did just that, a sharp pain following. She glared at the woman but endured, the pain followed by a strange heat, followed by intense itching. Her entire abdomen hurt. She had to focus not to fall on her face. Her magic waned, the pain intensifying as she bit down harder. Tears welled up in her eyes as her breathing quickened. Another sharp pain, the arrow gone from her arm, followed by the same heat and itching. She breathed harder still, now using her arm to stay sitting. The smell was horrible. Burning flesh, blood all around. Sweat. It was stuffy, hot. She tried to raise her shirt up to cover her nose. Someone puked. There was puke already.

She had to get out.

“Someone, help her up and out of here,” Melusine said, her headlamp swerving around before she moved on to the next person in need of healing. Kate hadn’t been the only one injured.

She winced at the pain but soon felt someone help her up. She glanced over and saw the pale face of Ethan, blood on his face and spittle on his chin. He shook a little and didn’t meet her eyes but he pulled her out, the two of them collapsing out in the broad cavern tunnel. She heard his breathing, his heartbeat. Her hand moved up to check on him, brushing away the sweaty hair. It wasn’t his blood. She helped him sit down against the nearby wall, resting next to him as she gripped his hand in hers. She could feel him shake, tears rolling down his cheeks as he gulped.

Kate herself focused on the pain and itching, the wood creaking in her mouth as she bit down harder. *Though the fires. Though the fires may rage. All consuming.* She rummaged in her pack and found a package of painkillers, taking out the wood before she downed two pills and drank some water. She looked over and held the bottle to Ethan’s face. “Drink,” she said with a slightly shaking voice.

Grey had joined them, the man standing nearby in silence, one hand on the handle of his blade, his headlamp aimed down into the darkness.

“Did...” Kate started but she focused on her hearing instead. It didn’t take her long to realize they were all alive. Logan was hurt, his breathing harder than usual, Melusine picking something out of his armor with Allison there to help. Jon sat down next to Kate. She gripped his hand as well.

“This is horrible,” the man murmured.

Kate took in a deep breath, her eye twitching at the healing magic in her stomach. She wanted to scratch out her insides.

They remained in silence for a long while, no more monsters coming for them as they waited and collected their breath.

“Use the time to level up and check your skills,” Grey said from the side. “And turn off your headlamps.”

Kate did as he said. It made sense after all. She turned off Ethan’s, the man still shaking slightly. His face was damp with sweat.

Jon did the same after he had reloaded his crossbow.

She tried to slow her breathing, forcing her body to calm down after the intense battle. Looking down the tunnel, the light reaching about twenty meters far, she knew there was more to come. Melusine joined, with Allison and Logan in tow.

The man seemed fine, though his armor had several dents and visible cuts. “Five minutes, then we move on,” he spoke, sounding tired.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Kate asked.

Logan chuckled, shining his headlamp her way. “You should see yourself, Kate.”

“Fuck off,” she answered with a tired smile, looking at her blood covered hands and hammer.

Chapter 25 Depths

Kate sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. Five minutes wasn't a long time but after an intense fight, she was glad for every second. After a while, she checked the new notifications in the corner of her vision.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Fighter]'

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Archer]'

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Fighter]'

...

'ding' 'You have defeated [Orc Warrior]'

'ding' 'You have defeated [Goblin Archer]'

'ding' 'Berserker reaches lvl 11'

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

'ding' 'Berserker reaches lvl 12'

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

'ding' 'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 15'

'ding' 'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 16'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 14'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 15'

'ding' 'Reckless Charge reaches lvl 12'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 12'

'ding' 'Unrelenting Carnage reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Intimidating Presence reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'You have unlocked the active skill: Shattering Step – lvl 1'

Active: Shattering Step – lvl 1

Use your strength and 20% of your stamina to slam the ground with a shattering force, disorienting or causing everyone around you to stumble. You may vary the power exuded.

‘ding’ ‘Silent Striker reaches lvl 3’

Serenity +1

‘ding’ ‘Silent Striker reaches lvl 4’

Serenity +1

‘ding’ ‘Silent Striker reaches lvl 5’

Serenity +1

‘ding’ ‘Frightening Growl reaches lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 4’

...

‘ding’ ‘Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘You have unlocked the active skill: Bewildering Wave – lvl 1’

Active: Bewildering Wave – lvl 1

Produce a wave of sound magic with you at the center, disorienting everyone around you that can perceive sound. Higher levels allow for a more targeted use.

Kate read through the messages, opening her eyes before she got out a pack of tissues, cleaning her hands of the blood as well as she could.

Melusine checked on everyone again without saying a word, lifting arms and opening jackets with a flashlight in her hand.

Kate knew that there were plenty of injuries perhaps not immediately noticed by the person who sustained them. Some could ignore quite a lot with a high amount of adrenaline and potential blood loss. *And now there’s magic involved as well.*

Her new skills were interesting. She thought that both could change the course of a fight if used at the right time, depending on how powerful they turned out to be. There was one major issue however. Her allies all around. Her growl only targeted enemies, at least according to the skill description, though she knew Melusine at least was affected when she had used it for the first time back in the castle.

Already she had taken a massive risk by activating both Mindless Ferocity and Furious Dance in the middle of that cavern. If she used her new abilities with the others present, there was a high chance of the skills affecting them just as much as her enemies.

New tools are new tools, she thought, glad to have gotten them anyway. There had already been several situations where she’d had to fight monsters alone, or far enough away from the others where she could’ve used something like a disorienting sound wave. She thought a cave like this one just didn’t exactly qualify for that.

Kate considered the four stat points she had gotten from her Berserker Class and decided to put two each into Endurance and Strength. Kate felt the new power flow through her, her muscles tensing and her heartbeat quickening. She took in a deep breath and gripped her hammer.

“Time is up. Kate, do you hear anything?” Logan said as he glanced back, him and Grey at the front.

“I would’ve let you know,” she whispered, glancing to Jon and Allison, then Melusine and Ethan. Kate stood up and rolled her shoulders. She looked down to Ethan and extended a hand, the man looking up before he gulped, and accepted.

She raised him up with ease, smiling slightly when he yelped. *I could get used to this strength.* She glanced up at the dark cavern ceiling a few meters above. *Guess I can. I have the stats now after all.* She took in a deep breath and joined the two men in front of her, hammer held in one hand as she walked past with steps as silent as she could manage.

“Quiet now. There’s bound to be more,” she said, flicking on her headlamp before they descended further into the dark.

Minutes passed as they made their way into the depths, Kate slowing down when her light revealed steps in the stone. Not perfectly aligned or angled but they looked too deliberate to be anything natural. Or at least so she assumed. It was the only way forward and she didn’t plan to turn back now. Not after the battle they had fought through to get here.

She winced slightly at the descending steps, her healed wounds still itching, distracting her slightly from the task at hand. Luckily nothing showed up during the descent. She heard the others walk down, already able to distinguish who was confident and who was hesitating, who put more weight on their feet and which leg they favored. The information was easy to distinguish now that the sounds were so readily available to her.

The cavern opened up slightly. Drops of water fell from stalactites several meters above, the impacts audible to Kate as she looked around. Boulders and rock formations partially blocked her view, seven headlamps illuminating the darkness. She didn’t hear any steps or breathing in the vicinity that didn’t originate from their own group. The air felt less stuffy than in the corridors before.

“Nothing,” she whispered.

“This is... far too extensive,” Jon said. “It... doesn’t make sense. The tourist guide didn’t mention a cavern like this in the entire region.”

“It’s incredible,” Allison murmured as she collected a sizable piece of rock from the ground. She moved her headlamp down and turned the piece around. Sparkling light reflected off the crystals.

“They didn’t dig this place out. Not in the time they’ve been here,” Logan said.

“They could’ve been around for years,” Jon said.

“No. Not with the way they’re behaving. They lack that amount of planning and foresight,” Logan spoke. “Be careful. We don’t know what else might lurk down here.” He got something out of his pack and cracked it, dull blue light emanating from the light stick. Logan placed it near the stairs, making sure it wouldn’t move. “That should last a few hours at least.”

“We might not be back before night falls,” Jon said, Melusine lightly touching his shoulder.

“Neither will they,” Kate said and kept on walking. She heard the others follow a few seconds later, the group taking the same formation they had started with.

Some time passed before she moved past a large boulder and stopped, raising a fist. The sounds had changed. She touched the boulder with one hand and moved forward with slow steps, her headlamp soon shining into nothingness. A cliff reached into the depths, Kate stopping a few meters before the drop began.

“Different way,” she whispered to the others and started making her way around the boulder. “There’s a drop here.”

“A drop?” Logan asked, slowly making his way forward before he saw what she meant, some of the others doing the same.

Kate came out on the other side of the boulder, scratching at her stomach when she heard a high pitched sound. “Fuck,” she murmured, seeing the two goblins at the other end of a five meter long suspension bridge made of rope and wood, two torches set up on the other side. One of the creatures aimed its bow and fired but she had already stepped away. Kate hesitated when she saw the abyss below, the second goblin already running down into a tunnel entrance.

She saw Grey rush forward, the man taking quick steps over the slightly swaying bridge before he rushed forward in a flash. Kate shook herself out of her fear and activated Mindless Ferocity, one hand on the ropes as she made her way over. She heard the string and ducked, an arrow flying past over her head. The movement nearly made her slip as she heard Grey slash through the running goblin. A crossbow bolt flashed past her, missing the bow wielding creature by a meter.

It ducked and moved to look for cover, giving her enough time to cross over. A moment later, she was by its side, its bow releasing a last arrow that hit her shoulder before she brought down her hammer.

She swung the weapon to the side, the corpse stuck to the metal released before it slapped to the ground and rolled over. Kate growled as she looked at the arrow.

Grey returned with the corpse of the other goblin, the man waiting next to the entrance with his hand on the handle of his sword.

The others crossed. Slowly.

Logan was the last, testing the wood and ropes before he dared to use it. The suspension bridge had sizable gaps between the wooden pieces, though it seemed well made and secured. The lives of everyone who would use it depended on it after all. The ground below wasn’t visible.

Melusine stopped next to Kate and glanced at the arrow, then at her.

“What?” Kate asked with a slight hiss. She turned her head and listened, Melusine closing in and checking the wound. There was something deeper still. Something heavy. Impacts.

“It’s stuck in your jacket. Couldn’t even pierce your skin.” Melusine said, simply taking out the projectile.

Kate didn’t feel it, instead moving closer to the entrance as the others gathered. “There is something down there. Heavy.” Then she moved into the tunnel. A decline followed, light visible on the other side. Kate turned off her lamp and motioned for the others to do the same. She watched six lights vanish one by one.

“I will scout,” Grey whispered in a voice so low the others didn’t even react.

Kate glanced his way, knowing perfectly where he was due to the sound. She heard his steps and saw his outline, then something about him changed. The light was barely enough to make out the others but she could no longer see Grey. “Go,” she whispered back, still hearing his steps as he moved.

Silent.

She felt the itch to go herself, annoyed that someone else would be the first to encounter their enemies. But she held herself back. Furious Dance was not active, either that or her new points in Serenity preventing her from going down the length of the tunnel already. Kate kept Mindless Ferocity active however. There were enemies left after all.

Grey returned, a strange sound coming from him before his breathing picked up, the man steadying himself against the tunnel wall. “There is... an ogre, or something like it. I think it’s taller, but I’m not sure. It has a cleaver... the size of... me.”

Kate moved her hands around the handle of her weapon. *Good.*

“Several goblins, and at least three orcs. It’s a big hall... and there are... corpses,” he said.

Kate ground her teeth. *Silent.*

“One of the goblins had a small staff or something. Might be a mage,” Grey said. “And there were strange growths or something. I c... couldn’t make out what exactly. It’s a big cave.”

“Where are the monsters exactly,” Logan said, listening to Grey give a quick description of the hall.

“Allison and Melusine, you two wait here,” Logan said. “Grey. You go for the mage. Kate, you take out the Orcs and then join me. I’ll try to distract the big one. Jon and Ethan, you pick off as many goblins as you can. Anyone gets seriously injured, we run back here, cross the bridge, and cut it on the other side. Understood?”

Kate cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders. “Understood, military man,” she whispered.

“Now go forth, warriors of humanity,” Logan said in a strange whisper.

She glanced at him and shook her head lightly. *Did he lose it?*

“For none shall stand in our way. We shall rage. We shall fight. Go forth,” Logan said as he crouched slightly, a pulse of white light glowing through the cracks of his armor, his eyes visible in the dark for a split second.

Kate felt herself tense up for a moment before she smiled, feeling the strange power. Furious Dance activated, her allies fading to the back of her mind as she focused on her hearing. She stepped forward with light movements, hearing the quiet and fast steps of Grey right next to her, heavier impacts coming from Logan and Jon, the latter farther back.

From ahead, she could hear the sounds of various monsters, shifting metal, guttural grunts, a heavy impact of metal against flesh, bone, then stone. She knew where they were before they had even reached the hall, four goblins to the left, two to the right, just as Grey had informed. The three orcs she could hear to the right as well, and the heavy impacts came from farther down the hall, at least twenty meters away.

Orcs.

Quiet.

Fast.

Hunt.

She came into the light, torches fastened to the mostly even walls. Corpses. The smell of blood. She ignored it all. One step, two. A flash behind her. One orc looked her way but she had already charged. She slammed the spike of her hammer into the back of a crouched monster. She ripped it out and used Bewildering Wave, her chest tightening before she huffed. Kate stepped forward, the orc to her left stumbling back at the sound, raising both hands to his ears. The other one shook his head, sword unsheathed and held towards her with a shaking arm. Kate slammed it away with her hammer, a second hit breaking through his right knee, a jab to his chin making the orc fall. She brought her hammer up when something bright appeared in the corner of her vision. A glance revealed a flying sphere of fire, Kate jumping up with Hunting Leap.

She watched as the thing exploded below, far more powerful than anything Ethan could summon. Arms held in front of her, the heated shock wave sent her higher still. She grit her teeth against the heat as she came back down, landing in a crouch. Kate turned at the pained groan of an orc, the half burnt creature reaching for its sword before she finished it with a strike to the head. Flames clung to flesh and hair.

She dodged when she heard the steps behind her, finding the last orc. Her pants had caught on fire. It didn't matter. The orc swung wildly, fast steps bringing him forward before Kate stomped her foot down. Power flowed through her right leg as her heel hit the ground. The very earth shook, a loud sound echoing through the hall. She watched the orc stumble slightly, his sword flashing past her head. Kate stepped forward, her hammer slamming into his face in a thrusting motion. Something broke. She struck again, his sword coming back around.

Kate blocked the savage weapon with her hammer, one hand letting go as the orc pushed with both. She unsheathed one of her knives and rammed it into his forearm, taking a second one as she stepped forward, still holding his sword back with her hammer. Metal slid against metal as the orc grunted in pain, his injured arm falling to his side. Kate closed the distance and punched the second blade into his chest with enough force to pierce through the leather armor, then she kicked, breaking his right leg.

The orc finally let go of his weapon, groaning as he fell to one knee, shaking hands grabbing for the hunting knife in his chest. He ripped it out right before Kate brought down her hammer in a wide arc, the chunk of metal impacting his skull.

Blood and bits of bones exploded to the side.

Fire.

She dropped to the ground, falling at the same time as the orc's corpse did. Then she rolled. She rolled and patted out the flames on her pants and jacket, large holes now visible with reddened skin below. She rolled up into a crouch and grit her teeth, taking in the scene before her. Fires all over, screeching goblins, Grey slashing through them. A crossbow bolt and spheres of fire rushing out from the tunnel, striking the massive being engaged with an armored knight. She moved.

The creature was enormous. At least three meters in height, and two in width. It was covered in strange rock like growths, several horns coming out of its shoulders. Dark yellow eyes took in the invaders as it moved with trunk like legs and arms. The being held a two meter long cleaver made of either stone or crude metal, the edge chipped in several places. Burns and bolts showed on its light green skin, the monster uncaring for the projectiles coming in from the tunnel entrance.

Kate ran towards it, seeing Logan deflect a powerful swing of the creature, the crude weapon crashing into his greatsword. Both his weapon and arms shook from the impact. He stumbled back when the creature raised its cleaver above and brought it down.

Logan's sword glowed for a split second, bright white light emanating from the entire length of the blade before the weapons met. A pulse rushed out, the cleaver deflected upwards and away.

Kate reached the creature in that moment, using its distracted focus to slam her hammer into its left knee. She heard cracks, looking up to see the thing turn her way. Grey moved past behind it, a sphere of fire impacting the monster's face.

It roared as a blade cut into the back of its right leg, the cleaver coming down at Kate.

She held up her hammer, the massive weapon striking her steel and sliding off to the side, taking the fingers of her left hand with it. Kate felt her knees buckle from the impact, nearly going down.

Logan's sword cut into its right leg from the front, Grey's from the back.

The monster kicked forward, striking Logan, the man flying backwards before he landed on his feet. He went to one knee and came back up.

Another ball of fire impacted the creature's head.

It roared and walked towards the tunnel, a crossbow bolt striking its chest without eliciting a reaction.

Kate felt the pain in her left hand, blood streaming out as she let go of her hammer. She ripped away a piece of her pants and wrung it around the wound in a quick motion, screaming when she tightened it. She grit her teeth and unsheathed one of her knives.

Grey rushed forward, once again cutting into the monster's injured leg. He got through, right as the creature turned, its heavy hand impacting his chest in an erratic motion.

Kate watched it fall to the ground, its leg breaking away under its own weight and the cuts from both sides.

Logan and Kate circled it as Grey rolled to the side, coughing up blood as he tried to get up.

Another fireball hit its head, blood flowing from the severed limb.

Kate sheathed her blade and instead took one of the orcish swords from the ground. She found it light in her hand, walking forward before she jogged and jumped, Hunting Leap activating as she approached from behind the thrashing monster. She brought the blade down onto its skull, biting through flesh and into bone before she jumped off and landed.

The creature now reached for the new injury, striking the ground and walls with its heavy cleaver.

Logan's blade flashed with light before it bit deep into the creature's arm. Grey was standing once more, his movements slowed slightly but fast enough to deal with the large and heavy creature.

They moved in and out of its range, Jon and Ethan periodically sending fire and crossbow bolts against its injured form.

It slowed further until Logan slammed his greatsword into the monster's open mouth. The creature slowly raised its injured arm to try and pull it out.

Kate came to Logan's side, grabbed onto his hands, and pushed the blade in further, the steel breaking through and out of the monster's skull with their combined effort. She could instantly feel the warmth of new health flowing into her, Kate stumbling back with a slight shiver as her fingers regrew. She glanced to the side, hearing the others rushing into the hall. Taking in a deep breath, she went to one knee and tried to listen. Her mind slowly cleared when she couldn't make out any sounds beyond the smoldering flames and the pained moans of her allies. *Where did I leave my hammer?*

Chapter 26 Beans

Kate took in a deep breath and coughed, smoke drifting from the burning clothing. She glanced to the side and saw Ethan walk past the flames, his arms raised, a concentrated look on his face. A smile came to her lips before she winced, pain now mingling with the itching sensation. The burns hadn't fully healed, her arms partially exposed.

She watched the flames flicker, dim, and vanish, Ethan walking to the next area before he repeated the magical feat.

That would've been useful throughout all those years, Kate thought as she blinked her eyes, her vision slightly blurry. She felt exhausted. *Used too many skills.*

"Those don't look very good," Melusine said as she approached, kneeling down next to her.

"Had worse," Kate murmured.

"Yes, I'm sure you have. Tough firewoman," Melusine said with a smile as her hands started glowing.

The pain on her right arm was replaced by itching. Kate wasn't sure which one she preferred. Of course she preferred the itching, but when the pain was entirely replaced, the answer didn't seem quite as obvious anymore.

"You should eat and drink something. I know our bodies aren't quite the same anymore with this magic improving us, but all of this can't be healthy. We're still human," Melusine said.

"I'm not entirely sure of that," Kate said.

"Eat anyway," Melusine said as she opened her pack. She got out a sandwich and handed it to Kate, then started putting together a gas cooker.

Kate removed the cling film and started eating. She was done in moments, her stomach rumbling.

"You're going to cook?"

"You're not the only one who should eat. And something hot will help," Melusine said, ramming a hunting knife into the top of a can of beans.

"Right, fair," Kate said. Fighting monsters was definitely draining. The sandwich wasn't enough, but it was indeed what she had needed. She looked for her own pack and ate her sandwiches too, handing the can she had to Melusine.

Kate scratched her arms, only now really looking around the hall. Her haze-like battle state shrouded by magic helped her tune out everything that wasn't necessary for her survival, but she would miss plenty of other things in the process.

The walls were a little too even to be something made by the monstrous creatures, nor something to occur naturally. Rushlights were fastened to the stone walls, the light casting shadows where the others walked past. Where the large creature had worked, a pile of meat and bone lay stacked up on a massive slab of stone. Dents and scratches showed on the workspace.

Kate gulped when she saw the jumble of body parts next to the stone. Deer, rabbits, birds, and humans. Plenty of humans. Dead eyes stared back at her, blood splattered shirts, missing limbs, fear

stricken expressions. She looked away, staring instead at one of the rushlights, the fire moving in serene patterns. Kate heard her own teeth grinding, her pulse going up. *Sitting here won't do anything.* She stood up, all the blood rushing to her head. Kate remained unmoving for a few seconds, the world spinning around her as she started hearing her pulse echo in her ears.

She opened her eyes. Her hearing cleared. *Hammer, bodies, food.* She went and grabbed her weapon, seeing that Ethan had finished putting out the flames. He worked together with Allison to fan the smoke out into the large cavern. Kate didn't miss the small entrance on the other side of the hall, keeping her ears peeled. She looked at her bloodied weapon before she started collecting her knives. She grabbed the knife lying close to the orc's chest, looking at the tusked face of the dead creature.

Absurd, how alien it felt to kill something just a few days ago. She shook her head and grabbed the knife, wiping the blade on the monster's arm. Kate stood up and walked over to the pile of bodies, sheathing the weapon on her belt.

Logan joined her as they silently moved one body away at a time, closing eyes and doing their best to lay them out with at least some dignity. There was no cloth around to cover them but everything was better than a pile.

"Did you level up?" Grey asked from the side, the man turning around one of the dead goblins, looking at the small staff the creature had carried.

Kate raised a brow, closing the eyes of a young boy. She couldn't tell if he had even reached his teens. She ignored Grey's question and looked at Logan. "Are you okay?" She looked at his broad armored back, his shoulders rising as he looked up. She stood up and walked over, grabbing his arm. "I'll finish up here. Go eat something."

The man looked at her, his face mostly hidden behind the slightly dented knight's helmet. He nodded ever so slightly.

"Go," she said again, watching him walk away. *You've seen enough.* She looked over the bodies, most of them killed by stab wounds or cuts. *Slaughtered in their homes.* She moved the last three bodies, cleaning off some of the blood and dirt on their faces. Kate would've liked to do more for them but this was all there was.

You can rest now.

Most of the others had gathered around the small gas cooker, Grey still looking through the monsters. He got to the massive creature and tried to move it.

Kate glanced behind the stone slab, seeing the small piles of bones. Human skulls seemed the most numerous among the heads she could spot. All of it was a mess. Bloody, bits and pieces of flesh still stuck to the bones. She heard the movement and then saw it, one of the strange growths on the nearby wall moving slightly. Brown and red mucus, veins pulsing as a being within stirred.

She walked over and watched with a strange fascination as hands ripped through the fleshy membrane, an orc fighting its way out of the disgusting cocoon. The creature fell to the ground, legs unsteady. It looked up and opened two bloodshot yellow eyes.

Kate swung wide when the creature bared its teeth, straining its legs to move forward. Her hammer impacted the monster's arm as it tried to protect its head. The bone snapped, its forearm crushed as it stumbled to the side and groaned. The next strike slammed against its head, bringing the creature down. Kate walked over and raised her hammer, splitting its skull with the spike.

The others had moved out, their weapons at the ready.

Kate turned her head and looked at Ethan, the young man wincing slightly. "Burn everything."

He nodded slightly and walked forward, his eyes focusing on the ground. Either because of the corpses or because of Kate. She didn't much care.

This smell is fucking terrible. She walked over to the slab and leaned against it, watching the fire mage work his magic. They would have to deal with the smoke again but she could feel a slight breeze moving through the hall, meaning there was at least some ventilation.

Grey joined her side and started laying out a few things. The small wooden staff, a metal necklace adorned with various small bones, and a small red gem. "I think these are magical items. I couldn't check the Battle Ogre yet, maybe you can help me with that." He pointed at the flesh growths on the walls. "So this is where they spawn."

"I'm not sure if spawn is the right word," Kate said, her words coming out with some bite.

"I..." Grey said before he went quiet.

She glanced over, seeing the man slightly slouched. She grabbed the red gem and looked at it.

"These were all people. People with lives. And homes. I don't want to think of this as some game." Kate shook her head.

"It isn't," he said in a quiet voice.

They were silent for a long moment.

"So how do you know these things are magical?" Kate asked. She felt a strange pulse from the gem. As if she touched a very weak electrical current. *Interesting.*

"S... something is s... strange about them. They feel unnatural," he said. "I thought maybe putting them on would show them... well they do show up but it doesn't say what they do. Maybe they just don't do anything, but maybe we just don't have the skills to figure it out. Sometimes in games t-" he quieted down and looked to the ground.

"It's fine. Tell me," Kate said.

"I... well... to identify things... there are sometimes spells for that. Sometimes scrolls, or even a person in some hub town to do that for you. A magical book even. Or maybe we just have to try them out and see what happens, tinker with them for a little while, attune to them somehow," he explained.

"Seems like a risk," Kate said.

"I agree. They might even be cursed," Grey said.

"Keep them with you for now. We'll think about it when we're back," Kate said. She watched the last of the strange growths burn away, Ethan now walking by with a cloth covering his face.

He gave her a slight nod.

"Thank you," Kate said as she pushed off from the stone slab. She jabbed Grey's shoulder. "Come on, you should eat something too. We'll check the large monster after."

They all walked over, and sat down near the waiting group.

Melusine stirred the beans. "Cups."

Kate got hers out of the pack and handed it over, waiting with her spoon as the woman filled it with hot beans. She started gulping them down a moment later. *My favorite fucking food. Unsalted beans.*

“You don’t have to like it,” Melusine said.

Mind reader, Kate thought, squinting her eyes. “Thanks. They’re calories.”

Logan chuckled. “That they are.”

“We know what happened to the bodies now,” Jon said, his eyes on the corpses. He looked tired. Then again, they all did.

“Calories,” Kate murmured, huffing slightly. She looked up to find Jon staring at her.

Allison snickered. “Sorry,” she said.

Kate didn’t find it particularly funny, but dark humor was one way to deal with horrific things. With everything the others had seen now, she didn’t think trying to pretend things were fine was reasonable. “There is another exit to this hall. Maybe there are more of them.”

“It’s soon going to get dark,” Jon said. “I don’t want to leave the others alone for much longer.”

“The way back shouldn’t be too dangerous with the sun still out,” Kate said. “But I don’t want to leave this undone. Not with what we found here.”

“Then... we’ll come with you,” Jon said, looking at Melusine.

Kate looked to Logan.

“I agree with both of you,” Logan said. “In case more monsters attack at night, there should be some of us at the castle. But we fought our way into this hall. If there is more, we should finish it here and now. Jon, you look exhausted. As do you, Melusine. Ethan, you used a lot of magic. I can still heal a little, and we have our first aid kits. Grey, how do you feel?”

“I’m... okay,” the man answered, gulping as he glanced to the ground.

“That’s a good thing,” Logan said and touched his shoulder. “Kate, Grey, and I will explore a little more of this cavern. Everyone else will go back. Rest up if you can, and barricade yourselves in the armory.”

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Jon said.

“He’s right, Jon. I don’t know how much I can use my magic anymore,” Mel said.

“I’m standing in the way anyway,” Allison said. “And I’ve seen enough violence for several lifetimes. I’ll lead them back.”

Ethan walked over to one of the corpses and grabbed one of the crude orcish blades. He gulped and looked at Logan. “I’ll... I’ll protect them.”

Logan smiled. “Good. And I agree, it’s not a good idea. But I don’t have anything better.” He looked at them as if to ask for any alternatives.

None of them spoke up.

“Then let’s not waste anymore time. Come on, we’ll check if the cavern is empty and see you off,” Logan said as he cleaned out the small pan, Melusine putting away the cooker before they readied their packs.

Kate drank from her canteen when Allison walked over and took off her jacket.

“Let’s switch. You need it more,” the woman said.

“It’s covered in blood,” Kate said.

Allison shrugged and held out the jacket. “Well observed. And here I thought all you can do is hit things with a hammer.”

“I’m surprisingly good at it,” Kate said in a deadpan voice, taking off the remains of her jacket before she handed it over. She put on the other one and closed the zipper.

“Not sure if it’s anything to be proud of. But I suppose it’s good to have... with the monsters and all,” Allison said as she looked around the hall, glancing down at her bloodied and shredded jacket. She looked positively disgusted. “This is going to be a pain to fix.”

“They’re there to be used,” Logan said from the side, shouldering his massive blade.

“Used. Not used up,” Allison said. “Now come, knight. Protect us as we leave this stinking dread hole.”

Logan glanced at Kate.

“She’s talking to you,” Kate said and motioned towards the exit.

They traversed the suspension bridge and soon reached the glow stick. The caverns leading outside were quiet, as was the forest outside. They waited and watched for a few minutes, binoculars out as Kate listened to the wind. She heard a few birds in the distance, some nearby critters rushing over the forest floor. Squirrels. She would’ve never spotted them without her hearing.

“Seems clear enough,” Logan said.

“Good luck,” Allison said as she started towards the forest, followed by the others.

“Run if you get injured,” Melusine said. “That’s not a suggestion.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Logan said as he slightly nudged his greatsword.

Ethan glanced back at them and nodded, holding the orc blade with both hands.

Jon looked a little guilty as he hefted his crossbow. “We’ll see each other at the castle.”

“We will,” Kate said. They watched the group move away and towards the slope of the mountains, the gray clothes better camouflage than she had initially thought. *I should check my levels.* She walked back into the cavern and leaned against the wall.

Grey walked towards the tunnel leading down and waited with his blade at the ready.

Logan sighed as he joined them. “The messages. Right.”

Kate smiled. *At least I’m not the only one.*

'ding' 'You have defeated [Orc Warrior]'

'ding' 'You have defeated [Orc Warrior]'

...

'ding' 'You have defeated [Battle Ogre]'

'ding' 'Berserker reaches lvl 13'

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

'ding' 'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 17'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 16'

'ding' 'Reckless Charge reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Hunting Leap reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Shattering Step reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 14'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 12'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Intimidating Presence reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Silent Striker reaches lvl 6'

Serenity +1

'ding' 'Bewildering Wave reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 7'

'ding' 'Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 8'

Back into the cave without Melusine. Kate put her two stat points into Vitality. She took in a sharp breath when she felt the heat rush through her, cracking her neck as she turned her hammer.

"Ready?" Logan asked as he joined them.

Kate glanced back at his bloodied metal armor. She flicked on her headlamp. "Yeah."

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 13

- **Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 17**
- **Active: Furious Dance – lvl 16**
- **Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 13**
- **Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 4**
- **Active: Shattering Step – lvl 2**
- **Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 14**
- **Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 13**
- **Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 13**
- **Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 4**
- **Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 4**

Support class: Silent Striker – lvl 6

- **Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 3**
- **Active: Bewildering Wave – lvl 2**
- **Active:**
- **Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 8**
- **Passive:**
- **Passive:**

Status:

Vitality: 23

Endurance: 17

Perseverance: 13

Strength: 17

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Serenity: 6

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 27 Hunt

Kate led the others through the dark cavern, Logan cracking another glow stick near the stairs. It didn't take them long to get back to the suspension bridge and into the hall beyond. Some of the smoke remained but the air wasn't as heavy with it as it had been before. She looked at the bodies, the carnage they had brought into the hall. And yet it was all so very quiet, now that the adrenaline was gone out of her body, the sounds and scents of battle no longer present.

The people they had moved out of the pile seemed almost serene. To her it looked like they were sleeping.

Kate jolted when a metal hand touched her shoulder.

Logan looked at her from behind his visor. "We should move."

She nodded, gripping her weapon as she walked towards the other exit in the large stone hall. She could smell the blood. The slow decay of death. It would get worse in the coming days and weeks. A part of her wanted to get every corpse out of there, but she knew rationally that it wasn't feasible. They were dead.

Killed by the monsters that live in this cave. She turned off her headlamp, the others behind her following suit without a word. Darkness returned to the entrance before her. She heard the slight gust of wind flowing through the cavern, heard the breathing of her allies, heard the drips of water falling down onto the damp stone floor. She saw the shadows dance on the walls before her, flickering rushlights illuminating the hall they had fought in.

"Stay close. And stay quiet," she said without looking back, walking into the darkness.

Kate heard every single one of her steps reverberate in the tight corridor, annoyed that she could hear it all but wasn't skilled enough to change it. Grey was the most quiet by far, Logan the loudest with his slightly dented knight armor. They couldn't see of course but with Kate's hearing, she still considered it the safest option compared to them using their headlamps. She moved slowly, one hand on the wall and checking the floor with each step to make sure she didn't fall into a random hole in the ground.

The corridor seemed natural for the most part, sections of stone occasionally blocking the way, the floor uneven. The general trend seemed to go downwards but Kate couldn't be sure. She found it difficult at first to orient herself in the dark but it became easier with time. After a few minutes, she started hearing the sound of running water. Fast but not roaring like a broad river.

Kate stopped when she saw pale blue light from ahead. Moving her head, she could see that something was in the way. She checked with her hand and found what she assumed to be sticks and dried leaves. She took one of her small flashlights and turned it on with the top pushed against her arm. Slowly she moved the tool in an effort not to produce excess light.

Sticks and a dried bush? To hide this entrance? She turned the light off and listened. Half a minute later she pushed against the barricade and found it moving easily, the sticks simply propped up to hold the dried woodwork in place. Going through, she immediately noted the sound of water becoming louder, the echo of her own steps changing as well. The blue light came from a strange ivy growing in vein-like patterns across some of the cavern walls to the left. It produced just enough light for Kate to see her own hammer.

On the right, she could see more of the plant, though farther away, some of it barely visible to her, even when she squinted. The water rushed by below, at least ten or twenty meters away.

“I can’t hear anything around us,” she whispered to the others.

“It seems like a larger cave,” Logan said. “It’ll be dangerous to move further without any light.”

“Do you think that plant is magical?” she asked.

“Don’t touch it,” Grey said. “It might be a monster.”

“That, or it’s just poisonous,” Kate said, following the vein-like growth with her eyes. It almost seemed like the plant was moving.

“What do you think? That hall was probably where the creatures came from,” Logan said, his voice slightly muffled by the helmet.

“Probably. This seems like a hidden entrance,” Grey said.

“Or a hidden exit,” Kate murmured. She crouched down and shushed the others when she saw flickering light in the distance. A torch, then two. Still quite a way’s off. They waited and watched for a while.

They’re coming towards us.

Time passed as they prepared themselves. Kate started to make out some of the noises when she focused on tuning out the sound of rushing water. Familiar guttural voices.

“What should we do?” Grey asked in a whisper.

“Ambush,” Kate answered, slowly moving ahead as she used the dim blue light to find cover behind outcrops of rock. The others followed suit, their movements soon stopping as they all got into position.

She looked over the jagged stone, now seeing a group of orcs and goblins. Two of the small creatures carried torches, leading the others to a suspension bridge much smaller than the one out in front of the hall. Kate could see six orcs and five goblins, three of the small creatures pulling a large carcass she couldn’t identify in the poor lighting. They used rope and wooden boards to drag the kill.

The group stopped in front of the small bridge, the crack in the stone only a few meters wide, the water below not visible. It was obvious that the goblins wouldn’t be able to drag the carcass to the other side. An argument ensued.

Kate didn’t speak their language but the aggressive sounds were obvious enough. One orc even drew his sword when the goblins squeaked their complaints. Then another one drew his blade, however not looking towards the goblins. He instead looked around the cavern, the light unable to illuminate the expansive area. He uttered a word. The others went quiet, the goblins letting go of the ropes.

Did they see us? She hadn’t heard anything, and the orc only glanced their way for a split second. She couldn’t even make out the details on his face, they were still quite a way’s off.

There are too many. If they know we’re here, it might be problematic. She watched the group, trying not to make a noise. *We could still just go back and cut the bridge.*

A sound rolled through the cavern, a growl, slow and almost clicking. Primal. Kate froze. She felt small, weak. Meant to die. She instinctively activated Mindless Ferocity, the breath she held going out. She remained tense, watching the orcs draw their blades, a few of them at least. Some remained unmoving.

One of the orcs took a few steps back and grabbed a torch wielding goblin, shoving the creature forward.

The goblin stumbled, looking back as it held the torch. It yelped when something came out of the dark and yanked it away. A series of cracks resounded, followed by something wet hitting the ground. The torch flickered when splatters of blood hit the fires.

Kate opened her eyes wide when she saw the creature step into the light of the dropped torch. She couldn't hear its steps against the roaring stream below. The monster was bipedal and crouching, its back bent forward as the hint of a tail swayed behind. Two long and massive arms ended in clawed hands, one holding the crushed remains of the goblin.

Its skin was near black, perhaps even covered in scales. Two horns jutted out of its large and elongated skull, sharp and bent forward like those of a bull. Near black eyes watched the group of orcs and goblins as blood dripped down from its maw, the two or three meters large monster pushing down onto the torch with a clawed hand, sizzling fire mixing with the breaking of wood before the cavern returned to darkness.

Shit.

Kate had seen enough, her body still tense from the sound alone. She moved as silently as she could, finding the others thanks to her hearing. Their heartbeats were racing, both of them holding their breaths. "We have to get out of here," she whispered, hearing shouts, then fast steps. Flesh tearing. A pained moan. Silence.

Fight.

No.

Run.

She held her hammer, grinding her teeth before she bit her tongue. The pain made her focus. *Run.*

She shook Logan. "Snap out of it," she said in a hissing tone, louder now. The shouts were getting closer, flickering light moving over the gap. Kate squeezed Grey's shoulder, not getting a reaction. *Fuck.*

Something hit the water below. Metal struck something, another crack, flesh being torn. Bones breaking. The cavern went silent, only the stream below remaining. The light was gone.

Kate stood frozen, waiting, listening. She heard her heartbeat in her chest. She felt hot in her jacket, felt the sweat run down her back. The bridge swayed, the wood creaking. Something landed. Something heavy. Closer, on their side of the gap. *Did it hear us?*

Dripping. A different sound than the monotone water from above. It's coming closer.

She took a deep breath and found her headlamp. Kate could see it now, the silhouette of the massive monster stalking closer, its near black skin and eyes reflecting nearly none of the pale blue light. She glanced back and saw the tight tunnel just a few meters away. *Run.*

Kate put her hammer behind her pack and flicked on her headlamp, grabbing both Logan and Grey's arms before she started running with all the strength she could muster. She heard the growl and felt the heat in her mind, her magic the only thing that kept her going. She held on and dragged the others, a crack resounding but she held on. Logan slammed to the ground when she reached the entrance. She grabbed Grey and threw him inside, grabbing Logan before she shoved him through.

She could hear the creature now, fast steps as she activated her charge. Metal scraped against stone as she shoved Logan into the tunnel, herself right behind. They impacted something in the way, falling in a tumble. Her head hit stone, ringing resounding in her ears as she forced herself up. She tasted blood. Her headlamp was swaying. She walked forward. Kate looked down and grabbed onto the shoulder piece of Logan's armor, pulling the heavy man and his armor closer with one arm.

She fell on her ass, Logan in front of her and closer to the exit. Kate stabilized her lamp, the light shining into the cavern beyond where she could see the hint of a tail sliding past the tight entrance. Straining her hearing, she tried to make out where the beast was as she forced herself up, continuing to pull Logan. A moment later, she stumbled over Grey, nearly falling. The creature was gone.

What the fuck was that.

She moved past Grey, seeing that he had started to crawl. His arms were shaking. Kate grabbed him too, slowly dragging the two men through the corridor. She felt that a part of her wanted to go out there and find the monster. Just to see. To see if she could hunt it, kill it. A trap might work, or if she managed to sneak up on it. She managed to ignore those thoughts. It had wiped out an entire group of orcs in mere moments.

The sound of flowing water grew more distant, her strained breathing resounding in between the scraping of metal and fabric against the stone ground. She stopped, shining her light into Grey's face. "Snap out of it," she said, her own magic still active. She slapped his face, turning her head towards the corridor to see if something was after them.

Grey opened his mouth and closed it again. "I..." he gulped and closed his eyes, a shaking hand moving up to his face, then to the headlamp where he flicked it on. The man slowly moved his arm out of the backpack's sling, moving it forward.

Kate turned to Logan, raising him up to see the scrapes on his visor. She propped him up against the wall, his legs in an awkward angle inside the tight corridor. She banged her fist against his helmet a few times. "Are you... alive?"

He shook, the armor rattling before he coughed, turning to the side. "What..."

"I asked... if you're... alive," she said.

"Kate," Grey said in a slightly shaking voice, holding his hand out towards her.

"That's coffee," she said, seeing the black powder in his palm. The smell hit her in the next moment. She swayed slightly, her back hitting the stone wall as she deactivated Mindless Ferocity. She could taste the blood in her mouth now, her shaking arms and legs. Her shoulders hurt. She looked down into the corridor, her headlamp shining into the darkness. Eyes wide, she could feel her heartbeat picking up.

Calm yourself, she thought and looked towards Grey. "It's fine," she said, gently pushing away his hand.

"What was that..." Grey murmured. "I c... couldn't move."

Logan shook his head a few times before he took in a deep breath. "Oh god. That was fucking terrifying," he murmured.

"Similar to my skill maybe... just far more powerful," Kate said. "We shouldn't stay here. In this cave."

"Right. Can I get a minute?" Logan asked.

"No," Kate said and grabbed the large armored man below his shoulders, raising him up as if he was a mere child. "We leave. Now." She offered Grey a hand and pulled him up. "Logan takes the lead," she said and put her headlamp onto his helmet. He had lost his along the way. Kate pulled her hammer out from between her pack and jacket, taking out a flashlight at the same time. "Steady. Breathe. Move."

Logan took a step, then another. His sword was gone too. Grey still held his, with both hands now, still slightly shaking.

At least it took out the orcs, Kate thought as she followed the others, focused on her hearing in case something followed them or waited on the other side.

They moved in silence, coming out into the hall a few minutes later. It looked the same, no clawed monstrosities waiting for them.

"I'll scout ahead. Wait here," Grey said, his body changing slightly.

Kate found it more difficult to focus on him, as if the rushlights from the walls failed to grasp his form. He was moving away before she could object. "You still feel like shit?"

Logan looked over. "I lost my sword somewhere. You don't lose your weapon."

"There should be a few more in the armory," Kate said, looking around before she found one of the orc swords. They waited close to the corridor for now, Grey returning a few minutes later.

"It seems clear," he said.

Kate nodded and grabbed the sword, handing it to Logan before they made their way towards the exit. She could tell their steps were strained. Hesitant. Kate took in a deep breath when they stepped into the large cavern. She didn't know what to expect, but found nothing out of the ordinary. Cautiously, they went over the suspension bridge and reached the other side.

"Cut it," Logan said, looking at Grey.

"Wait," Kate said. "It'll hit the other side." She opened her pack and got out the rope, quickly fastening it to the outermost plank of the bridge. "Now."

Grey unsheathed his blade, striking twice in quick succession, the metal biting deep into the wooden poles, separating the ropes that held the bridge in place.

Kate felt the weight of the entire thing now, straining as she slowly let it down. All the way until the bridge came to rest on the other side, without a loud impact. "Let's go," she whispered, their lamps shining the way as they walked back to the exit of the cavern, soon finding the glow stick. She felt herself relax a little as they ascended the steps, out and towards the forest.

They turned off their lights before reaching the last part of the cave. The sky was red when it came into view. Kate could hear small critters rushing over the forest floor, more of them than she expected. She saw a deer run up and towards the mountains. The familiar smells of earth and

conifers replaced the blood and sweat of the cavern. But there was more. She smelled fire, but couldn't see it.

"Shouldn't the sun be down already?" Logan asked.

"It should..." she heard herself say. "We have to get back to the castle." Her voice was shaking. *This shouldn't happen here. There are too many rivers. It's been raining too.*

"What is it?" Grey asked.

Kate looked to the sky again. "It smells like half the fucking valley is on fire."

"I can't see any smoke," Logan said. He grabbed his pack and got out a small radio, turning it on before he moved through the frequencies.

She heard a loud sound from above. The same she had heard last night. She could see the red dots moving through the sky. Two of them. Right before a series of fiery streaks were released. A voice could be heard through the static of the radio.

"... surviving inhabitants are advised to seek shelter, if possible inside of an air-raid bunker. I repeat, air strikes will occur at 2100 tonight. No nuclear grade weapons will be used against the monster populations inside of the Maar Valley and Falstadt. Inform other survivors and vacate the area as fast as you can. May god be with you."

Chapter 28 Inferno

“This is General Wieser. You are hearing a recorded message. The monster populations that have appeared earlier this week all over the world have dealt devastating blows against our military and civil facilities. We are in a state of emergency. Larger monster concentrations throughout Austria will be destroyed with our remaining air force. Air strikes will occur at 2100 tonight. No nuclear grade weapons will be used within the region of the Maar Valley and Falstadt. Supply lines are cut but we will do everything in our power to fight this emerging chaos. Surviving inhabitants are advised to seek shelter, if possible inside of an air-raid bunker. I repeat, air strikes will occur at 2100 tonight. No nuclear grade weapons will be used against the monster populations inside of the Maar Valley and Falstadt. Inform other survivors and vacate the area as fast as you can. May god be with you.”

They listened as the static riddled recording started yet again, dulled impacts resounding in the far distance, light flaring up in the already red skies.

“The region is inserted with another voice,” Logan said. “Which means they are using nuclear strikes.”

Kate felt her hammer slip out of her hand. She caught it at the last moment and gulped.

Logan looked at each of them in turn. “They won’t come to help us. This is a last effort to destroy the enemy, going as far as striking our own cities. All out war.”

Kate opened her mouth and closed it again. “We have to move. The others are somewhere in the forest, on their way back to the castle.”

Logan nodded, as did Grey.

“Give me your spare shirts,” Kate said and crouched down, opening her pack as she looked at the surrounding forests. The fire wasn’t close, and still she could smell it in the air. This was like nothing she had ever experienced. “We try to stay out of the trees as well as we can,” she said, wetting her spare shirt before she folded it up. She covered her mouth and nose, knotting it tightly around the back of her head.

“The fires will spread,” she said, quickly wetting and folding the other shirts and handing them back, making sure the two men tightened them enough. “We move to Keilberg, then north until we reach the Willow. It should be the closest natural barrier against the flames. If we can contact them with the radios, we move up into the forest, otherwise we meet back at the castle.”

Logan put his helmet back on over the wet shirt. “One moment... forth, warriors. Let us fight until dawn. Let us fight, until the enemy is slain.” A dim white glow lit up through some of the cracks of his armor, an invisible pulse passing through Kate as she watched him.

She took in a deep breath. And felt ready. “I don’t think we’re equipped to slay a forest fire.”

“Let’s focus on surviving first,” Logan said as they all put on their packs and readied their weapons.

Kate took the lead, jogging around the nearby copse of trees as she kept her eyes and ears open for any dangerous creatures they might come across. Logan and Grey followed close behind.

She moved up and towards the bench they had stopped at before, wondering if it was a good idea to use the radios yet. For now she decided not to. If Jon and the others needed help, they would use them, otherwise sending something through might alert monsters near them of their presence. Kate glanced left where she heard fast steps, crouching low when she saw three enormous wolves run out of the treeline.

The creatures slowed and glanced their way, growling. Sharp and bloodied teeth were bared, their heads larger than those of a lion, muscles shifting under their brown and gray fur. It smelled of burnt hair, a few cuts showing on their large bodies as they watched the three humans with their black eyes, taking tentative steps. The largest one of the wolves nearly reached the height of Kate's chest.

"They're not backing off," Grey said as he readied his weapon.

"Wolves don't attack humans," Logan said. "Not if they're not desperate."

"These aren't wolves," Kate said and growled back at the creatures. She raised her hammer and took a step towards the creatures, her magic taking hold. She could tell it had an impact by the way their bodies shifted. "Fuck off!" she shouted, taking another step forward on the dirt covered section of the mountain slope while waving her hammer.

One of the wolves whimpered before another ran away, southwards and up towards the distant peaks dimly illuminated by the red light on the horizon. The other two followed a split second later.

"You two alright?" she asked.

Logan shook his head for a few seconds, hitting the side of his helmet with one hand before he nodded. "That's some... strange magic you have. Almost felt it," he said.

"It shouldn't affect allies," Kate said, watching the wolves vanish into the dark treeline about forty meters above.

"It doesn't, but I could feel it too, just not directed at me. Those wolves were injured. Cuts and burns," Grey said.

"Let's hope that means they won't follow us," Logan said. "Those were bigger than tigers."

"Yeah, and probably what made those prints Allison found," Kate said as they pushed onward and up the slope.

They reached the lookout a few minutes later, moving in a slight jog as various creatures rushed through the forest. Kate could hear far more of them than she could see. Moving up towards the bench, she looked out onto the Maar Valley with wide eyes.

Entire sections were covered in flames. Kilometers of land set alight, the fires clinging to trees and houses, to fields and roads alike. Lines showed where creeks and rivers sneaked through the valley, splitting the sea of burning chaos. There were creatures moving throughout, their forms shrouded in smoke and flickering flames. She could hear them. Screams and shouts, dying cries from the midst of the destruction.

Kate watched as one of the fiery red lines moved through the skies, impacting the ground on the other side of the valley, a streak of red flame enveloping a horde of monsters briefly illuminated by the aerial strike. "This is insanity..."

Mere moments stood between the calm night and a sea of fire and death.

“We have to move,” Grey said, tapping both Logan and Kate.

She nodded, the trio moving down towards the fires. The smell of burning forests and fields was permeating now, Kate occasionally spotting tumbling figures of flame clad creatures between the line of trees.

They crouched low when the sound of a fighter jet roared past above. Heavy machine gun fire could be heard before an inhuman shriek filled the night. Kate looked up to see the plane take a sharp turn to the left. Light flared up as it fired at something she did not see. She glimpsed several sets of wings following the plane at a far slower speed.

Kate winced when the machine impacted something far up in the air above the valley, the bright explosion inaudible at the distance. The winged creature it must’ve struck fell in a burning tumble, surrounded by flame clad metal debris and shrapnel.

She gulped and moved onward, towards where she knew the Willow to be. They were getting closer to the fires now, entire trees set ablaze in the distance. Certain sections had already burnt down entirely, nothing but black stumps and ash remaining. Keilberg had been hit too, heavy smoke rising above the town, fires raging in a few of the buildings she could see from afar. Not a direct hit it seemed, but it was close enough. She hoped the flames didn’t move to everything.

Kate heard a cough and turned to see Grey putting a hand before his face. He looked at her with bloodshot and dry eyes, shaking his head when he saw her watching him.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“It’s not...” she looked at the forest floor and raised her brows, flames clinging to leaves floating through the visible air around them. *This is. It’s too hot. Why...*

She shook her head and continued moving. She knew turning back now was a mistake. “Tell me when you can’t go on! We’re close to the river!” Kate could tell by now that she should’ve at least needed her full gear to walk through this kind of heat but she barely noticed. Her hammer was warm, as were her clothes, but it didn’t match with what she saw around her. *The magic stats then*, she concluded, the bonuses the only thing she could think of.

A few minutes passed before they reached the Willow, the river moving down the mountain slope and towards Keilberg before it made a turn eastward and towards Falstadt. The water moved fast, ice cold at this time of year.

Logan and Grey moved down the slope and got into the water, splashing their faces. Steam rose where Logan’s armor entered the water. He took off his helmet and dunked his head down.

Melusine will have to check them. She grit her teeth, annoyed that she hadn’t noticed the true extent of the heat. She trusted her senses too much, what she assumed to be her high Vitality messing with her perception of the danger. It was good at least that it was them, both Logan and Grey having invested considerable stat points into Vitality. She had no idea how a human without those increases would’ve handled the heat they had just walked through.

Brushing off sword attacks, arrows, and punches was one thing, but she couldn’t put it into relation to anything. Kate had never had to deal with such injuries. Heat, she knew. Her hands fumbled with the pack before she managed to open it. *Jesus fuck. Without protective clothes and masks. We should all be dead.*

A part of her wanted to freak out. Monsters and swords were new and strange. Something she just had to deal with. Perhaps she needed to see something familiar to understand the true extent of this

new magic coursing through her veins. *My veins, skin, mind, or wherever it really is. Do I go into the water too?* She didn't know. Looking behind herself, she could see wisps of fire clinging to the autumn leaves of oaks and beeches. She understood in theory how hot the air was but her body didn't register it.

Kate looked down and opened her jacket, sure to find horrible burns that had destroyed her nerves. And yet there was nothing. She was uninjured. Sweaty, sure. It was warm after all. *Fucking hell.* She focused and closed her jacket, remembering that she had used her rope in the cavern. "Grey, your pack," she said, looking up and down the river to see if there were any monsters.

All she saw were a few animals, rabbits, deer, and a fox cowering near the riverbank, trying to stay hidden from the humans they had surely heard. She couldn't see far beyond, this side of the river mostly in the dark, the other side shrouded in smoke and fire. The sky remained lit in dim red, though the evening had quieted. No more impacts or flashes of light.

She caught the wet backpack and quickly found the rope, tying one end around her left upper arm before she climbed down into the river herself. The cold came as a bit of a shock, Kate gasping as she felt the contrast, slowing her breathing to get used to it.

The current was noticeable at the edge of the river but not particularly strong yet. She handed Grey the pack and bound the rope around his arm, moving on to Logan before she added him in turn.

Kate pulled on both to check. "You two ready?"

"Yes," Grey said in a raspy voice before he coughed.

Logan nodded.

"You two stay in the water if you have to. We move close to the riverbank," she said and started eastward, her hammer held in her right hand, the left one keeping the rope close, to make sure she would be ready if the others were taken by the current.

It proved quite difficult to wade through the undergrowth but they managed it with some time, Kate using a hunting knife from time to time to get rid of particularly annoying shrubbery. She kept glancing behind her to check for monsters, despite her excellent hearing. It just felt wrong, to know the heat and smoke wasn't bothering her. She considered being in shock or simply being pumped full of adrenaline but the symptoms just weren't there. Her body was calm, her senses alert. She could see, hear, and smell. Very well even.

About twenty minutes of careful walking later, she crouched, signaling to the others to stop, both of them in the river up to their waist, close to each other and often dowsing themselves with the cold water. She waited, hearing the strange cracking sound from ahead. Logan and Grey moved up behind, getting closer to the bank as they readied their weapons.

Kate motioned them to wait, her eyes widening as a massive creature reared up its antlered head. Its entire form was made up of roots and leaves. Two vague arms and legs moved into the river, parts of its torso burnt and blackened. Roots linked through an antlered skull, the creature's eye sockets hollow. The nearly four meter tall being lowered itself into the water before it stood up once more. Kate heard the sound of rustling leaves despite the creature being wet from top to bottom. She could hear strange patterns in the sound before it stopped entirely.

The creature spread out its massive arms, its empty eye sockets aimed towards the spreading fires on the other side of the river. Wood ground and splintered as its root-like hands grew larger, fingers interlinking before the creature submerged them in the water. And pulled up. The motion raised

hundreds of liters of cold water, the impact on the other side resounding in a loud splash as the flames were pushed back. The being made another sound, wind moving through autumn leaves as it walked deeper into the river, submerged now to its waist.

Kate motioned to the others, walking onward along the riverbank whilst keeping an eye on the being. She felt the creature was far more concerned about the raging fires than a few humans sneaking past behind it. *A kindred spirit*, she thought with a slight smile. Strangely, the sight of the inhuman tree creature calmed her. Far less strange than her apparent resistance to heat. *Fight the fires, friend*.

They sneaked past without the creature so much as turning around, soon back to the methodical walk along the riverbank. The radios remained silent through it all, though Kate didn't know if the heat and water had damaged them. A few minutes later, they saw a group of orcs moving through the forest in the distance, some of them limping as they looked for a way through the raging fires. None of them seemed to see the group, soon past as they moved southwards.

It took longer than usual but Kate soon saw the elevated outline of the burg. The sky had darkened considerably. She couldn't see any smoke or fire rising from the structures, but most of it lay in shadow. She crouched when she heard wings flapping, a large winged creature landing on their side of the river, just about twenty meters ahead.

Two bird-like legs dug into the dirt, yellow scales covering most of its lithe body. Leathery wings flapped once, the wingspan at least five meters wide, then retracted snugly on the creature's back. Its head was long and covered in scales, two small horns growing out towards the back, sharp teeth in its mouth as it lowered itself down to drink from the water. The creature was at least two meters tall, nearly twice as long including its tail.

Kate waited in silence, watching from behind the bushes as the being drank. She heard each gulp, heard the flowing water, the cowering critters about ten meters to her right, and the crackling of burning wood on the other side of the river, farther away now.

The winged creature looked up and spread its wings. Wind brushed against the grass, bushes, and trees as it lifted itself off the ground, flying northwards and into the valley.

"Wyvern," Grey whispered.

Kate motioned for him to be quiet as she pushed on, glancing to their right from time to time. She could no longer hear any movements from the creatures that had hidden there. Nothing came and attacked as the others moved out of the water, Kate helping them with the rope. She opened the knots and put the thing back into Grey's pack. The forest here seemed fine, the smell of burning wood still present but less pronounced. She couldn't feel the heat at all.

Hammer in hand, she moved ahead and up the steep slope, soon seeing the castle walls in the darkness. A wisp of fire lit up on the battlements. "It's us!" she called out, raising her weapon as she walked closer. The fire vanished again.

They made it.

"Go and open the gate," she said, checking on her companions. They seemed fine, though exhausted. Kate checked the forest behind them as the gate opened, going towards the burg when she couldn't hear or see anything else. She made sure to look up too, though the sky had darkened considerably. *I would hear the wings*, she thought, shouldering her hammer as she entered.

“Melusine is in the armory,” Ethan said with an agitated voice. “What happened out there? We heard the planes and the... the bombs.”

“Air strikes against the monsters. I’ll take over once we’re checked up,” she said. “Everyone here and well?”

He nodded quickly. “Yes. We were nearly here when it started.”

“Good. Come on, you two,” Kate said as she made for the armory. “And Ethan, check the skies for Wyverns.”

“What?” he asked.

“Flying monsters. Yellow scales. Little dragons basically,” she said.

He looked at her and gulped, nodding before he made for the stairs.

Grey coughed. “N... not dragons... dragons have four-” he coughed again.

“Don’t talk,” Kate said, giving him a slightly worried look as she grabbed his arm to support him.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 13

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 17***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 16***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 13***
- ***Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 4***
- ***Active: Shattering Step – lvl 2***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 14***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 13***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 13***
- ***Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 4***
- ***Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 4***

Support class: Silent Striker – lvl 6

- ***Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 3***
- ***Active: Bewildering Wave – lvl 2***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 8***
- ***Passive:***
- ***Passive:***

Status:

Vitality: 23

Endurance: 17

Perseverance: 13

Strength: 17

Dexterity: 8
Intelligence: 7
Wisdom: 10
Serenity: 6

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 29 Burning

Kate grabbed her radio and pressed the send button. “Back at the castle. Testing if this thing still works,” she said. She opened the armory door and helped Grey inside, Logan following behind.

Melusine already rushed down the stairs and looked at them. “Are you injured?”

“I don’t know, smoke and fire maybe. Nothing else I think,” Kate said. “Let’s go up first. Did you hear the radio?”

“Ethan told us you’re back, nothing else,” Jon said from behind, making way for them to come up.

Kate found the entire group awake, wide eyed, and tense. She wordlessly moved Grey over to the bed and sat him down. “We walked through the fires. I didn’t even notice the heat at first. Do we have oxygen?”

“No. We don’t,” Melusine said. “Let me check him.”

Kate let her work her magic, or her medical skills. Herself turning away and sitting down with one of the bedrolls supporting her back. She took in a deep breath, trying to figure out if she herself had breathed in too much smoke. *I should have. We all should have.* “You didn’t run into any trouble on the way back?”

Jon had his arms crossed, pacing from one side of the room to the other, Eloise and Celeste sitting together in their corner. Bert sat on the chair, shotgun on his lap. Allison looked at the monster pieces they had gotten, herself sitting on top of a glass showcase.

“We saw monsters,” Jon said. “But they were as confused as we were. When the jets arrived... everything fled. We ran the last bit. As long as we could. But the military. This means-”

“It means this is the extent of their help. For now. Maybe forever,” Logan said, opening the straps on his armor. “Can someone help me with this?”

Allison looked up and walked over. She yelped when she touched the armor. “Jesus, did you put this thing into a forge?”

“We walked through the river,” Kate said. She opened her eyes wide when she saw the breast plate come off.

Logan grunted, his shirt half scorched with burns showing below.

“Shit,” Kate murmured but Melusine was already on it.

“Don’t move for now,” she said, giving him a look before she opened one of the cabinets, now filled with well sorted medical supplies. She opened a few cartons before she handed a set of pills to the man. “Swallow.”

He did.

“Oh, this wouldn’t be good,” Melusine murmured, starting to apply a set of creams to his chest, arms, and back. She looked through bandages as Allison helped remove the rest of Logan’s armor, his entire body showing severe burns.

“I’m... sorry,” Kate murmured. She looked at him and lightly shook her head. *How is he standing?*

“Don’t look at me like that. The pain is manageable,” he said. “We have magic, and bandages. I’ll be fine. Kate, look at me.”

She did.

“I’ll be fine. It’s not your fault. We had to get out of there. We did,” he said, looking around the room. “That one looks fine,” he said and pointed at one of the large swords displayed next to a set of other weapons.

“I said don’t move, Logan,” Melusine said, a pin in her mouth as she applied the first bandage.

Grey coughed.

“Grey, raise your hand if you can’t breathe,” Melusine said, glancing his way for a moment before she continued treating Logan. “Kate, get him the sword so he puts down his arm.”

She shook her head and forced herself to stand up, quickly opening the showcase and retrieving the large sword. Kate lifted it with one hand, handing it to the man in a way that would help him support his own weight.

He grunted. “A walking stick.” A smile.

“Don’t pass out now,” Melusine said.

He did.

Kate took a step forward and caught the heavy man with both her hands, keeping him up as easily as one would hold a child.

Melusine looked at her with wide eyes, the sword clattering to the ground. “C... can you hold him like this?”

Kate nodded. *I’m sorry, Logan.*

“Perfect. Let me finish up his waist and legs, then we can lay him down,” Melusine said. “Allison, that cream. All over. If you can.”

Allison moved. “Is he still alive?”

Melusine put a hand below his nose. “Yes.” She continued her work in silence.

Jon had joined his daughters, distracting them as the scene commenced. Kate thought they were all rather calm considering the situation. Perhaps just the past few days helping them adjust. *No*. She could feel her own lips quiver, her arms shaking lightly.

“Kate. Tell me when you can’t lift him anymore,” Melusine said in a calm voice, not even looking at her. “And look at the wall. Focus on one spot.”

She did as the nurse said, focusing on her stance and arms. “I’m fine,” she said. She wasn’t.

“He’s gonna look like a fucking mummy,” Allison said before she snickered.

Melusine chuckled. “Focus, woman.”

“Ay, ay,” Allison said. “You should teach me what you’re doing by the way. I’m not going out there again with those fucking monsters. Might as well make myself useful in the medical camp.”

Melusine started explaining the process, what the cream did, what the burns did, which pills she gave to the man, how much, and why.

Kate didn't hear most of it, her ears ringing as she focused on a small black spot on the stone wall. *Everything is on fire. They won't come. We're here. In Keilberg fucking castle, and they won't come. This is it.*

"Grey, still there?" Melusine asked. "Don't talk, raise a finger if you can."

He did.

"It's a good thing you all leveled up your Vitality. With Logan having these kinds of burns, I'm surprised any of you made it out alive," Melusine said as she finished up the bandages. "We're going to set him down now. Grey, if you can, move out of the bed. Logan needs it more. Kate, move him. Carefully."

Kate did as the nurse said. She focused on her steps and made sure not to hit anything on the way with the large man. Moving one hand below his shoulders and one below his knees, she steadied herself and raised him up. Grey had gotten out of bed with the help of Jon, Kate slowly putting down the unconscious Logan.

"Fucking hell, you're strong," Allison said.

"It's the magic," Kate said. "I know I couldn't lift him like this."

"Maybe I should invest in some Strength as well," the woman murmured next to her.

Kate ignored her, looking at the bandaged head of Logan.

The radio cracked. "Orcs... at the gate..." came Ethan's voice. The radio cracked again and then went silent.

"You stay the fuck down," Kate said as she saw Grey try and sit up, coughing with the attempt. She grabbed her hammer when she looked at the assortment of weapons in the same showcase she had gotten Logan's sword from. A battle axe stood out to her. Entirely too large and unwieldy, but she grabbed it anyway. "I'll be right back."

"I didn't check you yet," Melusine said.

"I'm fine," Kate said and walked past with one weapon in each hand. "Lock the door behind me." She walked down the stairs, checking the open messages still in the corner of her vision.

'ding' *'Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 18'*

'ding' *'Reckless Charge reaches lvl 14'*

'ding' *'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 14'*

'ding' *'Intimidating Presence reaches lvl 5'*

'ding' *'Silent Striker reaches lvl 7'*

Serenity +1

'ding' *'Frightening Growl reaches lvl 4'*

'ding' 'Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 9'

'ding' 'You have unlocked the passive skill: Echo Location – lvl 1

Passive: Echo Location – lvl 1

Your ability to orient yourself with the help of echoing sound is increased dramatically. Use sound waves to find your way. You may deactivate this effect if needed.

Why the fuck not, she thought as she closed the door to the armory below, already hearing explosions of fire coming from beyond the gate. Kate started running, going directly to the left and up the tower. She kept herself hidden and listened for Ethan, hearing him hide behind the battlements. An arrow struck the wood. *Good. Keep distracting them.* She jumped down to the side, grunting lightly as the weight of the impact went through her knees. Her Echo Location she already deactivated, finding it disorienting at best.

Crouched, she made her way around the castle and to the front. The sky remained a dark red, though the night had reclaimed some of its domain. She could still make out the group of orcs and the three goblins aiding them. Two of the former were injured, only three of the five armed at all. *Shit for you. I'm having a bad day.*

She didn't wait, putting down her hammer before she raised the large battle axe above her head. Stepping back like she used to with her fire axe, she used her whole body and threw the thing forward. The weight felt about the same, but compared to the already heavy axe she used to throw at the mock competitions, this thing was a massive axe made for war.

It didn't even finish a full rotation before it struck one of the armed orcs in its side, the steel embedding itself with a wet sound before the creature tumbled once and fell to its knees.

Kate growled, five steps bringing her to the goblins, the creatures standing frozen and shaking as they looked her way. Three strikes finished the frightened creatures. She smelled piss as she turned to the remaining four orcs, the creatures wide eyed, some of them injured. "Leave us alone," she said through gritted teeth, deflecting a frenzied sword strike before she stomped on the ground, Shattering Step activating as the closest orcs lost their footing. Her knee came up to strike the one that had attacked, a wave of sound coming from her throat in a strange whistle. She stuck another creature that rushed her with her hammer, teeth and blood flinging to the side. Their steps weren't steady, she noted, looking down at the first orc who had attacked, the being trying to get up with staggering steps. She grabbed one of her knives and stuck it into his face with a wet sound.

Moving on, she slammed aside a shaking and raised blade, then broke the last armed orc's leg. Bringing her hammer back, she slammed it down onto its skull. She watched one of the last two orcs go up in flames when a fireball hit its back, bits of flesh and leather exploding outwards.

The last one held its arm, blood trailing from one of its eyes with burns showing on its chest. It looked to one of the swords on the ground.

Kate stepped onto the blade as she heard the last groan from the dying orc behind her. She growled, watching the injured creature glance between her and the forest. It chose wisely, stumbling into the darkness with loud panting sounds coming from its injured throat. She turned around and smashed the burning orc's head, moving to the one clutching at the knife stuck in its face before she brought

her hammer down. She wanted to scream, wanted to smash them to bits. Furious Dance remained inactive. She wondered if she should hunt down the last orc. It would die out there anyway.

She stood there and breathed, smelling the burning air, the burning flesh. She grunted and grabbed the corpse by its leg, groaning as she moved her body and flung its corpse into the line of trees. Kate removed the battle axe from the near split creature before she threw the bodies away from the gate, as far as she could. She looked into the underbrush, clicking her tongue as she activated her Echo Location.

Coupled with her enhanced hearing, it felt like a 3D plan of the surroundings came to her mind. Disorienting, but clear at the same time. As if she saw through a sense she'd always had. Then she puked. *Fucking shit.* She grit her teeth, not hearing anything other than the shuffling steps of the injured orc, departing farther until he was gone from her perception.

"Are... are you alright?" Ethan's voice came from above, a downright whisper.

She took in a deep breath, smelling blood, burnt hair, the forest. Fire. *Here we stand. And here we remain.*

Again she looked into the forest. Again she heard and saw nothing else. Kate took in a deep breath before she looked up, seeing Ethan twitch just a little. "I'm better," she said. "Can you open... wait, let me try actually." She knew her Hunting Leap increased by 0.25m per level, meaning at her current level four, she was at three meters with a full charge. The walls of the castle were about four meters high, but she had her arms as well.

"Anyone in the courtyard?" she asked.

Ethan checked and shook his head.

Kate grabbed the bloodied battle axe and threw it over the wall. She stepped back and ran towards the wall, charging her ability before she jumped. Power flowed through her legs and muscles, propelling her upwards before she grabbed onto the side of the stone battlements. She threw up her hammer and grabbed on with her other arm, pulling herself up with one swift motion. She downright leaped over the stone and collected her weapon, turning to see a wide eyed Ethan watch her.

He raised his hands. "I... just watching, ma'am."

She smiled and looked out towards the yard, seeing the battle axe lying on the ground. "Tell them we're fine."

Ethan froze before he whirled into action, rushing over to the wood covered section right above the gate. He grabbed the radio and talked. "We... we're fine. The monsters are... ah... dead. Nobody injured... wait are you injured?"

She gave him a look.

"Nobody injured. Fine. Over, I mean," he said and stopped sending.

"Thanks," Kate said as she leaned against the stone railing, looking out into the night. She turned her head to look his way. "Mind if I stay out here for a while?"

"No ma'am, of course not ma'am," Ethan said quickly.

“Can you stop calling me ma’am? I’m Kate,” she said, walking past him and towards the northernmost part of the castle. The bit of the wall that overlooked the Willow River far below, and the valley beyond.

“Of course m... Kate, sure,” he said and looked to the ground, gulping before he smiled. He glanced up at her. “That was... that was sick.”

“Thanks for the fireball,” she said.

“Any time, Kate, ma’am,” he said and gave her a thumbs up. “And no fire in the castle. Promise.”

She gave him a glance before she looked at the valley she had once called her home. “Yeah, there’s plenty of that around.”

Kate looked at her bloodied hammer, most of it still covered in soot. She found a spot a little removed from the gate and sat down, feeling the cool wind brush through her hair. Fresh blood and sweat mixed with that from her time in the cavern. She looked at the distant fires, some of it still spreading, other sections seemingly calming down. The Henner Forest on the other side of the valley was near fully engulfed in flames.

She remembered the dry summer a few years back. Two, maybe three years past. The entire brigade had to embark to put out a fire in that damn forest. *We even got air support*, she thought with a smile, giggling to herself as she watched the burning valley.

“Are you okay?” Ethan asked.

She turned her head to see the man standing at the corner of the battlements. “Why wouldn’t I be,” she asked with a smile.

“The mad cackling. You sound like someone in a horror movie, losing their mind or something,” he said.

“Who knows,” she said, shaking her head lightly. “I mean look at this,” she added, turning her gaze towards the valley.

Ethan walked a few steps closer and rested his arms on the cold stone. He grinned from ear to ear. “Fucking beautiful,” he muttered.

“Who’s mad now?” she asked.

“All those fuckers are dead now. The hordes you saw. Humanity, man,” he said. “Badass.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle.

“It’s kind of nice looking, you have to admit that. Come on, even as a firefighter,” Ethan said.

“I’m not a fan, honestly,” Kate said. “It looked nice enough before.”

“Yeah... but this is a one time thing. A one time fire. Trees hundreds of years old, houses, fields, all burning down. All ashes. Fuck it all,” he said and spread his arms.

She sighed, taking in a deep breath before she closed her eyes. *Fuck it all*.

“Right, Jon asks if we need anything,” he said.

“I puked up my food again,” Kate said, more to herself. “Some coffee would be nice too.”

“Shouldn’t you sleep at some point?” Ethan asked.

“Fuck off, fire boy,” Kate said.

“Sure, ma’am,” he said and walked away, whistling a tune to himself before he talked into the radio.

She heard every word but ignored it, instead looking out onto the seas of fire. The last wild breath of humanity, against a changing tide.

Kate checked the messages from the short battle, finding some of her skills had leveled up.

‘ding’ ‘Shattering Step reaches lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Toll for the Living reaches lvl 15’

‘ding’ ‘Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 14’

‘ding’ ‘Intimidating Presence reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Frightening Growl reaches lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Bewildering Wave reaches lvl 3’

Guess I was injured after all. Interesting.

It didn’t take long until Eloise reached her, the young woman sheepishly handing her an insulated bottle and a few sandwiches. “Melusine asked if she could check on you.”

Kate glanced at her and took the food. “Thanks. If she wants to, I’m here.”

The girl smiled and nodded before rushing back.

Kate opened the bottle, calming down a little when she smelled the coffee. She took a sip and turned her attention back to the fires.

That’s a lot of work out there.

I hope some of the others made it.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 13

- Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 18

- Active: Furious Dance – lvl 16

- Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 14

- Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 4

- Active: Shattering Step – lvl 3

- Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 15

- Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 14

- **Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 14**
- **Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 4**
- **Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 6**

Support class: Silent Striker – lvl 7

- **Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 5**
- **Active: Bewildering Wave – lvl 3**
- **Active:**
- **Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 9**
- **Passive: Echo Location – lvl 1**
- **Passive:**

Status:

Vitality: 23

Endurance: 17

Perseverance: 13

Strength: 17

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Serenity: 7

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 30 Ash

Kate eventually found a bedroll herself, late in the night. Sleep came quickly, despite Logan's pained breathing and Ethan's snoring. Her ability to tune out certain sounds definitely helped. She did not dream that night.

Nor was she woken by yet another attack on their quiet castle set on the slope of Steinwacht. Instead, she blinked her eyes and opened them wide, sitting up before she looked around. Kate smelled fire and ash. She stood up quickly and rushed to the door of the armory until she remembered the previous night. The planes. The burning valley. She let go of the handle before she rubbed her eyes.

Kate heard the wind whip against the stone building, whistling sounds from above where the wooden roof remained poorly insulated. She heard the Willow River rushing past below. It was rather quiet, all things considered.

Logan, Grey, and Ethan were still asleep. She glanced at the bandage covered man but found his breathing more relaxed than when she had gone to bed. *Healing magic*, she reminded herself, shaking her head when she thought of similar burns she had seen before. Reconstructive surgery was just one part of it.

No major scars where I was injured. She hoped for the best, quietly moving to her bed again before she grabbed her pack and hammer. She still wore the same clothes, half burnt up. It didn't matter much to her. They had survived the cavern. And the night.

Slowly, she closed the door behind herself and went down the small stone stairwell. Kate listened before she activated her echo location, trying it out once more whilst steadying herself with one hand against the wall. It was freaky. She shook her head, taking slow and deep breaths before closing her eyes. She tried to calm her breathing and tried again, a clicking noise echoing down the circular stairwell, into the room, and out onto the yard.

Kate knew there was nobody below. The door was closed. Her perception quickly waned as the yard opened up but it felt almost like she could see everything before. Just a flash. A static image. But she knew that sound traveled fast. Not nearly as fast as light but at this distance, and with her reaction time, what did it matter? She tried again, but already felt a headache coming. *Some food would help. Coffee, a shower. And fresh clothes. I reek.*

Looking down at her hammer, she decided to clean the weapon as well. Even in the stairwell, she noticed the less stuffy air. *The ability is using magic. Probably can't keep that up too much with my comparatively low Wisdom.*

Kate definitely liked the additional options her Silent Striker Class provided, though it would take time for her to effectively use all of it in battle. *I just slammed those orcs with everything I had. Worked well enough though. I suppose if they're right in front of me.*

She paused in front of the exit, a wry smile coming to her face. *Already thinking of the next fight. How I can use my magic efficiently... to kill things.* She shook her head, taking in a deep breath. The air smelled of fire and ash.

You're killing monsters. To survive. And to help others survive. Others who cannot fight.

Kate opened the door and stepped out into the yard. The sun was out, she assumed it to be around ten or eleven in the morning, though the light seemed subdued. She was familiar with the effects, but had never seen it happen to this extent. Looking at her hands, she could see flakes of ash. Kate quickly turned away and moved to Bert's house. She closed the door behind herself and coughed a few times.

Celeste sat at the table, the girl considering her next move in a game of chess against old man Bert. Eloise watched them, an open book sitting on the table before her. Jon sat on the couch with Melusine, the two talking in whispers.

Light came in through the windows, no lamp or other appliance running.

It's so quiet, she thought, putting down her pack. "Morning," she said.

"Good morning!" Celeste said, looking up with a bright smile, her deep brown eyes taking in the slightly burnt up woman. "You stink!"

Kate smiled. "Yeah. I know."

"Feeling better?" Melusine asked, the woman looking back to see her. She rested her head on her hands as she slumped on the couch.

"Physically. I'm fine," Kate said.

Jon chuckled. "If that isn't a pragmatic assessment."

"A shower, fresh clothes, food and some coffee," Melusine said.

"That sounds like a good idea," Kate said.

"No, that's my prescription," the woman answered, a broad grin on her face.

Kate nodded. "Right."

The healer slapped the couch and stood up. "I'll check on the others."

The radio on the table crackled. "Status update. Boring," resounded the slightly distorted voice of Allison.

Melusine glanced at Jon.

"I'll go talk to her," the man said, grabbing his pack before he put a respirator mask on.

"Right, Kate, we added the masks to the packs. I assume these are fine?" Melusine asked.

Kate looked at the thing. "Yeah. Best that we have. It'll take a few weeks for the smoke to clear. If the forests aren't still burning."

"Far less than last night," Jon said.

"Anything new on the radio?" Kate asked.

He shook his head.

She took in a deep breath before moving up to the showers. At least the water was still running, though she quickly realized it wasn't hot. The heating was off too. *Of course. Oh well.* She shivered when the cold water touched her skin, the liquid running black when it reached the drain. Soap they still had, and she was glad for it, though the smell would not be gone for some time regardless. Not if she scrubbed for half a day, and she didn't plan to stay in the cold water longer than necessary.

Back in a fresh set of clothes, Kate put her hammer into the shower and cleaned it off. She scrubbed away the blood and ash, drying the weapon before she looked at it. *Good as new.* It impressed her, the tool really one made to withstand incredible abuse. *Lewis would like this thing,* she thought with a grin. The man regularly went on rants about various pieces of equipment they had in the force, and about how badly some of it was made.

Kate didn't feel particularly cold, despite definitely feeling the cool air in the bathroom. Without any breakfast. *Another benefit of some stat or magic? Or just placebo?* She didn't mind either way. Being more resilient to the cold would be more than welcome in the coming months. *We have a stove,* she reminded herself, quite pleased with that circumstance.

In theory, they could even move a bathtub down into the armory, heat buckets of water, and have a hot bath. *Everything is right in the world,* she thought, coming down into the living room where she already smelled coffee.

"Using our precious gas to heat up your brew," Bert murmured.

Kate took a glance at the chess board. He had double the pieces, absolutely destroying the frowning little girl. She raised a brow towards him but didn't comment.

"She's our Striker," Eloise said with a bright smile. "And the striker needs to be fueled up." She filled a mug and held it out towards Kate.

The living room was a little warmer, though Kate assumed it would become quite uncomfortable in just a few weeks. *We'll have to move furniture. Make the armory a home. It's more defensible anyway.*

She forgot the plans when she smelled the brew, taking a sip before she shuddered, the heat slightly burning her throat.

"It's hot," Eloise said.

Kate looked at her and took another sip.

"No... I mean it's really hot. Near boiling... you shouldn't drink it," she said, her eyes widening a little.

"Oh," Kate said and looked down at the steaming cup. "Right. Yeah Vitality makes your body tougher. I'm pretty sure it's just that. Don't think I would be standing h-" she stopped herself.

"There's bread, cold cuts, and cheese. Eat as much as you can. It's going to go bad soon," Eloise said, ignoring the comment with a glance to Celeste. She hesitated before looking up at Kate.

"Thanks."

"Thanks for what?" Kate asked.

Eloise looked down. "For being here. For staying. For fighting."

Kate smiled. "It's what I do."

They remained in silence for a few seconds before Bert spoke up.

"Check mate."

Celeste growled, hitting the table with her fists.

"Anger will not change the result of the game," Bert said.

“Then explain it to me,” Celeste said, focused entirely on the board.

“She gets intense like that,” Eloise said.

Kate took another sip of her coffee, making herself a simple sandwich with her free hand. “She could make it to the nationals.”

“She also gets quickly distracted again,” Eloise said. “And... I don’t think there will be nationals.”

Much less competition now, I’m sure.

She decided not to voice that thought to the present people.

“Your backpack was too damaged, but there are new ones ready,” Eloise said, putting a pack onto the table.

“Thanks. I’ll go to the ramparts,” Kate said and put the thing on.

“Oh... I... we found this for you,” Eloise said, searching through the contents of a box near the couch. “Here it is,” she said and held out a piece of leather. “You can put it onto your belt. For your hammer. It should be less annoying than using the belt itself or your backpack.”

Kate smiled, unbuckling her belt before she added the small strap. Sliding her hammer into it, she found it sturdy enough to keep the handle from hitting her leg, the metal instead angled behind herself. “Thanks. Let me know if you find more of them.”

“Will do. Bert has a lot of stuff in his... well everywhere. This place is a treasure trove,” Eloise said. “I’m sorting and categorizing everything,” she added in a whisper. “It’s a mess.”

Kate smiled. “Great. And we’ll get you more stuff, I’m sure.” She waved to the others with two sandwiches in hand, hammer strapped to her new belt addition, and her mug of hot coffee in her other hand. *A shit, the mask.* She checked her pack and found it, quickly putting the thing on before she went outside and up to the battlements.

When she came out from the old stone guard tower, she slowed, looking at the forest. Smoke still rose from distant sections up on the slope, but what made her slow was the layer of gray covering the trees. The leaves moved in serene patterns, the sound quiet even to her ears. The parking lot too was coated in a thin film of gray.

Almost like snow, she thought, breathing through her mask when she saw the corpses from the fights of the previous two nights. A thin layer of ash covered them too, but it wasn’t enough to hide what they were.

“Coming up,” she said, seeing the two men and Allison absorbed in conversation.

Jon twitched ever so slightly, turning her way before he gave her a nod.

She didn’t miss his hand going towards the crossbow leaned against the stone.

Ethan smiled. “Good morning.”

Of course he’s in a good fucking mood. With half the world burned down, she thought with a sigh, joining them below the wooden roof on the battlements. Kate tried sitting down, finding her hammer in the way before she moved it to the side. She left her mask hanging from one ear and sipped on her coffee.

“You look better,” Allison said. “Morning.”

“Morning,” she said, looking at the three of them. She glanced to the right when she saw something move in the corner of her vision. A winged creature in the far distance. It flew high. Kate lost it a few seconds later when the roof got in the way.

“There are quite a few of them out there,” Jon said.

“Wyverns, yes,” Kate said. “Pretty large too. I don’t know if it’s a good idea to fight them.”

“Yet,” Ethan said and nodded her way.

She looked at him, unsure why she wanted to reprimand him. She supposed it was confusing for her too. Every time someone had talked about fighting, self defense, or even war, the most reasonable thing was running away, avoiding all of it entirely. Nothing good would come of it. With fires, it was about saving people. From the elements, she supposed. Animal attacks were rare, but now there were monsters around. Monsters that couldn’t be reasoned with. This wasn’t a political thing. Nor an angry drunk idiot trying to start a fight. More just an infestation. And if there was an infestation, Kate called an exterminator.

She took a sip of coffee, looking at the young man. The fire magic user. *A fucking wizard. Or a mage? Sorcerer? Who the fuck cares.*

“I saw you out there yesterday,” Ethan said. “I think you can take a Wyvern.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Kate asked.

He shrugged. “Intuition.”

She chuckled. “Fucking idiot.”

He laughed.

“It doesn’t matter. Kate is not going to be here all the time. The walls help us deal with anything that can’t fly, jump four meters high, or can break through stone or a massive gate with ease,” Jon said. “But we don’t have much against flying creatures. Other than crossbows.”

“What’s your suggestion?” Kate asked.

He sighed. “The valley is on fire. Maybe we managed to remove the orcs that attacked us at night. Allison checked for tracks, and she’s rather sure the ones you killed... did not come from the same direction.” He looked northwards and to the sky. “The military... if things are as desperate as we assume. And we have to plan for the worst. Then we need to prepare for winter. And for the next years.”

Kate nodded. She had come to the same conclusion. All of them had.

“There are dozens of towns, and Falstadt. A majority of supplies must’ve burned up, been raided, or destroyed. By monsters or survivors like us. And it’s not even been a week. We have to get more. We have to assume the penicillin, morphine, hell everything that is manufactured... what’s in the storage rooms, is what we have left,” he said.

“More supply runs then,” Kate said.

“Food too. Anything canned. And we have to learn how to make traps, how to hunt, and how to become self-sufficient. There is a patch of earth in the yard. Maybe enough for us to grow potatoes, but it’ll take time,” Jon said.

“There’s a lot to think about. We need heating too,” Kate said. “Though the wood stove should be fine.”

“I’m listing everything, setting priorities,” Jon said. “You can look over it, but I’m pretty confident I can handle this. Compared to fighting monsters.”

“I’ll have a look,” Kate said. “But realistically we’ll just go into a town and get what we can before hauling the fuck out of there.”

“Of course. Especially considering the monsters,” Jon said. “And still it will help to prioritize things. I have local maps now, population statistics, town maps too, though some are older. It’ll help plan fast raids, with priorities depending on how long you can remain, how many monsters there are.”

Kate raised her brows. “Sounds like you have a plan.”

“I have seven supply runs already planned out. With changes depending on who’s available. Eloise is categorizing what we have in the castle. We have enough food already to last us a few months but I want at least three years worth of supplies. And again, I’m planning with the worst case in mind. More optimistically, all the magic and classes will provide unknown benefits,” Jon explained.

Ethan laughed. “You remind me of a friend I used to have.”

“Used to have?” Kate asked.

He shrugged. “Yeah, cops caught him when he moved a few hundred kilograms of coke. Been in jail last I heard. Random check, was just unlucky. He’s a legend either way.”

“A stain on society, if you ask me,” Jon said.

“Hey, plenty of people hooked on the stuff. Someone’s gonna deliver anyway. His coke was pure,” Ethan said.

“You don’t know what his buyers mix in,” Jon said. “Though I understand. It’s a system wide issue of policy. Legalization and preventive measures would probably be more effective.”

“I don’t think drug policy matters much at this point,” Kate said.

“Yes, you’re right. We digress. Especially with us having quite an illegal amount of opiates in our possession,” Jon said. “What we need in addition is an illegal amount of weaponry.”

“Rifles and the like? We’d have to raid a military base, or a police station,” Kate said. “Which would likely be some of the first places any survivors have raided.”

“Your hammer seems quite effective as is,” Jon said. “Rifles and ammunition would be a boon, sure, but I’m talking about heavy machinery. I don’t think Wyverns will like standard military calibers, but what I’m rather sure of is that high caliber anti air guns will reduce them to nothing.”

“How would we even find, let alone move something like that? And where would you put it?” Kate asked.

Jon looked at her with raised brows. “I’m an architect, Kate. I design contemporary living spaces. Adding military grade air defense to a medieval castle is like playing with mega blocks. We might need machinery to move things, yes, but don’t think anyone has missed how strong you already are. The same is true for Logan. It’s not a priority. But long term planning. For now we will simply reduce our time in the open, to avoid any Wyverns noticing our presence.”

“Anti air guns, and rifles,” Ethan said with a grin.

This is going beyond mere survival, Kate thought. She still took the days one by one, all the impressions and changes more than she could reasonably process in the little time she had between chaos. She smiled. *It’s good to know someone is thinking ahead. Now that we’ve found the corpses from Keilberg.*

Something to fight for. Maybe this place can be the start.

“Nobody is getting any weapons without Logan’s approval,” Jon said. “So forget about that again. Kate, let me know when you think you’re ready to go out again. If you’re willing to do so at all.”

“When I’m done eating these sandwiches,” she said.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Berserker – lvl 13

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – lvl 18***
- ***Active: Furious Dance – lvl 16***
- ***Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 14***
- ***Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 4***
- ***Active: Shattering Step – lvl 3***
- ***Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 15***
- ***Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 14***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 14***
- ***Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 4***
- ***Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 6***

Support class: Silent Striker – lvl 7

- ***Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 5***
- ***Active: Bewildering Wave – lvl 3***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 9***
- ***Passive: Echo Location – lvl 1***
- ***Passive:***

Status:

Vitality: 23

Endurance: 17

Perseverance: 13

Strength: 17

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Serenity: 7

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 31 Echoes

Kate sat on the battlements with her mask on, fed and coffee fueled. She looked at the expansive landscape, snow on the peaks of the distant mountains. Ash and smoke clung to the fields and forests of the valley. Some few spots still lingered with visible embers, others still alight with fire. She wasn't exactly an expert on forest fires, but she had seen a few predictive models for various situations, including two on the Maar Valley specifically. None had been this optimistic, though none had assumed military bombardment.

The visible damage, even from the walls of Keilberg Castle, was extensive. But Kate knew it should've been worse. The fires should've continued, for at least a few days. *Maybe there are more of those tree beings? Or maybe other creatures that dealt with the fires? Magic users? Fire mages?*

She remembered the goblin shaman. Creating flames with magic was obviously possible, why shouldn't stopping them be a thing too?

Kate looked to the east, just barely seeing the edge of the Weywater Lake, Falstadt itself hidden behind the slope. All she could see was the rising smoke, nothing different from the entire valley. She gulped. The monsters were one thing to survive. Bombardment and fires another. She shook her head, focusing on the map in her hands. A planned route. One that didn't lead to Keilberg but Grenndorf instead. A similarly sized town to the east of the castle, still along the slope of Steinwacht and by the Willow River but a little farther away than Keilberg.

It wouldn't make a massive difference by car, perhaps a twenty to twenty five minute drive. Other villages and towns were marked, so far only the closest ones to the castle. Grenndorf, Hemdorf, Wilsdorf, Neidsturz, Kahrsdorf, Ehricht, and Heersdorf. Each a little farther away than the last.

Kate could wander to each of those locations in a single day, starting at Keilberg. Not that a route like that would be particularly interesting. The forests and mountains were far more enjoyable to her. Now they were planning to loot those places. She shook her head lightly, folding the map before she put it into her pack. Grenndorf was close enough, and she knew the roads. What she didn't know about was the state of the road and that of the village itself, the monsters in the area, and what the fires had done to it all.

Only one way to find out, she thought, moving away from the battlements. Jon was right. They had to prepare for the worst, and as much as she hated it, supplies and possible survivors were more important than burning corpses in Keilberg or waiting for the military to show up. Not that she hoped for the latter at the moment, considering the hellfire they had rained down on the valley.

One step at a time, Kate.

She moved close to the walls and not out in the open, soon reaching Bert's home. Supplies, clothes, and even furniture was set up in the living room, to be moved to the armory.

"Already?" Kate asked.

"It won't help if everyone gets a cold," Melusine said.

"We're testing the stove. And the armory should be far easier to defend than the house, or both," Jon said, a few notebooks in front of him.

"The truck is ready," Ethan said as he walked in behind Kate. "We can leave whenever."

Kate looked at the clock on the wall. It was past noon. “Who else is coming?”

“Grey wants to go,” Jon said.

“He should rest, but I suppose his condition is far from critical. Logan however, has to stay,” Melusine said.

Kate nodded, grabbing her radio before she spoke into it. “Grey, we’re leaving in five minutes. Get ready.”

Jon glanced her way before he looked down at the table.

“Don’t give me that. There’s enough work to be done here,” Kate said. The experience in the cavern had pushed them all to their limits. She hadn’t known much about violence and fighting monsters, but she had seen plenty of firefighters join and leave. Some were cut out for that kind of work, others were not.

And even those that had been around for a while showed cracks, broke down, and reached their limits. Regularly. She had thought about it often. How fucked up things were. In the end she assumed she too was a little fucked up. Perhaps it was one of the reasons she had chosen her profession. *A rag tag team of fucked up idiots, running into the fires.* She grinned, reminded of her crew-mates. Rolling up on an apartment building set alight, with Highway to Hell blasting through the speakers.

Maybe Berserker isn’t the worst choice for someone like me after all, she thought, checking her pack. “Got the list, fuel, bags, packs, radios. We’ll be fine.”

“Don’t overextend yourself,” Jon said.

She smiled. “A little optimistic, are we?”

He raised his brows and smiled a wry smile. “For the long term benefit of everyone here.”

Kate touched the top bit of her hammer. “We’ll do our best. Right Ethan?”

“Right,” the man said. “Our best it is.”

She looked at him for a second before waving to the others. “We should be back before nightfall. Don’t come looking for us.”

Leaving the apartment, she saw Grey come out of the armory, his sword and plenty of knives at the ready. He wore the usual gray gear with a white filter mask covering his black skiing balaclava, a skiing helmet on top.

She wore the same sans the helmet and skiing mask.

Ethan summoned a small flame above his gloved palm. “Let’s burn some shit.”

Rag tag team of idiots, Kate thought.

“The Forest looks clear,” came Allison’s voice through the radio. The woman looked out into the yard from atop the battlements.

“Logan still burnt up?” Ethan asked.

“He’s better. But it l... looked rough. W... when Melusine... c... changed the bandages,” Grey said.

“Why do you always stutter?” Ethan asked.

“Let him stutter,” Kate said.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. Just a fucking question,” Ethan said.

“It... it’s o... okay,” Grey said, looking to the ground, one hand on the handle of his katana.

Kate grabbed her battle axe and started towards the gate. “No it’s not. The question obviously makes him uncomfortable, you’re being a dick Ethan. And Grey, you’re an adult. Stand up for yourself. If others are shit to you, you have to tell them. It’s not fine to feel like shit.”

She ripped the wooden bar out of the gate and put it aside. “Allison, we’re leaving. Come close the gate behind us,” Kate said. She looked at the two young men and sighed. “Jesus fuck, you were killing orcs yesterday, how is this bothering you so much?” Kate moved to Ethan and grabbed his shoulders. “Stop being a dickhead. Apologize to him,” she said.

He rolled his eyes. “Sorry.”

“Sorry for what, Ethan?” Kate asked.

“I’m sorry for being a dick,” he said.

She glanced at Grey.

“I...” he stuttered.

“You could accept the apology, even though he doesn’t really get it. But it’s a start,” Kate said.

“R... right. I accept,” Grey said.

“What are you doing?” Allison asked as she walked towards them, staying close to the wall.

“You’re not good at this, Kate. Way too direct. You have to manipulate people, not bash them with your hammer, but then what did I expect?”

Kate shook her head.

“You know I’m right,” Allison said, smirking at her with her head tilted a bit to the right.

“You’re a harpy,” Kate said.

“I made money selling cosplay pictures to horny nerds,” Allison said as she pulled on the gate.

Kate gave her a hand, the large wooden gate squeaking at the fast motion.

“God, you’re a fucking brute,” Allison said. “And I prefer siren,” she added with a wink.

Kate just rolled her eyes and walked towards the prepared truck. She glanced up to the sky and listened to the forest, nothing sticking out to her.

“Now go forth, fighters, and bring me back some corpses,” Allison said.

Ethan entered on the passenger side and looked at her. “Think she wants to eat the corpses?”

Kate shrugged. “Who knows. I’m not clear on what sirens do.”

“What is a siren?” Ethan asked.

“Some screeching sea monster woman, I think,” Kate said as she turned the key. She checked behind to see Grey sitting between the gas canisters and empty packs, a loaded crossbow on his lap.

“She’s kind of hot,” Ethan said, glancing back towards the battlements.

“Your call,” Kate said in a dry tone before she started driving. “Do you mind Rock?”

“You’re the driver. Your music,” Ethan said, summoning a small flame before he made it vanish.

Kate gave him a look but didn’t comment on it. The sooner he learned to handle his tools, the better. She couldn’t exactly take away his magic. *Let’s see what else you had, Lars.*

The drive was rather uneventful, Kate taking the route through the forests as she had discussed with Jon. The trees would help hide them from any flying beasts. Anything else they just had to deal with. They had considered walking, but the large loading area and speed of the truck won out in the argument, despite possible roadblocks from fallen trees or debris. Many of the monsters they had spotted so far didn’t exactly seem capable of keeping up with a car, let alone breaking through a metal door.

More supplies for less time. At least that was the hope. Kate parked the truck backwards and between a set of trees, trying to hide it as best she could. She turned off the radio and then the car, rolling the window down a few centimeters before she listened.

“What are you doing?” Ethan asked.

She ignored him. “Nothing is coming towards us,” she said before she rolled the window down more. Kate turned on her echo location and clicked her tongue. All she could see was the glimpse of a forest. She turned it off again, shaking her head a little to get rid of the strange sensation.

“You okay? You don’t seem okay,” Ethan said.

“Sound magic, remember?” she asked. “And echo location.”

“Oh, right. What’s the echo thing?” he said as Kate opened the door.

She walked to the back and repeated her findings to Grey, in a whisper. “It’s what bats do to know where they’re going,” Kate said as she grabbed four large empty sport bags.

“I’m not sure I get what you mean,” Ethan said as he got out of the car.

“I’ll explain some other time, we stop the talk now. There will probably be monsters nearby,” she said.

“I don’t see any,” Grey said.

Kate saw him crouching behind a tree right next to the concrete road that led into Grenndorf. He looked through binoculars, slightly leaning past the tree.

“There are quite a few corpses. Not just human. Orcs, goblins, larger things too,” he said. “I can’t see anything that is moving.”

“Might attract other things, let’s move, quietly. Ethan you wait with your fire until we get attacked *and* can’t handle them quietly,” she said.

He shrugged. “How am I supposed to know if we’re being overwhelmed?”

“When I’m bleeding or on the ground,” Kate said and started to move into the forest.

“What if I’m bleeding or on the ground?” Ethan murmured under his breath.

She heard him but chose to ignore the man, instead focusing on her surroundings and the sounds of the forest. She soon managed to tune out the unimportant rustling of leaves, still glancing up at the occasional bird call. For all she knew the calls could come from a monster type she hadn’t encountered before.

Occasionally, she stopped and clicked with her tongue, her echo location giving her a glimpse of the surroundings. It still felt somewhat strange and disorienting but Kate found the added depth to her perception more welcome than detrimental.

Mostly she just perceived the dense forest of firs, occasionally spotting a distorted squirrel or bird, though either she had already heard long before. Slowly they crept up on the settlement, the outlines of houses soon visible through the trees. Kate clicked her tongue when they were a few hundred meters away from the closest house. She saw an old wood cabin with small windows towards the forest. Around her, she saw bushes and trees. And something that looked like a shoe. She shook her head, raising her fist, turning her head to look at the sneaker she would’ve missed without her echo location.

The loud steps of her companions ceased.

Kate took in a deep breath, reorienting herself. Looking through the underbrush, she could see an herb garden, a small slide, a sandbox with a toy excavator built onto its side. She could only see the top of the slide from here, but with the added bits from her spell, she managed to get a somewhat full picture, as disorienting as it was.

Following the trail that the discarded shoe left, she quickly found two dead humans lying between a few dense bushes, arrows sticking out of their backs. A woman, maybe in her thirties, holding on to a man, his left leg horribly twisted. Their eyes were open.

Kate saw that the woman had a blue blouse on, the man wearing khaki pants, both stained with dried blood. They smelled of decay.

She crouched down and started pulling out the arrows, one by one, hooked metal moving past flesh. She turned the woman around and closed her eyes, moving the pale hands onto her stomach. She repeated the same for the man. Standing, she looked at the two. Quiet. Already forgotten. She took in a deep breath, pulling the hammer out from the leather strap. Kate felt its weight, clicking her tongue again. The image of the two dead was clear as she wasn’t moving. More visceral and real, the added depth providing another dimension to the silent scene.

She could feel bile rising up in her mouth, steadying herself against a nearby tree as she took in a deep breath.

Grey gestured with a thumb, up then down. His brows rose up, vanishing below his balaclava.

She nodded, gesturing with her hand. She needed a minute, hearing her own heartbeat pick up. She heard Ethan’s doing the same. Grey’s stayed steady.

Her breathing calmed before she gave the two waiting men a thumbs up, seeing Ethan staring at the corpses.

She closed her eyes and sighed. “Sorry,” she said, more confused than anything.

Neither of them commented, for which she was thankful.

Didn’t think I could be impacted by corpses in an entirely new way of perception. Fun.

She continued onward and towards the small house, now seeing more buildings past the remaining trees. The pointy top of a church was visible behind a set of more modern stone buildings, the clock showing fifteen past one. Various colors adorned the apartment houses, each three stories high and lining the main road that led into and through Grenndorf. A bakery was visible across the street, the large loaf of plastic bread no longer attached to its intended metal clasp. Instead it lay strewn between decaying corpses, blood covered like the rest of the quiet road.

Kate moved silently past the slide and sandbox, to a stone building on her left and adjacent to the main road. She crouched down and listened, her two companions close behind her. "Faint steps from farther down the road. Growling. Something biting into flesh," she said and closed her eyes. Kate moved her head past the side of the building and looked.

There was a lot.

Corpses. Humans. Orcs. Goblins. Four entire ogres. Two dead Wyverns. One more she heard was still alive, behind a set of buildings, the sound of its large maw biting down into flesh and bone. Wolves too, dead and alive. The growls she had heard. Kate clicked her tongue, her echo location adding a little more depth to the image, though the prone corpses quickly became a single form within the strange perception.

'ding' 'Echo Location reaches lvl 2'

She took a deep breath. "One Wyvern, feeding," she said and took out the folded up map from her jacket. Using the compass from her pack, she turned the map until it seemed right. "We're here?"

Grey nodded. "I think so."

"The Wyvern is here," she said and pointed at a set of buildings. "Large wolves in this direction," she said and moved her finger. "Corpses all over. No idea who fought whom. Doesn't matter." She put her finger down. "Pharmacy and general store are both to our right. We can cross behind the wooden cabin, there are plenty of bodies there."

"What about the police station?" Grey asked, nodding towards the map.

"We'd have to circle half the town," Kate said. "Let's first do these two. Objections?"

They both shook their heads.

"Great. Let's stay hidden and quiet. They have enough to eat," she said, pushing away from the stone wall and sneaking towards the wooden house. Kate moved around it and checked again, her echo location scanning the street. It took a few seconds for her to reorient herself. She found it helped to pick a spot and stare at it.

The road was littered with bodies. She only got a glimpse of a Wyvern wing this time, the distant wolves barely registering by now. She motioned to the others and crossed the road in silence, still listening for anything that stood out.

With quick steps, they rushed past more houses, up the slope and towards where the pharmacy was located. Grenndorf had been untouched by the air strikes it seemed, little to no smoke rising. Kate soon reached the building in question, finding the entrance closed and locked. She circled the rather small one story concrete block, finding all of the windows closed as well.

Should've brought my crowbar, she thought, standing at the back of the building, a set of cabins farther up the slope and behind the pharmacy. Kate stepped back and walked upwards as Grey and Ethan checked the window. She soon saw the top of the building where she spotted a hatch. Closed

but with a handle. Kate smiled, ready to give it a shot when her eyes moved past the pharmacy and over the town. She spotted the yellow wings of the Wyvern in the distance, more buildings beyond, then a patch of forest that led down into the valley.

Farther back she could see the Weywater Lake. And before it stood Falstadt. A city of nearly eighty thousand people, stretching along the shore and out into the valley, train tracks moving out from the arched main station. She saw smoke rise from all over, glowing flames visible in hundreds of spots, even from this distance. Bursts of fire erupted on occasion, just flashes of light to Kate, but she knew each explosion was worse than most she had seen.

Entire buildings were missing, others reduced to blackened hollow frames, as if they were mere stumps of burned down trees. Few windows reflected any of the weak sunlight, sections of the city entirely flattened and coated in a hue of black. Kate stared in silence, feeling her lips quiver before she bent down and retched up her lunch.

She fell back on her ass and closed her eyes, tears welling up in her eyes as she tried and failed to put herself back together.

Grey was by her side an instant later, touching the hilt of his blade as he looked around.

“What’s going on?” Ethan said as he walked up, his boots rustling through the autumn leaves.

Kate’s vision blurred as she stared at the ground, breathing faster.

“Oh shit. Holy fuck, that’s insane,” Ethan exclaimed, looking towards the lake.

“You should use your magic,” Grey said.

Kate heard him and nodded slowly, activating Mindless Ferocity. Immediately, she could feel her body calm down a little. Her thoughts focused. She rubbed at her eyes and took in a sharp breath. “Fuck,” she said through gritted teeth.

She closed her eyes and focused on slowing her breathing for a while. Then she sighed and stood up. Checking for the Wyvern, she ran at the building and jumped, Hunting Leap bringing her to the roof. She landed, nearly stumbling before she crouched. A moment later, she was at the latch. *Closed from the inside*, she thought, grabbed on, and pulled. She heard a slight groaning sound of bending metal before the lock gave in.

Kate listened before she climbed down into the small storage room below, the part of her that wanted to stare at the burning city silenced as she focused on the task at hand.

She had known. But seeing it herself was different. And she knew it wasn’t the time to deal with it. Nor was there anything she could feasibly do.

We shall prevail.

The words felt hollow in her mind, subdued and meaningless as she opened the window from the inside, waving for the others to come inside with all the empty bags.

Her magic deactivated, having fulfilled its purpose. A part of her wished that her dad was there right then. He always knew what to say.

She stood in the small pharmacy and sighed, reminded somehow of a strange thing he had once told her.

*One step at a time, Kate. But when your stomach hurts from eating too much Nutella, you stop.
Don't be fucking stupid.*

She hit the wall with her back and slid down, laughing and crying at the same time as she tried to keep the sound down.

Grey closed the window behind himself, Ethan sitting down next to her.

He found her hand and held it tightly.

Chapter 32 Forward

Kate shivered. She felt cold. Her hand was sweaty, still held tightly by the young man sitting next to her.

Grey had started filling the bags in silence.

She heard them breathe, heard the wind outside push against the windows. Her eyes were dry. Her face hurt.

“Doing better?” Ethan asked. He gave her a smug look.

She removed her hand out of his. “Fuck off,” she said. “And thanks.”

“Of course, ma’am,” he said and patted her shoulder.

Kate saw him stare at the opposite wall.

He glanced down, opening his mouth before he shook his head and grabbed one of the bags.

Kate rubbed her eyes again and blinked. *World’s in the shitter. Focus. You’re the firefighter, not them. Get the fuck up.* She stood up and growled, not using her magic. She shook her head. “Like a fucking warzone. Think anyone survived that?”

Grey just glanced her way but avoided eye contact.

Ethan shrugged. “Who knows.”

“Some must’ve,” Kate said. “Before being eaten by monsters,” she added, taking one of the bags too. “Sorry if I’m being too dark.”

“Falstadt is pretty dark now too,” Ethan said.

Grey chuckled, nearly choking at the attempt to stop himself.

Kate grinned. “Right. Ragtag team of idiots.”

Ethan raised his brows, some of his red hair jutting out from the ski mask.

She shooed him away. “Supplies. Let’s empty this place before some General decides to nuke this damned village.”

They worked in relative silence, all three of them filling several large sports bags with all sorts of medical supplies. Kate even found oxygen tanks in the small storage room at the back. They left another note and a few essential medical supplies, telling survivors to seek Keilberg Castle. It took them a while to fill everything, the bags nearly bursting when they left again through the window. Kate made sure to listen to their surroundings, focusing on the task at hand and forcing herself to ignore the distant smoke rising above Falstadt.

She kept an ear out for the Wyvern especially, occasionally using her echo location to check on their surroundings. Each use was accompanied by a slight bout of nausea, nothing worse than a little bit of smoke poisoning.

They reached the car ten minutes later without an incident, Kate putting the supplies onto the loading area.

“Shouldn’t we hide everything first? Someone might steal the car,” Ethan said.

“I have the keys,” Kate said.

“I know... people who could hotwire a car. It’s not... it’s supposedly not that hard,” Ethan said.

Kate looked at him and raised her brows. “Sure. People. That you know. I’d still prefer to have the stuff on here, in case we need to leave quickly. Plus if someone takes these medical supplies, they might need them more than we do.”

“Right,” Ethan said.

“We are technically stealing all of this,” Kate said while looking at him.

“More just looting or raiding,” Grey interjected.

“I don’t disagree. I’m just saying, nobody really owns this stuff anymore,” Kate said. “Now let’s go get the rest. Then we’ll try to go to the Police station.”

Another trip and a lot of full bags later, they had emptied the entire pharmacy. Twenty one bags full of medical supplies, though some of it wasn’t exactly immediately useful. But Kate knew a time would come where they’d be more than happy to have taken shampoo and deodorant with them as well. The loading area of the truck was half full by now, Kate glad they had taken so many bags with them.

When they returned towards the northwestern part of Grenndorf, Kate heard a screech resound from the center of town. She signaled to the others but it seemed they had heard it too.

Putting down her numerous empty bags, Kate grabbed her hammer and glanced around the side of a nearby house. She spotted the yellow wings of the Wyvern. It flew up and landed on the main road. *Can’t go back that way then.* She did a double take before grabbing her binoculars from her pack. A closer look showed the creature bite down onto a small green figure, the large head whipping from side to side before a body was ripped in half by the motion. Kate saw another creature rush at the Wyvern. *A goblin?*

She watched the small green skinned being run, then jump up, the glint of a blade visible as it stabbed down into the screeching Wyvern’s neck. Kate watched with raised brows. *What in the...*

The winged yellow being stumbled to the side and hit the stone wall of a small building, the impact audible even at this distance. Bits and pieces of the goblin were all that remained on the Wyvern’s neck, the scales now showing spots of dark blood.

Kate saw it shake its head before it resumed its meal, relocated now to the main road that led through the town. The wolves she had spotted before were gone. She put away her binoculars and gestured to the others.

“Was that a goblin?” Grey asked.

“I think so, yes,” Kate answered as she moved ahead, hammer fastened to her belt and bags in her hands. She moved past a set of buildings, already seeing the supposed station in the distance. Kate walked at a brisk pace, the three of them glancing past the buildings and into the forest, listening before they rushed through the town with as little noise as they could manage.

Kate came to a stop near the back entrance of the Police station, the building a three story concrete block with steel bars in front of the windows. She checked the door but found it locked.

“Why would goblins attack a Wyvern?” Grey asked in a whisper. “They’ve been afraid of even us. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Maybe they have magic like Kate’s?” Ethan said.

“A Berserker Class you mean?” Grey said, considering for a moment before Kate interrupted them.

“Strange goblins or not. If they attack us, we kill them. Now focus on why we’re here,” she said, moving around the block and up the slight slope before she checked the road ahead. Her tongue clicked, a flash of the surrounding roads and buildings coming to her mind. Corpses littered the ground.

She could see several dozen near the station entrance. More orcs and ogres, interspersed by goblins and humans. Some of the monsters had limbs missing, heads entirely caved in. There were bullet holes. A lot of them. The main double doors to the station were slightly ajar.

She moved up, ignoring the bodies as best she could, hearing the others follow behind. She got her hammer and a headlamp. Kate turned around when she heard a clicking sound, Ethan crouching near a uniformed body with a pistol in his hand.

The man checked the magazine and shook his head. “Empty.” He opened one of their bags and put the firearm inside.

Kate glanced up towards the edge of the forest where she saw movement from the corner of her vision. Nothing was there. Leaves moved in the wind, making her unsure if that was all she had seen. “Let’s go inside before more monsters show up,” she said and quietly entered the building. The smell hit her instantly. Blood and decay. Much worse than outside. She was glad for their filter masks. Already, she heard slight tapping sounds from somewhere up ahead, followed by quiet grunts.

Grey and Ethan entered behind her, the latter closing the door just as Kate turned on her headlamp. She gripped her hammer, seeing the carnage within. A corridor led deeper into the station, doors on either side wide open. Bodies both human and monster lay on the floor, blood and guts on some of the walls, most of it already dried.

She heard Ethan gulp, the other two turning on their lamps as well. “Something moving ahead. It’s not coming closer,” she whispered, her voice slightly muffled through the mask. Kate heard Grey unsheathe his sword. Ethan stepped to the back with the two close combat fighters taking the lead.

Kate clicked her tongue and saw a similar picture in the corridors ahead. Corpses all over.

She moved into one of the rooms at random, finding a few officers on the ground, all of them dead, bullet holes in the walls and doors. Their pistols remained, suggesting that nobody had looted this place yet or that the monsters who attacked had not considered taking the guns. *Did they not understand how they work? Or were they all killed or injured in the attack? Maybe someone got out.*

“Kate,” Grey whispered, his lamp shining onto a map on the wall. It showed the setup of the station, including escape routes in case of a fire.

“There in a minute,” she said, figuring out how to remove the magazine from one of the pistols. These guns still had a few bullets. “Does either of you know which one the safety is?”

Ethan crouched down next to her and moved his bags onto the ground. He opened one of them in silence and took out the gun he had found before. Removing the magazine, he checked the chamber

to make sure there was no bullet left inside, then he pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He fiddled with a few of the other mechanisms before he gave up. “No idea.”

Kate removed the magazines and checked the chambers like he had before she put them into her bag.

“Shouldn’t we use them?” Ethan asked.

“And alert everything in however far a gunshot can be heard?” Kate asked.

He raised his brows. “Is that really an issue when we’re about to die?”

She shrugged. “Maybe not. But I don’t trust any of us with a gun. I’d rather have you throw fireballs, which you have trained, than have you shoot a handgun from behind me. While fighting.”

He considered and finally nodded. “Fair, I guess. Still not sure it’s the best idea.”

“Take it then. If you have nothing else left, use them,” Kate said and handed over the sports bag. “Last resort,” she added and gave him a long look.

“Last resort,” Ethan said, shouldering the pack with his others.

She stood up and moved over to Grey who still looked at the plan. There were plenty of offices, a break room, meeting rooms, nothing particularly interesting to them. She took out the piece of paper, smiling when she found the plans of the other floors below.

Above were more offices, but in the cellar below were a few rooms labeled with *storage*.

“Found keys,” Ethan said, shaking the set in his hand before he put them into his jacket.

More robbing of the dead, Kate thought, shaking her head to get rid of the sickly feeling. These people were gone. They had no use for their keys and guns. If anything, they’d welcome someone else using it all to fight back against the monsters.

“Cellar?” Grey asked.

“Yeah,” she said and looked at the ground floor map again. “Sounds like something is alive in this direction.” She pointed at a set of meeting rooms ahead and to the right.

“Should we find out what it is?” Grey asked. “Could be humans.”

“Doesn’t sound human,” Kate said, considering for a moment. She didn’t like the idea of knowing that something else was in here with them. “It’s on the way to the stairwell.”

“Might be surviving monsters,” Ethan said. “Let’s go kill it then, before we go down.” His expression wasn’t quite as confident as his words implied.

She prepared her hammer and checked the knives on her belt, activating *Mindless Ferocity*. “Quiet now. And fast. We don’t have a healer.”

Kate moved ahead, stepping over the corpses in the way. She tried not to slip on any of the blood. Most of it was dry but there were large puddles remaining here and there, the smell of it strong and permeating. Around the corner and towards the next corridor, she couldn’t even find a free spot to stand on the floor, instead stepping onto a dead orc before she moved on and around yet another corner.

The sounds were closer now. She could pinpoint them to an open door ahead, the stairwell beyond. Sneaking was difficult with all the bodies and blood, Kate hearing not only the strange groans from

the creature but the breathing and stumbling of her allies. When she took another step, the sole of her boot squeaked. She froze, hearing the creature ahead make a higher pitched sound.

She barely had time to react, seeing a goblin rush out of the room and towards her, nearly moving on all fours before it jumped. Kate moved faster, catching the creature in mid air with her hammer before it was slammed against the wall. More noises came from ahead but she kept her focus on the goblin. One of its arms seemed broken, blood all over its body as it stood up again. It growled, blue eyes staring at her as its mouth opened.

Again, she struck it with her hammer, this time hitting its head. She watched it hit the ground in a split second, bits of its skull missing, and yet it still tried to stand up. Two more goblins were rushing up from the stairwell, both stumbling over the corpses with movements far faster than any goblin she had ever seen.

Kate stepped to the side and stomped down, Shattering Step activating before the goblin's head was turned to mush. The ground shook slightly as a fireball flashed past, exploding on the chest of a goblin.

The creature slowed for a moment, smoke rising from its burnt chest. Bones were visible, its lower jaw gone but it kept running forward.

Grey put his blade in its sheath before he sliced upward, the jumping goblin cut vertically in two, dark blood splattering onto his jacket.

Kate jabbed the last creature with her hammer but it hardly slowed down. She struck again, hearing a crack. A kick pushed the goblin back ever so slightly before the spike of her hammer cut into its head. She watched with wide eyes as the creature struggled to get closer, its head stuck to her hammer. "More steps from ahead," she said, unsheathing one of her knives before she slammed it into the monster's throat. This time, it died.

"That's an officer," Ethan said.

She ripped her hammer out of the corpse and saw the stumbling man. The light of their lamps reflected off his ice like blue eyes. He took two steps and hit the wall with his shoulder, one of his legs not quite at the right angle. Deep cuts showed on his torso. And he held a rifle.

"Cover!" Kate shouted when she saw him raise the gun, reckless charge activating as she aimed for an open door adjacent to the corridor. She hit the edge of the door frame, hearing a crack before she moved into the room and pressed her back against the wall. The man fired.

Kate sank down and covered her head, her ears instantly ringing from the continuous gunshots. The firing stopped after a few seconds but her ears still rang, a pounding in her head. She forced herself to stand up. Not knowing if the others were alive, she glanced around the corner and saw the uniformed man drop the magazine from his rifle. She moved.

Three quick steps and she was there, striking right into his damaged chest with her hammer. She heard the cracks and let go with her left hand, grabbing the rifle before she pulled. Her brows rose when the man held on, her entire strength needed to pull the weapon away, half his arm coming with it. He kicked forward.

Kate stumbled back from the impact, all the air pushed out of her lungs as her eyes blurred slightly. She went down to one knee and coughed, throwing aside the rifle. *What kind of-* He ran towards her when a ball of fire zipped past and exploded on his face.

Half his head was gone but he kept going.

Kate dodged to the left, the remains of the man moving forward and past. She struck his right leg with her hammer, breaking bone. He stumbled and fell. She broke what was left of his left leg. He swung with his arms, ripping away a piece of leather armor from a dead orc. Kate stepped behind him and raised her hammer, using all her strength, she brought the metal down upon his skull. Bits and pieces of bone and blood splattered to the side.

He stopped moving.

She looked up as her ears popped, some of the damage undone.

“... that was loud,” Ethan said. “Did he get anyone?”

Grey stepped out from behind a filing cabinet. “No. His aim wasn’t the best. Fully automatic too. I don’t think you’re supposed to do that.” He rubbed his ears.

“So much for alerting monsters in the area,” Ethan said. “What should we do?”

Kate looked at the dead officer before she checked the blinking notifications.

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

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

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Undead Human]’

There were a few more notifications but she ignored them for now.

“They’re undead,” Kate said, immediately glancing at all the bodies around them.

“Right... shit,” Grey said, his sword at the ready as he stepped closer to Kate.

“Was anyone bitten?” Ethan asked.

“Undead aren’t zombies,” Grey said.

“We don’t know how they work,” Kate said. “Try not to get injured either way.”

“So what do we do? Leave before anything comes in response to the shots or stay and search the place?” Grey asked, both men looking at Kate.

Her spell had worn off by now, adrenaline still in her body. *I just killed a man. No. Undead.* She focused on her breathing, taking a few seconds before she nodded. “Too many corpses here. We don’t know if and when they become undead. Those three were all that attacked. Let’s use the time we have to get what we can, before they become a problem. Then we check the surroundings and leave through the back entrance if possible. Ethan, you have the keys?”

“Several sets,” the man said.

“Then let’s move,” she said and stepped down towards the cellar.

Chapter 33 Cellar

Kate shined her headlamp down the stairwell, finding more corpses in the way, though fewer than on the ground floor. She listened. There were faint noises in the distance though too muffled to be inside the building. "I think there are monsters outside, but I can't tell how far away or what kind," she whispered.

Ethan grabbed the rifle from the ground and put it into one of his bags.

"Nothing down here. At least nothing I can hear," Kate said.

The cellar consisted of a main corridor with two forks and eight rooms in total. Plus one additional corridor that led to the back exit, though a closed door blocked it off at the moment. The power was out in the station, leaving the windowless cellar near entirely dark.

Kate clicked her tongue and found a few more corpses with her echo location. She deactivated the magic and motioned to the upcoming fork. One way went left, the other right, with the main corridor continuing down the middle. She checked around the corner with Grey taking the other side. "Clear," she whispered.

"Clear," he copied.

"What are we, some kind of special forces unit?" Ethan asked, the eye-roll downright audible.

"There's a reason they do this," Kate said.

"Communication makes sense," Grey said. "I did plenty of raids."

"Raids? Like police raids of illegal parties? I thought you did IT or something," Ethan said.

"I d... did. I studied. It doesn't m... matter," Grey said.

"The storage rooms are down your hallway, let's check those first," Kate said, walking past the flustered Grey with her hammer in hand.

"Right," Ethan said, glancing behind for a moment before he followed. "You said undead. What did you mean when you said the others could become a problem?"

"It means corpses could become undead. Their eyes looked strange. Too intense. Sometimes there are necromancer Classes or necromancy where you can summon skeletons or take corpses, then turn them into undead. Usually unthinking and stupid. The ones we just fought seemed quite stupid too but the policeman could still use his weapon, which means they at least retain some of their abilities from before dying," Grey said. "They're stronger too."

"Not necessarily," Kate said as she reached the end of the corridor and put down her bags. She prepared her hammer and nodded towards the heavy locked door made of steel.

Ethan rushed towards it and started trying keys.

"What do you mean?" Grey asked, looking her way.

"Adrenaline alone can make you do insane things. If you remove things like pain reception, fear, self preservation, and switch up some instincts, you get a scary combination," she said.

“Like you?” Ethan said, glancing at her with a grin.

“Find the key, fire boy,” she said before addressing Grey. “Either way, they’re strong. Against humans without a Class or higher Strength and Vitality, I don’t know how they could be stopped. Without modern weapons at least.”

“It’s weird that only those three were undead. I wonder if there is someone around that raised them, or if it’s a natural occurrence,” Grey said.

“Let’s just hope nothing else turns while we’re here,” Kate said. *There were a lot of corpses out in the streets. And those two goblins did attack the Wývern.* “At least they seem to attack other monsters too, which means we could make an escape in the worst case.”

“We can also test if the undead thing is something local to this town. There were plenty of corpses left in front of the castle,” Grey said.

Shit. Kate opened her eyes wide.

“Oh,” Grey uttered.

“Not sure if they’re smart enough to climb the walls, or dodge bolts. Don’t shit your pants,” Ethan said. “Got it.” The lock clicked before he stepped to the side. “Hammer.”

Kate held her weapon with both hands, standing next to Ethan as he opened the door. Nothing rushed out and no trap activated. She glanced into the room and scratched her cheek. “Right. Guns. Lots of guns.”

“That’s from the Matrix,” Grey said.

“Don’t explain jokes and references,” Kate said as she shouldered her empty bags. “Just... let them be.”

Grey looked down. “S... sorry.”

“Don’t apologize either,” she said, shining her light into the room. It was rather small.

Ethan whistled when he saw the row of rifles on the opposite wall. He slapped a hand over his mouth when he realized how loud the noise was. “Holy shit.” He glanced behind himself to see Grey enter with his bags. “Are you... sure we can just... take this stuff?”

“They’re dead, Ethan,” Kate said and took one of the rifles. It was a dark gray color, near black. A long shoulder piece and a very long barrel. The added scope made her think it was a sniper rifle of sorts. The thing just barely fit into the longest bag she had. There were two of them. She packed them both.

Grey looked at one of the other rifles, the same model the undead had used. It was quite a bit smaller, two handles and a shoulder piece, equipped with a scope as well and colored in gray. There were five of those in addition to the one from the undead. “Should we take all of them?”

“If there’s space, yes,” Kate said and started to pack them.

The others did so too, packing everything they found in the room. There were batons, cans of what they assumed to be pepper spray, multitools, cleaning kits, and five pistols in addition to the three they had found so far.

“More magazines,” Grey said as he looked at an open box. He closed it and put the thing into one of his bags.

“What about ammo?” Kate asked.

“In here maybe?” Ethan said, standing in front of a large metal locker in the corner of the room. It was higher than Ethan and bolted to the wall and floor. “Can’t find the key for this one though.”

Kate walked over, ready to use her hammer. She grabbed the handle and pulled. *Hmm*. She put her left leg against the wall behind and pulled with both hands. Something bent and broke, the metal door of the locker ripped open with a screeching sound. “There you go,” she murmured, looking at the cases of ammo, labeled with what she assumed to be the caliber. She grabbed a bag and started to move the cases.

“You just... ripped it open,” Ethan murmured.

“Strength,” Kate said.

“Maybe I should rethink my magic stuff,” the fire mage said.

“Too late now,” Grey said. “Say that again when you can summon meteors from the skies.”

“Y... you think I’ll be able to do that?” Ethan asked.

Grey shrugged. “No way to find out but getting stronger. Just focus on your main stats.”

“Do we have everything?” Kate asked a few minutes later.

“I think so,” Ethan said.

“Then let’s check the next room,” Kate said before moving on. She read the rest of the messages in the corner of her vision while listening for noises.

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 19’

‘ding’ ‘Shattering Step reaches lvl 4’

‘ding’ ‘Toll for the Living reaches lvl 16’

‘ding’ ‘Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 15’

‘ding’ ‘Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 15’

‘ding’ ‘Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 10’

‘ding’ ‘Echo Location reaches lvl 3’

No Class levels from that fight. Next one I suppose, she thought as Ethan unlocked the next door in the corridor. She raised a finger to her mouth and listened. Steps and growls. Something had entered the station on the ground floor. “Open,” she said in a whisper, checking the room with her hammer and headlamp before she motioned the others inside.

Kate closed the door behind herself and pointed at Ethan. “Lock it again, we’re not alone anymore in the station.”

“What did you hear?” Grey whispered.

“You’re blinding me,” Ethan said to the man.

Grey moved his headlamp to the side, illuminating much of the larger room. Steel grating split the room in two, the other side packed with boxes and shelves.

Ethan locked the door. “Hear what came?”

“No idea,” Kate said, setting down her bags. She was glad for her increased strength. The sound of the ammo bag being set down made her raise her brows. “We’ll deal with it when we leave.”

“If we just wait, it might leave on its own,” Grey said. “I think this is an evidence room. I can see more guns.”

Ethan walked to the grated door and started trying keys again, finding the right one after a minute.

Kate stood next to the entrance with her hammer in hand, her right ear to the wall and her other one held closed. Other than a few snarls and fast steps, she couldn’t hear anything. Whatever it was, it was moving around. *More than one.*

“More than one thing, moving around fast,” Kate whispered when she joined the others.

“Holy shit,” Ethan said in a whisper, an open bag on the shelf in front of him. He dipped his finger into the white powder and tasted it. “Oh, Jesus thine name is holy.”

“We’re not taking that,” Kate said.

“What do you mean, we’re not taking that? There’s weed too. You took games and books, let’s take this stuff too. It’s fun,” he said.

“It’s dangerous,” Kate said, hearing closer noises now, even from the distance to the door.

Ethan considered as he closed the bag. “Dangerous? Like the morphine we have in the trunk? Or the sleeping pills? Just because this stuff is illegal doesn’t mean it’s any worse than what’s sold over the counter. Compromise, we take it and let Melusine decide. I’m not an addict, Kate, but a joint here and there hasn’t killed anyone. And I bet your killing machine mode would go into overdrive if you sniffed a bit of this stuff beforehand.”

“Being a Berserker is enough. I don’t need to be a coked up Berserker,” Kate said. The suggestion was ridiculous but she couldn’t exactly find a logical fault in it. They were fighting magical monsters, with their lives on the line. Drugs weren’t high on the list of her worries. “Pack it.”

Ethan grinned and did as she asked, the trio looking through the boxes and weapons.

Everything useful went into the bags, the sounds outside now more numerous, some closer.

“Quicken the pace,” Kate whispered.

“Don’t touch that,” Ethan said, a hand on Grey’s arm. “I think that’s a self made explosive. You don’t want to find out how well the person knew their business.”

Kate raised a brow at the man’s knowledge but she supposed it was useful in their situation. To think the pyromancer throwing around fireballs was the one warning them about explosives safety.

“We could use guns to deal with the monsters,” Ethan said.

“If they’re undead, I don’t think it’ll be very effective. After what we’ve seen,” Grey said. “Maybe if you hit their head, but even then, I don’t know.”

“We don’t have time. And none of us know how to use them. Just pack everything useful, then we wait and see what they do. If they’re even undead,” she said.

All their bags full, Kate motioned the others to shut up as she listened. *Sniffing sounds. Snarls. Uneven steps. Nothing tearing into flesh. They’re not eating.*

Something scratched against the door.

Kate readied her hammer, Grey held the handle of his sheathed sword, Ethan standing at the back, glancing to the side before he grabbed a battered riot shield from the ground.

They stayed silent, their headlamps shining towards the door. The scratching became louder. *Might be the light they’re reacting to.*

Something heavy hit the door, the frame rattling slightly.

Kate motioned the others to get out of the way.

Another impact. And a third. One of the hinges bent slightly.

I’m not the only one with Strength enhancements.

Kate activated Mindless Ferocity, her hands gripping her hammer as she crouched slightly.

The door flung open, hitting the wall with one hinge ripped away.

Too many, she thought and activated Furious Dance.

Kate’s world narrowed as she rushed forward, her hammer striking the large wolf that had broken through the door and rushed her way. Its body showed cuts, a part of its head already missing. The impact ripped away another bit. Flame flew past and exploded in the hallway, goblins set aflame as flickering light reflected off blue eyes.

She struck the ground, Shattering Step shaking the stone before Kate swung her hammer into the massive wolf two more times, breaking its spine and skull until it stopped moving, then she turned towards the green creatures, one already rushing her way. She used her whole body to swing her hammer in a horizontal strike, the undead jumping at the last moment as she had expected. The heavy strike burst its head, blood splattering against her chest and the wall to her left, the rest of its body falling to the ground. She heard slicing noises from the blade of her ally, more fire exploding as she rushed into the hallway.

A large wolf jumped her way. She rushed towards it, hammer held towards its open maw. The two impacted each other in a tumble. Its jaw was ripped open, the hammer stuck halfway inside its head before its weight won out, toppling Kate below.

She could feel the claws cutting into her shoulders as she unsheathed one of her knives, slamming it into the head of the wolf with a sickening crunch. Once, twice, three times, then into its side where she stabbed and pulled, leaving furrows of bleeding gashes, the creature unable to bite at her with the hammer stuck in its maw, the claws digging deeper with blood and ooze dripping onto her face, until it finally stopped moving. She spit out blood, seeing a goblin with blue eyes move to the side of her, a dagger in its hand slashing down towards her face.

Hunting Leap activated, her boots hitting the ground under the wolf before both herself and the large furry corpse were moved backwards, the goblin cutting into the wolf instead of her.

Kate hit the ground hard, pushing off the heavy corpse with a groan. Her vision focused as she got up and readjusted her headlamp. She grabbed for the hammer still stuck inside of the wolf's head when the goblin reached her. Dodging back, she unsheathed a knife of her own. She tried to avoid the creature until she hit the back wall of the corridor. A heavy kick slowed the creature for a moment but it pushed on relentlessly and stabbed its dagger into her leg.

She growled, not using her magic. The goblin struck again but not before she got close and sunk her knife into its face, the impact dull and heavy enough to lift the creature up. It still moved as she pushed it down and stabbed it with another knife, three times in its chest until it was dead. She let go of both her knife and the creature stuck to it, grabbing her hammer before she moved forward with an annoying limp, the smell of blood all permeating.

A bit of energy returned to her but she was bleeding. She knew that much even in her battle haze. Sounds from ahead, slashing, snarling, burning flames. The ground was littered with bodies. Kate cracked the head of a running orc, avoiding the awkward strike of his sword before he impacted her body and brought her down with him. The creature punched at her face, pounding her head against the stone floor before she used Bewildering Wave. The blue eyed monster reeled back for just a moment, enough for her to slam her hammer into its face again with a wild horizontal strike. More bones cracked, blood splattering to the side as she grabbed a dagger and stuck it into its neck. She screamed and pushed the large beast away with a kick, enough distance now to strike fully with her hammer. The spike dug deep into its head, leaving it tumbling with its arms looking for something to strike. Kate got away and stood up, her vision blurring slightly as she ripped out the weapon and raised it high. She struck the stumbling orc on its head, bringing it down to the ground where it no longer moved.

Allies

She rushed into the room where she heard Ethan call out for help, her limp gone now, her vision clear once more. *Good.*

Kate moved in and saw a large burning wolf biting into the awkwardly held riot shield, scraping sounds from its claws and teeth trying to get past. She turned her hammer and slammed it spike downward into the spine of the large monster. She ripped the weapon out with as much pull as she could manage, striking it again twice before she turned around to address the human running towards her.

A woman in her thirties, blue eyes and a wide cut visible on her stomach, holding a small blade.

Kate angled her hammer and jabbed the metal bit towards her head with all the strength in both her arms. The impact broke in the woman's face with the sound of bones cracking, stopping only halfway into her skull as she slowed, kicking and thrashing with her arms, the knife slashing at Kate's jacket. Kate stepped to the side and ripped out the hammer with a wet squelching sound before she let the undead fall onto the wolf, her knife still slashing downwards. The wolf moved slower, pushing away the undead woman as it limped towards Kate with a broken back.

A heavy strike to its large head broke and dented it, a second one crushing its jaws, the third downed and killed it. The undead woman had stopped moving as well.

Ally?

She saw the man was still moving. Which she deemed good.

Monsters.

Back in the corridor, she could still hear slashing sounds from near the stairs. Rushing there, she found a few humans with missing arms and heads, a goblin cut in two, and a direwolf with all its legs missing, the creature still moving. Kate raised her hammer and killed the undead.

She found her other ally at the base of the stairs, injured but focused and standing. Two unarmed humans rushed down towards them.

He moved aside to give her space.

Kate grinned, her bloodied hammer and his sword striking into the coming undead with precision and strength alike, the creatures killed with far too many blows. Something roared upstairs, the last two undead, a human and an orc turning around before they rushed up and around the corner.

The human was flung back, his back broken against the wall before he slid down. Another roar resounded as something yellow filled up the corridor at the top of the stairs, the orc swinging his sword at the large leathery wings before his head was crushed between the large maw.

Kate was pulled to the side by her ally when the creature turned to look their way, its maw opening before a torrent of brown sludge sprayed forward. Everything it touched started to sizzle, even the stone wall.

Monster.

Silent.

Wait.

She stayed in cover behind the wall and listened, holding up a hand towards her ally.

Kate heard the creature walk down the stairs, its wings scraping against the ceiling. It growled.

She growled back, her magic activating this time.

Fear.

Kate motioned to her ally and rushed out of cover. She found the large scaled and elongated horned head of the Wyvern right before her, rows of bloodied teeth, yellow reptile eyes and the rotten smell of its breath as it widened its jaws. Holding up her hammer, she blocked the bite and held on, her body lifted up before she was flung against the wall, all the air punched out of her chest. She rolled down the stairs before another spray of the strange substance could engulf her, still holding on to her hammer.

Kate came up to find her ally standing below the creature, his sword stuck in its long neck. He let go and moved aside in a strange motion when the creature tried to strike him with its talons.

She rushed up the stairs while the Wyvern roared, her hammer coming in with a horizontal strike. The impact made her arms shake but she held on, the Wyvern's leg cracking backwards before it buckled, spreading its wings inside the stairwell to keep itself steady.

Kate rotated her weapon and struck again, the spike biting into the scales before she ripped it out again. A sphere of fire impacted the creature's head when it opened its maw. Again she struck. Her ally removed his blade and sheathed it, the following cut biting into the monster's thick neck.

Another fireball hit its head, the flames joining in with the moving lights of their headlamps.

Kate used Hunting Leap to jump on the monster's back, not much space in the small stairwell. She came down with one of her knives, the metal scraping against the scales, failing to gain purchase.

She let go of the blade and used her hammer instead, striking in horizontal motions at the neck and head of the creature whilst trying to balance herself on its back.

Her ally dodged out of the way when the monster released another spray of its acid. With the third strike, she got a good angle. The spike of her hammer broke through the scales on the Wyvern's skull.

It screeched and hit the wall of the stairwell, falling when it tried to stabilize itself with its broken leg.

The rapid motion ripped the hammer out of Kate's hands, still firmly stuck within its head. She unsheathed her last knife and tried to move to its head, a fireball exploding on its right wing.

She saw the tip of a blade come out of the back of the monster's skull. Letting go of her knife, Kate grabbed the blade and pulled, first with one hand, then with two. The cut got larger until it reached from the front bit of the Wyvern's skull to halfway down its neck. She watched the blade disappear and fell, landing with both of her feet on the stairs as the large dragon-like head hit the ground.

Its wings twitched a few more times before it stopped moving.

Chapter 34 Scales

Kate put one boot against the Wyvern skull and pulled out her hammer. It came out with a spray of dark red blood. She listened for more enemies, hearing a groan from the top of the stairs. She rushed up and found the injured human, blue eyes staring at her as it tried to get up and attack her.

She raised her hammer behind her shoulder and swung it down into the man's forehead, the metal shattering through bone as his skull was crushed against the stone wall behind. Kate watched the corpse for a few seconds as she listened for more monsters. All she heard were her allies, fast breaths and panicked words.

Fight.

Hunt.

She shook her head, looking for more monsters. Kate knew there could be monsters outside.

“Kate!” a voice came from below.

Kate growled. She took a step towards where she knew the exit was, then hesitated. It hurt. She wanted to go, wanted to fight. There were more monsters out there, waiting. Waiting to face her.

Why was she standing here?

Was there someone else there?

Allies?

Did someone call for her?

She heard the voice again, one hand going to her temple as she staggered. *Stop.*

Stop!

STOP!

Kate felt the weight of her body, stumbling before she hit the wall. She breathed hard, smelling the blood and sweat. The death and decay. *Grey, Ethan*, she thought as her eyes widened. She took a step and nearly fell. Her chest hurt, her throat ached with every breath. *Check, or you won't be able to help them.*

She looked down on herself, finding her jacket mostly ripped apart, the sweatshirt, shirt, and sports bra below in better shape but not exactly store bought either. Blood seeped through the fabric near her chest. Kate didn't know if she was still bleeding, nor could she see her throat. *Breathing still works. That's good.*

And I wanted to keep fighting. With all that.

Didn't even feel it when I ran up the stairs. Fucking hell.

There were notifications in the corner of her vision, Kate moving towards the stairs before she went down, trying to avoid all the corpses. She didn't feel particularly dizzy and the red blot on her sweatshirt didn't grow, nor was there blood dripping down from any of the injured areas. She wasn't bleeding out. Not yet. Which meant the others were a priority.

"I..." she started, unable to get out more. She closed her eyes for a moment to handle the pain from her jaw and throat. *Fuck.*

She refocused and walked down, finding Ethan sitting on the ground in front of Grey. "Thank god you're back. He's bleeding, Kate," the man spoke in a panicked voice.

"G..." Kate spoke then gestured to her shoulders, trying to mimic the straps of a backpack.

"The pack... yes," Ethan said and rushed away.

She went down to her knees, more falling than anything else. The edges of her vision blurred for a moment as she breathed heavily.

"You don't look well," Grey murmured, his eyes open as he sat against the wall, his arms limp.

Kate looked up and smiled. She felt tired. *Shut it.*

There was a wound on his leg, the fabric of his pants soaked through entirely. She took off her jacket. What was left of it. Kate folded it and pressed it down on the wound. He winced.

"I can't... decide..." he murmured.

Kate looked at him, unsure what he meant. She raised a brow.

His lips quivered slightly, tears in his eyes as he tried to handle the pain. "I can't decide... which support class... the options are... good... ah this hurts," he said, closing his eyes.

He's bleeding out and this is his concern? Grey. You goddamned idiot.

She shook her head, flicking his face before she pointed at the wound on his leg.

"I... made a mistake," he said. "Failed to... d... dodge the Wyvern."

Ethan came back and handed her the pack.

Kate noticed his limp, blood on his arms. She nodded to the wounds and opened the pack with one hand. *Scissors.* She cut through the pant leg as fast as she could, opening the area up before she took out the patches of fabric meant to be put below a bandage. She patted away the blood and applied a wound spray. Not quite an anesthetic but it would help a little. Pressing down the last thick patch of white fabric, she ripped open a bandage with her teeth, pressing it down before she moved it around his leg, making sure to tighten it. She grabbed the other two bandages and did the same, finishing up with a set of knots before she checked the man for other wounds.

She took out a set of painkillers and raised them in front of his face.

Grey glanced at them, considered, then shook his head.

He looked even paler, lost in thought or with a high fever. Touching his forehead, she assumed the former. *This absolute nerd,* she thought with a sigh, a light smile on her face. He survived. For now. She looked at the spray and opened up her shirt, moving away the bits of torn fabric before she liberally sprayed her chest and throat area. *Melusine can figure out the rest,* she thought then nodded to Ethan, the man watching everything with wide eyes.

She motioned to his hands which he raised.

Kate doused a clean rag in the disinfectant before she handed it to him. She grabbed a marker from the pack and shook it, removing the cap before she wrote on the wall. *Wounds. Packs. Leave.*

Ethan nodded. "I'll h... help."

Stay. Grey, she wrote.

"A... are you okay?" Ethan asked.

She just glared at him and got to work, stepping over the dead creatures while collecting the knives she had used. She found all but one, entering the evidence room where she found the stack of bags mostly untouched. She gave the shelves a last quick look, moving chests and boxes to see if they had missed anything particularly useful.

Kate paused when she saw something slightly shiny stick out from behind a set of bags. Moving them aside, she found what looked like a shotgun. Not a double barrel model like the one Bert had. She reached up and grabbed the thing, finding its weight comfortable in her hands. *Thanks Arnie. This might come in useful.*

She checked the bags and found one that had red shells. *Might not be the right ammo but it's worth a shot*, she thought and put it all into one of the bags. The entire haul was heavy, even for her. The main issue was the sheer logistics of carrying over ten near entirely full bags at the same time. She came out into the hallway where she found Ethan cutting into the wyvern corpse with one of his hunting knives.

Kate moved away two goblin corpses with her boot before she set down the bags with a heavy thunk. She spread her arms in a what the fuck gesture.

"Grey told me to start cutting away parts. The head, wings, claws," Ethan explained.

She glanced at the sitting man, his complexion a little better than before.

"They're valuable parts. For Allison. We should get meat too for Celeste. Who knows what Wyvern blood and flesh can bring. Might be good for support class requirements but could also be used for the food section in our status that we haven't figured out," Grey explained. "The Wolves too. If you can, get what you can."

Kate hesitated. She didn't hear any more monsters come but more could reach this place at any time. And Grey was injured. She checked her clock and looked at them, signing a three.

"Three minutes, gotcha. Maybe you take the Wyvern, I can barely get through the scales," Ethan said.

She obliged, getting to work as she checked both the time and Grey. She got half of one wing, folding it as well as she could before she stuffed it into an empty bag. Moving on, she hacked away into the neck of the creature, removing its head and throwing it into the bag, some of the horns sticking out. Next, she cut into where its left leg connected to its torso, cutting into it before she ripped away the entire chunk. *Into the bag you go.* She checked the time, less than a minute remaining.

Kate moved the body to the side and started hacking into its chest. The serrated blade of the hunting knife helped sever the scales, ripping through the tissue that held them together. She grabbed on and ripped away a sizable chunk of its chest.

Grey glanced around the corner. "Get the heart."

What.

She shook her head and cut deeper, ripping out flesh until she saw the large organ. *Fantasy, fucking, bullshit.*

Everything went into the bag, filling it fully, with yellow Wyvern pieces, horns, and claws sticking out. Kate had no clue how much it weighed. More than the gun bag.

She tapped the wall with her knife and sheathed it, Ethan rushing over with his bag of wolf bits.

“I... I had no clue what I was doing,” he said.

Kate took out the disinfectant spray again and pointed to his arms, throwing the thing his way.

“You should’ve leveled up too. Your stats,” Grey said.

Right. Might as well, if it helps survive the next fight.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Undead Direwolf]

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Undead Goblin]

...

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Young Acid Wyvern]

‘ding’ ‘Berserker reaches lvl 14’

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

‘ding’ ‘Berserker reaches lvl 15’

Stat points +2

Perseverance +1

Kate instantly put all four distributable points into Vitality and read on. She shuddered as the heat flowed through her veins, sighing when she felt that breathing had become a little easier.

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches lvl 20’

‘ding’ ‘Mindless Ferocity reaches 2nd lvl 1’

Active: Mindless Ferocity – 2nd lvl 1

Tune out all but the sound of battle. Sacrifice what is not required to increase your resistance against pain, shock, and trauma from both injuries and enemy attacks by 15.5%. Auto activates when at 25% health (set value).

2nd stage: When active, Mindless Ferocity grants a low grade resistance against all mental attacks.

“Mental attacks, great,” she murmured. *And I guess after level twenty, skills get a second stage.*

“You can speak again,” Grey said.

“Right...” she said and touched her throat. “Still hurts a little.”

Could've saved myself the trouble of writing on the wall.

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 17'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 18'

'ding' 'Furious Dance reaches lvl 19'

'ding' 'Reckless Charge reaches lvl 15'

'ding' 'Reckless Charge reaches lvl 16'

'ding' 'Hunting Leap reaches lvl 5'

'ding' 'Shattering Step reaches lvl 5'

'ding' 'Shattering Step reaches lvl 6'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 17'

'ding' 'Toll for the Living reaches lvl 18'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 16'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 17'

'ding' 'Courage of the Unarmored reaches lvl 18'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 16'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 17'

'ding' 'Two Handed Weapon Fighting reaches lvl 18'

'ding' 'Unrelenting Carnage reaches lvl 5'

'ding' 'Unrelenting Carnage reaches lvl 6'

'ding' 'Unrelenting Carnage reaches lvl 7'

'ding' 'Silent Striker reaches lvl 8'

Serenity +1

'ding' 'Silent Striker reaches lvl 9'

Serenity +1

'ding' 'Frightening Growl reaches lvl 6'

'ding' 'Bewildering Wave reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Heightened Hearing reaches lvl 12'

'ding' 'You have unlocked the passive skill: Hushed Presence – lvl 1

Passive: Hushed Presence – lvl 1

Your movements become softer, all of your actions producing less sound in turn, should you will it so.

Kate found the new skill toggleable, similar to her heightened hearing and intimidating presence.
Even more stuff.

‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for Class Evolution [Berserker] becomes [Scion of Wrath]’

She saw the additional text and closed the notifications again. There was too much for her to read in a reasonable time, and it looked like there were several options. They had to leave. “I got evolution options for my Berserker Class,” she said, crouching down next to Grey. “Think you can move?”

“I have to,” Grey said.

She raised her brows and smiled. “I could carry you.”

“And leave the loot behind? No,” he said, as if her suggestion was downright sacrilegious.

Kate helped him up, slowly. She glanced at his still unsheathed sword. “How is standing?”

He took in a few breaths with closed eyes, opening them before he nodded slightly. “Don’t think... I can carry much. You said class evolution?”

“We can talk in the car, or when we’re back,” Kate said. “Ethan, ready?”

The man nodded, grabbing four of the bags.

“Take two and help Grey walk,” she said. “I’ll take the rest.”

Ethan looked at her. “T... that’s a lot.”

“I know,” Kate said and grabbed everything, activating her new Hushed Presence as she took in a deep breath. *Right.* She felt like a Christmas tree with all the bags slung around her shoulders and those held in her hands. *I suppose with all the presents we’re getting out, I might as well be one.*

If we can avoid any monsters on the way, she thought, nodding towards the back exit.

Ethan helped Grey walk, the door to the hallway open. They reached the exit, finding it only locked from the outside.

“Open it slightly, I want to listen,” Kate said.

The cool and fresh air that came into the hallway reminded her of the state of the station. They had to get out before more creatures turned undead. Already she could hear noises from the upper floors again. “Nothing outside. Headlamps,” she said, her hammer held atop the bags in her right hand. “I go first.”

Ethan turned off her lamp and opened the door, Kate walking out into the open. It felt strange, her steps producing considerably less sound than before, as did her breathing. Even her heartbeat. Though it was difficult for her to tell how much the difference was exactly, same as it was difficult for her to gauge how heavy things were, both her strength and hearing having gone through considerable changes.

She walked over to the next building, hearing Ethan close the exit behind himself. They continued through the village, Kate constantly checking for monsters until they reached the main road. She used her echo location, pausing for a moment before she rushed over the street.

Back near the small slide and sandbox, the three continued onward and into the forest. Kate tried to crouch slightly, avoiding branches and bushes. She paused again and clicked her tongue, finding no additional signs of monsters in the vicinity. The truck remained where they had parked it.

She put the bags down and loaded the back area. "Ethan you get on the back this time," she said.

"Keys," he said.

She threw them over to him and finished loading.

The man helped Grey enter the car before he climbed on. "Sure thing, ma'am."

Kate ignored the comment, getting in the car herself before she closed the door.

Grey handed her the keys. He winced slightly at the movement, relaxing in the seat as he slowly put on his seat belt, sheathed sword by his side. "There were fewer corpses," he said in a quiet voice.

Kate nodded. "I know."

She kept her eyes on the trees and turned the keys. Driving out onto the street, she saw movement in the left back mirror, several small green creatures rushing out of the underbrush and towards them. They were still quite a way's off.

Goblins running with strange movements, faster than they had any right to be, mouths wide open, cuts on their bodies visible even at the distance.

How about no?

She drove off, keeping her eyes on the road while Grey watched the skies for any Wyverns.

"Think they will follow us all the way?" Grey asked.

"Let's talk about that once we're back," she said and put on some music, changing tracks until she came across some power metal.

Let's hope the Wyverns and Ogres don't stand up again.

She sighed, gripping the steering wheel with both hands. *One fire at a time.*

Chapter 35 Evolution

Kate drove as fast as she dared, the undead goblins long gone from the rear mirrors. Pine trees rushed past, the shadows cast onto the ash covered road far longer than on their drive to Grenndorf. The third song had come and gone when Kate turned off the music. She was no longer gripping the wheel like her life depended on it, the loaded truck rattling as they sped back towards their castle.

No other car was on the road, the same as it had been since this thing had started. She was glad for the rivers and strangely for the tree creatures she had seen putting out fires, knowing that if it had progressed this far, the road may not have been usable at all.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, not taking her eyes off the road.

Grey didn’t respond.

She glanced over, seeing him focused and biting his lip.

“You’re obsessing over the status. Focus on the road. If we crash, you’ll have to react fast,” she said.

“I... yes,” he said, wincing slightly after he had spoken.

They drove the rest of the way in silence, Kate thinking on everything they had seen in the small village. All that death. *Falstadt*. Plumes of smoke, fires, and destruction. It tasted like ash. As if she had failed them. She knew it made no sense. What could she alone have done? And yet she felt her stomach twist.

Kate focused on her breathing. She was glad to see the outlines of Keilberg castle between the lines of trees. Glad she wasn’t alone in all of this. Knocking on the rear window, she got Ethan’s attention and rolled down the window on the driver’s side. “Be ready, in case the corpses have risen,” she said, grabbing the radio from her pack. “Kate here, we’re approaching with the truck. There in two minutes. Grey needs medical attention. Monsters can turn undead, be careful around any corpses.”

She kept driving, quiet seconds passing as if they were minutes. She activated Mindless Ferocity just in case, her breathing slowing as she looked at the underbrush, the car now driving in a crawl. A gust of wind howled against the window.

A static crack resounded. “We’re ready at the gate. Everything is clear,” Jon’s voice came through the radio.

Kate didn’t relax quite yet, driving the car over the gravel as she glanced to the side, finding the orcs where they had left them. She watched the gates open and drove inside, glad they had at least pulled the ogre corpse out into the forest.

Melusine opened the passenger seat as soon as the truck had come to a halt.

“Status?” she asked.

“I was an idiot,” Grey murmured.

“Wound on his right thigh, from a Wyvern talon,” Kate said. “Pressure bandage, no meds.”

“A... and I got... a support Class, plus some stats,” Grey said to the woman, Melusine already searching through the bag beside her, hands glowing with magic as she moved aside his hands and katana.

Kate turned off the car and stepped outside, her hammer in hand.

“What happened? Are you alright?” Jon asked as he rushed her way, Allison, Eloise, and Celeste coming to join them.

“We’re more than fine!” Ethan said from atop the loading area. He opened a bag and took out a rifle, aiming it towards the sky like some eighties action hero, only that his bloodied and ripped jacket coupled with his messy red hair made him look like some teen who really shouldn’t be holding a rifle. Which was exactly what he was, though perhaps not a teen anymore technically.

“Put that down,” Kate said.

His grin dropped as he lowered the weapon instantly. “Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

“Dead monsters and people are rising as undead, far stronger and faster than they were before. Any corpse could be dangerous, we don’t know how it works yet,” she quickly explained. “We didn’t manage to get any food, but we got to the pharmacy and the police station. Falstadt.” She paused and shook her head lightly. “Ethan, my battle axe.”

Jon listened with wide eyes, nodding in the end. “The... corpses outside.”

She heard Ethan rummage around before he pulled out the medieval piece of equipment.

Kate smiled. She knew the expression didn’t reach her eyes. “Yes. That’s what I need the battle axe for.”

“Shouldn’t we burn them?” Ethan asked.

She paused. “Someone could see the smoke.”

“There was smoke rising from a lot of places,” Ethan said. “Do you really think it would be an issue?”

“Removing limbs and heads could create something worse than a normal undead,” Grey said from within the car.

“Don’t strain yourself,” came Melusine’s voice, gentle but firm.

“Suppose he could be right. Yeah, burn them,” Kate said.

“I can do that,” Ethan said.

“And after, you check in with Melusine,” she said, rubbing her brow.

“Yes, boss,” he said, jumping down from the truck before he made his way towards the guard tower.

“Shiny stuff,” Allison said, looking into the loading area. “Anything for me?”

Kate smiled. “Yeah. There’s a lot of stuff. Rifles, pistols, and ammo too.” She gave a look to Jon.

“We won’t touch anything until Logan is awake, and better,” he said. “Is it safe to move the bags down into the armory cellar?”

“I think so. Let me do that, actually,” she said.

“We’re here together. You three risked your life out there, let us handle this at least,” Jon said.

Kate smiled as she grabbed the first two bags, adding two more, then another two. “It’s not about work distribution and risks, it’s about Strength. The one with a capital s.”

Jon nodded, looking at the six full bags she lifted without so much as a grunt. “Understandable. Eloise, can you go prepare some food and coffee? Celeste, you go back and play. The things they got back are dangerous.”

“I know what a rifle is, dad,” the little girl said with her arms crossed, her tongue out.

“You know rifles in movies,” Allison said. “The real thing is a little different.”

“Don’t tell me you know about guns as well,” Jon said, looking at the woman as Kate started towards the armory.

“Not really. Some research for a few cosplays but I’ve never actually fired one,” Allison said. “Not that I don’t want to.”

Kate tuned them out, glad she could focus on putting away loot after fighting and fleeing a bunch of undead monsters. *Roided up chunks of unthinking flesh.*

The ground floor of the armory had a few more things in it than before. Chairs and a small table, a toolbox, and cleaning supplies. Plus most of the prepared backpacks.

She set down the bags and opened the hatch to the cellar, climbing down the wooden mesh of ladder and steps. What she found was a surprisingly spacious storage room about four meters wide and seven long. Wooden shelves lined the walls and an old table stood at the center. The food they had gotten from Keilberg was neatly sorted and put away on the shelves. As were much of the clothes and medical supplies, some of them with Melusine or already in the backpacks. Still, only a small part of the room was taken. She set down the bags and got the rest, the monotonous task allowing her to finally skim through the notifications that remained in the corner of her vision.

‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for Class Evolution [Berserker] becomes [Scion of Wrath]’

Fear the Wrathful. You have slain ten or more creatures while using the Furious Dance skill. You have chosen to fight and kill those who have wronged you. You have used your rage to fight through pain and injury. You have used shouts and growls to intimidate your enemies. You have endured poison and injury, fighting on despite your state.

The Scion of Wrath is entirely consumed by their rage. Hordes shall tremble in your sight, monstrosities beyond your understanding left in fear of your presence. Your voice will become a weapon, a warning, those who would oppose you, will die. Your mental fortitude will leave you unshaken, unbroken, until your promise to the world is fulfilled. Rage, Scion! Rage until the end of days!

Unique stat: Perseverance

Would you like to evolve your Class [Berserker] into [Scion of Wrath]?

‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for Class Evolution [Berserker] becomes [Child of Chaos]’

The world burns at your will. You have slain ten or more creatures while using the Furious Dance skill. You have fought an enemy while surrounded by flames. You have walked through and survived a large scale fire. You have slain a formidable foe despite heavy injuries and an option to escape.

Wielding fire, the Child of Chaos seeks the destruction of their foes. Until nothing remains but ash. Your weapons are wreathed in flames, burning those who would stand in your way. Resisting the flames yourself, you will remain the last one standing, amidst the scorched remains of your enemies. Embrace chaos, and become one with the flames.

Unique stat: Brutality

Would you like to evolve your Class [Berserker] into [Child of Chaos]?

‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for Class Evolution [Berserker] becomes [Omen of Vengeance]’

The path to retribution. You have chosen to hunt and kill those who have wronged you. You have pursued and killed your fleeing enemies with no remorse. You have slain ten or more creatures while covered in blood. You have absorbed life force from ten or more creatures you have slain, fighting on despite heavy injuries. You have chosen to carry forth the retribution denied to the dead.

The Omen of Vengeance aims not to right wrongs, but to bring to conclusion the fate of their enemies. Those you kill, will mend your wounds and fuel your power. Your blood shall boil, each strike you deal to your foes infused with its most primal magic. That which flows through all living beings. Blood and vengeance, at your side. Hunt and kill, for the living, and the dead.

Unique stat: Vigor

Would you like to evolve your Class [Berserker] into [Omen of Vengeance]?

‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for Class Evolution [Berserker] becomes [Bone Dread]’

Terror, to all. You have broken the bones of your enemies. You have fought with your bones broken. You have slain ten or more creatures with a blunt and heavy weapon. You have struck fear into your enemies. You have killed even fleeing foes in your rage.

Those who come across your path will find only terror in their minds. The splitting cracks of breaking bone an accomplice and a herald to your coming. The very frame upon which your living flesh is resting, shall become a weapon against your enemies. Kill all in your way!

Unique stat: Brutality

Would you like to evolve your Class [Berserker] into [Bone Dread]?

Kate finished reading while she leaned against the table in the storage cellar, her task done. So I have to choose one? Or could I just level Berserker further? Evolution kind of implies that they're gonna get better.

She decided to talk to the others about it, climbing back out of the dimly lit room before she shut the hatch. The heavy wood plank fell into place with a loud thud. She remembered the promise of

coffee and started making her way towards the apartment. Looking towards the gate, she saw smoke rising from beyond, the frame of Ethan visible up top, fire lighting up every few seconds.

Nobody remained at the car, Kate reaching Bert's home before she entered. It was cool inside, whatever heat had been left within was gone now, the only source of warmth the people themselves. She crossed her arms and rubbed her shoulders. "When are we checking that stove?"

"We'd have to burn furniture," Jon said. "Finding or chopping wood seemed too dangerous. It's not a priority. We have blankets."

"It will be sooner than you think," Kate said, smiling when Eloise handed her a hot mug of coffee. "I can go chop down some trees."

"You say that like it's easy," Allison said, the woman covered in three blankets, wearing a hat, and holding what looked like a hot chocolate. With cream. And sprinkles.

Kate raised a brow at that but didn't comment. They did have to use up the perishables, now that they didn't have electricity anymore. She moved over and leaned against the counter, taking a sip of the hot liquid before she sighed. *That was a fucking afternoon.*

"Grenndorf, whenever you're ready," Jon said, his books open on the table.

"I'd rather get that stove working. Having no heat sucks," Kate said. "I'll go test my strength and medieval equipment against some trees later."

She drank from her coffee, closing her eyes for a moment before she started telling the others of what happened. Everyone but Logan and Ethan present. She mentioned her echo location, the corpses they had found, Falstadt, the pharmacy, police station, the undead. The gear they had recovered, and the fighting. Her skill upgrading to the second tier, and the evolution options that popped up when she had reached level fifteen.

"The Classes change as well," Grey murmured, a slight smile on his face. "Based on achievements. And there are options. Do you mind reading them all to us?"

Jon wrote down everything, sections about the monsters they had encountered, about the locations themselves, and everything they had learned about their magic and the rules that governed it.

"So far it seems consistent between us," Grey said. "Which is good. It means while some may discover new things, the others can learn from it, mimic it, or even copy some things entirely."

"I also leveled up," Melusine said. "I was taking care of Logan. Two stat points, the same as when Kate or you level up."

"So fighting isn't the only way to advance," Grey said, his grin wide now. Then he winced, touching his leg.

"Don't touch it," Melusine scolded.

"It's i... itchy," he complained in a murmur.

"It'll get better in time," Melusine said. "Itching is good."

Kate drank the last of her now lukewarm coffee. "So which one should I take?"

"What are your thoughts on it?" Jon said. "You're the one who has to live with it."

She looked into the mug. “The fire one is right out. As is the bone one. Sounds like some kind of monster. Which leaves Scion and Omen, the former seemingly just a continuation of my Berserker Class. But Blood magic?”

“You’ll likely be able to absorb even more from the monsters,” Grey said. “And we would learn a lot about how evolutions and magical incorporation works. Same as a new stat. Plus there’s no mention of Mindless Ferocity or constant rage, which means you might not get lost in battle as easily.”

“I’m aware of it, Grey, you don’t have to sugarcoat it. I mean if nobody has a good argument against it, I’ll choose this one,” she said.

“Blood is gross,” Allison said.

It’s actually quite pretty. Fascinating too, Kate thought. The most primal magic. She didn’t hate it. I just hope I don’t turn into a vampire. The sun is way too nice to give it up for power.

But there was no mention of day and night. If she could lessen the influence her Berserker Class had on her mind, she would take it.

“We should go outside,” Grey said.

“Why?” Allison asked.

“Well... if it’s blood magic. Who knows? She might explode in a gory mess of blood,” he suggested, then blushed slightly.

Allison grinned. “Oh you would know, hmm?”

“Leave him alone, he nearly died today,” Kate said, putting down her mug before she walked outside. “We don’t know anything about evolutions. He’s right.”

Excited steps followed her, even Jon a little more chipper than usual. She smiled when she heard Bert’s grumbling and the groan when he got up to join everyone.

“What’s happening?” Ethan asked from atop the wall.

“Evolution!” Eloise shouted back.

“Evolution?” he asked.

“Evolution!” Eloise shouted again.

“You’re getting way too excited,” Kate murmured as she made some distance to the waiting group. “At least don’t stand in a half circle, I feel like a circus animal.”

They obliged.

So, Omen of Vengeance.

‘ding’ ‘Class change: [Berserker] becomes [Omen of Vengeance]’

Support Class slot acquired: +1

Support Class requirements: Omen of Vengeance lvl 30

Kate felt her body heat up. She looked down and saw the veins on her forearms pronounced against her skin. She could hear her heartbeat. Faster. Louder. It echoed in her head. She took rasping breaths, going down to one knee as distorted voices called out to her.

‘ding’ ‘Skills changed by [Omen of Vengeance]’

Active: Furious Dance – lvl 19

Give in to your coldest fury and become one with the blood and pain of battle. You strike harder, increasing your damage with melee weapons by 14.5%, using 14.5% more stamina for each attack. Your senses are focused on battle alone, making you into the very embodiment of bloodlust until all of your enemies are slain. Each creature you kill while Furious Dance is active returns 7.25% of your damage dealt as stamina.

[Furious Dance] becomes [Blood Frenzy]

Active: Blood Frenzy – lvl 19

Give in to your rage and become one with the blood and pain of battle. You strike harder, increasing your damage with melee weapons by up to 14.5%, sacrificing up to 10 points of health for each attack. Your senses are focused on battle alone. Each creature you kill while Blood Frenzy is active returns 7.25% of your damage dealt as health.

Active: Reckless Charge – lvl 16

You rush forward with a sudden burst of speed. Choose a distance between 1 and 7 meters, each use requiring 20% of your total stamina. None shall flee the field of battle.

[Reckless Charge] becomes [Vengeful Charge]

Active: Vengeful Charge – lvl 16

You rush forward with a sudden burst of speed. Choose a distance between 1 and 7 meters, each use requiring 10% of your total stamina. The cooldown of Vengeful Charge is reset upon killing an enemy. None shall flee the field of battle.

Active: Hunting Leap – lvl 5

Power surges through your legs, propelling you upwards. Charge your muscles for 15% of your total stamina and jump up to 3.25m high. Not cliffs nor walls shall stand between you and your prey.

[Hunting Leap] becomes [Reaper Jump]

Active: Reaper Jump – lvl 5

Power surges through your legs and body, propelling you upwards. Charge your muscles for 12.5% of your total stamina and jump up to 3.25m high. Blood magic surges, granting you a medium resistance to physical damage for the duration of the spell. Not cliffs nor walls shall stand between you and your prey.

Active: Shattering Step – lvl 6

Use your strength and 20% of your stamina to slam the ground with a shattering force, disorienting or causing everyone around you to stumble. You may vary the power exuded.

[Shattering Step] becomes [Blood Rupture]

Active: Blood Rupture – lvl 6

Use your strength and up to 15% of your total health to slam the ground with a shattering force, creating a wave of blood magic in a 2.6 meter radius around you.

Passive: Toll for the Living – lvl 18

Your anger knows no bounds. When you slay an enemy, you absorb 6.5% of their total health. Find and kill them, all.

[Toll for the Living] becomes [Blood for the Living]

Passive: Blood for the Living – lvl 18

Your anger knows no bounds. When you slay an enemy, you absorb 6.5% of their total health and stamina. Find and kill them, all.

Passive: Courage of the Unarmored – lvl 18

Your body is a tool for war, forged in battle. While you are not wearing armor made of metal or above 25% of your body weight, your skin, muscles, and bones are 14% more resilient to both physical and magical damage.

[Courage of the Unarmored] becomes [Fury of the Unarmored]

Passive: Fury of the Unarmored – lvl 18

Your body is a tool for war, forged in battle. While you are not wearing armor made of metal or above 25% of your body weight, your skin, muscles, and bones are 14% more resilient to both physical and magical damage. Magic surges when your blood is spilled, burning those who would strike you down.

Passive: Intimidating Presence – lvl 6

Your enemies will know your wrath. You have bathed in the blood of those who stood in your way. Beings will instinctively be wary of your presence, should you will it so.

[Intimidating Presence] becomes [Terrifying Presence]

Passive: Terrifying Presence – lvl 6

Your enemies will know your wrath. You have bathed in the blood of those who stood in your

way. Beings will instinctively be wary of your presence, should you will it so. The effects of Terrifying Presence are highly increased if you are partially covered in blood.

Kate felt something warm. Her eyes were closed, her heart beating. Steady now. Strong. Hands held her, the breaths and quick voices now audible to her. A wet cloth was pressed against her brow. She took in a deep breath and opened her eyes.

Kate Lindgren

Unspent stat points: 0

Class: Omen of Vengeance – lvl 15

- ***Active: Mindless Ferocity – 2nd lvl 1***
- ***Active: Blood Frenzy – lvl 19***
- ***Active: Vengeful Charge – lvl 16***
- ***Active: Reaper Jump – lvl 5***
- ***Active: Blood Rupture – lvl 6***
- ***Passive: Blood for the Living – lvl 18***
- ***Passive: Fury of the Unarmored – lvl 18***
- ***Passive: Two Handed Weapon Fighting – lvl 18***
- ***Passive: Unrelenting Carnage – lvl 7***
- ***Passive: Terrifying Presence – lvl 6***

Support class: Silent Striker – lvl 9

- ***Active: Frightening Growl – lvl 6***
- ***Active: Bewildering Wave – lvl 4***
- ***Active:***
- ***Passive: Heightened Hearing – lvl 12***
- ***Passive: Echo Location – lvl 3***
- ***Passive: Hushed Presence – lvl 1***

Support class: Locked

Status:

Vitality: 27

Endurance: 17

Perseverance: 15

Strength: 17

Dexterity: 8

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 10

Serenity: 9

Equipment:

Torso: -

Legs: -

Trinket: -

Food: -

Chapter 36 Changes

“Let her be, she is well,” Melusine said.

Kate took in a deep breath, her whole body tensing up before she relaxed. “I need to sit,” she stammered out, moving her legs as Melusine and Eloise helped her sit down. She felt strange. As if something new was settling within her body. Comparable perhaps to having a really hearty meal after a long day out skiing, or eating too much fondue. The pulse she heard vanished as she focused on it, her enhanced hearing tuned as she willed it.

“That was quite interesting,” Melusine said. “Something happened to your body. The entirety of it.”

“Anything specific?” Kate asked.

The nurse shook her head. “My magic lets me gauge injuries. I can observe the body but it’s not the same as the tech available in a hospital. I’d be very interested to see your blood values right now, let me tell you that. Everything seemed accelerated for a few seconds. You’re back to normal now... but you seem different too.”

“I suppose that’s what an evolution is like,” Jon said.

“It’s very unspecific,” Grey complained.

“No explosion of blood, boring,” Allison said as she crossed her arms in front of her. “Can I look at the monster bits you got now? Bert, you have sewing supplies and the like, right? All old people have that.”

“You mean all reasonable people,” Bert grumbled. “The times have changed.”

“That is what time does,” Allison observed. “Show me, please.”

The old man left with Allison in tow, Ethan back to burning the corpses when nothing major happened.

“Are you alright?” Grey asked.

Kate hugged her knees. She felt good. Really, quite good. “Let’s go inside, you can write down the changes.”

“Yes!” Grey said, looking at Jon. “Let’s start.”

Melusine offered a hand but Kate stood up on her own, cracking her neck as she grabbed her hammer. The weight felt the same, but she was quite interested in testing everything.

Back inside, Eloise brought her another cup of coffee as she started to read out the messages.

“It’s good to have the second tier available, the skills are even more valuable now, but you’re right, mental attacks could mean all manner of dangerous magics,” Grey said.

“How can we even defend against that?” Jon said, shaking his head.

“With exactly these kinds of skills. Resistances. Also just knowing that kind of magic is out there is helpful, though I suppose something like Kate’s growl ability could fall into that category too,” Grey said.

Kate nodded, moving on.

“Another support Class slot,” Grey commented immediately. “Once you reach level thirty.”

“A longer gap than the first at level ten,” Jon said. “With both of you getting your support Classes at level ten, we can assume thirty is going to be a second one for everyone as well.” He wrote down the considerations in one of his books.

Kate glanced over, noting the insanely clean handwriting. *Because of his job? Or is it a hobby?*

“What could go with blood magic, close combat, and sound... I wonder,” Grey murmured, biting on his nails as his eyes glazed over slightly.

Kate went on with the first skill.

Blood Frenzy. The numbers themselves hadn't changed but instead of stamina, the skill now used health itself. “It's a little concerning,” Kate murmured.

“Using up your own health to attack?” Jon said, the look on his face similar to how Kate felt about it.

“It's expected with blood magic. But not a detriment at all. Quite the contrary,” Grey explained. All eyes were on him. “T... the stats...” he gulped. “Vitality... you're using Vitality now. Health is just another resource. Quantifiable even, as we just learned. Whatever ten points mean, it's the highest amount you can put into a blow as energy. With Blood Frenzy active.”

Jon raised his brows. “Right. So Vitality basically becomes more than just health and resilience. It becomes a resource too.”

“Yes!” Grey called out. “Which means every point invested into the stat is going to be doubly beneficial. This is great news. It means combinations may be possible. Like using mana for health if you're a high level mage, or using mana for stamina. Things can become interchangeable.”

“It opens a lot of possibilities,” Jon murmured.

Kate glanced to the side as she sipped on her coffee, seeing Allison descend the stairs with a large sewing machine. The thing was massive, half of it steel. “What the hell is that artifact?”

Allison grinned but kept her focus on not falling down the stairs. “Straight out of the Cold War.” She puffed as she reached the bottom. “Seriously though, it's a Strohringer 1986. They don't make them like this anymore. It's slow but that thing can punch through boiled fucking leather as if it was butter. Indestructible needles too as far as rumors go.”

Kate just looked at her with a smile.

“Oh fuck off,” Allison murmured, taking her newfound treasure out and likely towards the armory.

“The monster bits bag is in the cellar!” Kate called out.

“I know.” She heard Allison say, mostly thanks to her enhanced hearing.

“Monster bits?” Celeste asked.

“You can go watch her,” Melusine said. “But don't go into the cellar.”

“Yes!” the girl called out and rushed after the sewing enthusiast.

“Kids,” Bert grumbled as he slowly started his long descent down the stairs.

All the people that died, and this old man is still around, Kate thought, impressed by the sheer stubbornness. *You go. Step by step.*

“What’s the next skill? Or was that everything that changed?” Jon asked. The man far more interested in all the magic and monster related topics since he accepted their authenticity.

Kate refocused on the initial conversation and told them about the next change.

Vengeful Charge. The cooldown now reset upon killing an enemy.

“Useful, though the stamina cost remains,” Grey said.

“It’s halved,” Kate noted.

“Yes, but still limits you to nine reasonable uses, probably less,” he said and looked at the ceiling, starting to pace. He was the only one not sitting down. “But you get resources back upon killing something, so the loop could in theory just go on and on, especially with the numbers increasing at higher levels. That bonus alone is insane,” he murmured with a smile on his face.

He continued after she had read the changes to Reaper Jump. “So we can assume evolutions generally reduce the cost of skills, and add magic specific bonuses and additions. Similar additions to getting skills to the second tier by leveling them. Stat points from the Class levels and versatility, specialization from the skills. We’re starting to get somewhere. Having a physical resistance added during your jump is helpful too but very specific. And we have no clue how effective it really is.”

“We can test it,” Kate said. “I want to test the health sacrifice anyway.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Eloise said, a worried expression on her face.

“It’s more dangerous if I don’t know how many times I can safely use it,” Kate said.

“Right,” Melusine said. “I will try to help with that.”

“And I can throw something at you while you jump, maybe we can figure it out. A medium resistance,” Grey said.

“Wouldn’t a resistance against physical things stop anything but mental attacks?” Jon asked.

“We don’t know yet, but usually physical damage refers to things like... swords, hammers, maybe even projectiles but those could be separate. Magical damage like ice spears or something like that is usually separate, even though yes, technically it’s a physical object too,” Grey explained.

“I see,” Jon murmured, turning the page in his book before he added the speculative information in the section labeled *Resistances*.

“I’m happy to test, with Melusine nearby,” Kate said, taking a sip of coffee.

“I’ll be there, dear,” the woman said and touched her hand in a gentle manner.

“The leveling is quite incredible too,” Grey said. “You’re going to be able to jump really high, even at level twenty.”

Kate nodded with a smile. “Seven meters at level twenty. I’d break my legs if I fell from that height,” she said and grinned, looking at Eloise.

The girl smiled awkwardly before she looked at the table.

“Even without the physical damage resistance, your Vitality alone would likely prevent that by then, maybe even now already,” Grey said. “Another thing to test.”

“How easily my legs break?” Kate asked.

“Y... I...” He scratched the back of his head.

“We will test it, when the time comes,” Melusine said with a broad smile. “Broken bones are fascinating,” she added as some kind of explanation for her enthusiasm.

Blood Rupture was the next skill on the list, the change quite substantial.

“Talk about area damage,” Grey said. “I will want to see that.”

“Me too,” Kate said. “But fifteen percent of my health is quite a chunk.”

“Not if you get most of it back from the creatures that die,” Jon said without looking up from his book.

“The radius is going to be impressive too at higher levels. Coupled with your mobility, your blood rush resetting its cooldown with every killed creature, you could decimate entire groups before anyone could even touch you,” Grey mused. “What was the normal cooldown again?”

“Of Blood Rush?” Kate asked. “Around thirty seconds. Twenty for the jump, but it could be different now with the changes.”

Grey slapped the table with his hand when he heard the description of the new Blood for the Living passive. “There you go. Infinite Vengeful Charge and Blood Ruptures. You already have a loop,” he said and moved both his hands through his hair. “Now I’m excited for my evolution.”

“Do you think the Support Classes evolve as well?” Jon asked.

“I hope so,” Grey said with a grin. “Kate, you’re going to be unstoppable.”

She raised a brow, sipping from her mug. “Against goblins maybe. There’s plenty worse we’ve seen already, and surely more we haven’t.”

“Right... right,” Grey said.

She read the changes to Fury of the Unarmored.

“I’m not sure how that would work, we’ll have to test it. I volunteer,” Grey said.

Kate glanced at the faces around the table, surprised nobody objected to people getting hurt. *I suppose magic is exciting to all manner of people. Even Eloise seems interested to see the spell.*

“I don’t suppose we have blood bags?” Kate asked. She hadn’t seen any in the pharmacies she raided.

“Empty ones,” Melusine said. “I can try to stock up.” She gave her husband a glance, all color fading from the man’s face in turn. “Gothic, Baroque, Modern, Victorian...”

Kate was confused for a moment, smiling when she saw Jon calm down, nodding at the list of architectural styles. The man didn’t like needles.

The last change was to her Terrifying Presence, the added bonus quite simple and obvious.

“Wouldn’t that effect be present anyway?” Eloise asked.

“It’s probably magical,” Grey said. “Just seeing a person covered in blood would not be scary to an orc, I think. Which means, you should probably cover yourself in blood all the time.”

Kate nodded, finishing her cup. She didn’t know if the idea was gross or awesome. Maybe a bit of both. A glance to the stairs informed her that Bert had finished his journey. “Well done, Bert.”

“Go to hell,” he said.

“We can test everything before sundown,” Kate said. “In case of more monsters coming at night. Maybe even undead. I’d like to know what I can do.”

Jon looked at his watch. “We have about eighty minutes.”

Kate sighed, crossing her arms as she looked at the wooden table. “We have to talk about Falstadt.”

She could hear the people shift in their chairs, their hearts pounding in their chests. She tuned out the sounds. “The city is... devastated.”

Jon clicked his pen a few times. “How bad is it?”

She shook her head. “The airforce...”

“I’m sorry,” Melusine said as she touched Kate’s forearm.

Kate shook her head, taking in a deep breath before she focused. “I... will want to go there.”

“Of course,” Jon said.

“Once we know more, and I’m as ready as I can be,” Kate said.

“I w... want to go... t... too,” Grey said, looking at her and then away.

“Just because I’m going?” Kate asked.

“No... m... my f... friend. Monkslayer515... he... he lives there. Lived. Maybe,” Grey said. “H... he’s the best wizard dps I know. You’d think it’s the easiest role because everyone wants to play it but he’s the best.”

“The best wizard dps,” Kate said and tilted her head a little. “Sounds like a plan.” She looked to the wheezing Bert, finally back in his armchair. “Got any relatives in Falstadt?”

“None worth a mention,” he said, quiet for a moment as the look on his face changed. “If, in the future, maybe you could check on Abby.”

“A long lost lover?” Kate asked.

“You lutt. She’s my granddaughter. The only person in this godforsaken family worth a damned thing. But she’s in Vienna,” he muttered.

“Vienna is quite a distance,” she said. “And the roads aren’t safe. If they’re even still there.”

“We have people in Salzburg,” Jon said before he sighed. “None of this is a priority, as much as it hurts. We have to focus on what we can do here, and now. Falstadt is a consideration due to the proximity, and all the resources we could get.”

“There’s a hospital,” Melusine said.

“Not just that. Power, weapons, food, bunkers, libraries, boats,” Kate said. “Just off the top of my head.”

“There will be more monsters there,” Grey said. “Undead.”

“You don’t know that,” Kate said, nearly shouting. She felt her blood for a moment. *My blood*. The sensation was strange, but there was no other way for her to describe it. As if her heartbeat pulsed through her. She calmed down, Melusine rubbing her arm. “I’m sorry.”

Grey looked down at the table.

“We’re taking everything into consideration,” Jon said. “And we’ll discuss the next steps when Logan is back up on his feet. I think some of the small towns and villages should remain our priority. Until we know more, and everyone is stronger. But of course we can’t force anyone to stay. Or guilt anyone into doing something they don’t want.”

Kate remained quiet. A part of her wanted to drive down to Falstadt right now, to check on her team. But she knew the people here needed her. Not just for her magical power.

Maybe she needed them too.

A smile tugged on her lips, thinking of Maurice leading a group of survivors against hordes of monsters. Or Fred, somehow spinning this entire ordeal into a romantic comedy. None of them would want her to come and find them, not when there were people that needed her. She thought the same way about them.

Survive. She felt another pulse in her blood, as if she willed the command to her friends, somewhere out there.

“I’m sorry, Grey. I’ve been under a lot of stress,” Kate said.

He looked at the table even more, turning a little red.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I... it... it’s been... exciting,” he said in a quiet voice.

Kate raised her brows. There were things she wanted to say to that, but she snapped her mouth shut. Thousands had died. More people than she had known, and those she did were likely gone as well. Everything she had worked to protect, gone up in flames. Monsters killed and pillaged as they spoke, discussing their simple plans.

She took in a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment as she sat back.

There was a part of her that wanted to punch him for what he had said. For his uncaring attitude. He had seen the dead, had he not? His wizard friend, his mother, they could both be dead.

She felt another pulse.

Magic. Her magic. The circumstances had changed. The world had changed. Going back was not an option, all she could do was focus on the now, and think of the future. When she had been a firefighter, they had tools, gear, skills they trained and honed, to protect and save people, buildings, pets. They taught people preventative measures, checked fire code violations, and in the worst case they took care of fires. And yet she had just been one woman. Fighting against an endless slew of accidents. Her time and energy was limited.

The first point remained true, but her energy, what she could physically do... that had already changed.

What had happened to Keilberg. What had happened to Falstadt. She couldn't change it. Not anymore. But she could learn, could grow, to make sure whatever they built here would not meet the same fate.

And already she felt more powerful than she had ever been.

In that, she could empathize with Grey. But exciting wasn't the right word.

It was intoxicating.

When she fought, when she let loose. When Mindless Ferocity burned away her doubts, when she killed the monsters that came for them. She gulped. It had meant survival, either her or them. Easy to justify, even to someone who had never hurt anyone. Even to someone who considered violence the last resort.

What she hadn't admitted to herself so far, was that a part of her enjoyed it. Enjoyed it a lot.

"I need some fresh air," she said, standing up as she nearly toppled the chair she had sat on. She bit her lower lip when she stepped out into the cool yard, though the difference to Bert's home wasn't much.

Ash still fell, scattered clouds moving above, evening sunlight coloring the autumn trees in gold and red.

It had been conflicting. The Berserker. Something she had rejected. Vile, violent, unhinged. A tool for survival, forced upon her.

Standing in the open as she looked for Wyverns, Kate started to think that perhaps a part of *it* had always been there.

Chapter 37 Life

They didn't have long until nightfall, Kate intent to at least test her new abilities once or twice before the last bits of sunlight faded. She knew that monsters could attack at any time but so far it seemed most of the creatures they had seen avoided daylight. *Not the undead*, she remembered, two blue eyed goblins running after their truck just a few hours prior.

She looked down at her hammer, felt its weight. Her clothes were ripped in places. Dried blood, most of it not hers. Her gear was still in a much better shape than after some of the previous fights she'd had. She grinned. *Fights I've had. Me.*

Fucking ridiculous, all this. Exciting for Grey, sure. I had enough excitement before all this. She looked at the dried blood on her weapon. A medieval tool made for war. Kate felt its weight once more and threw it up in a spin, catching it as if it was a children's toy.

"That's pretty hot," Allison said.

Kate glanced her way, seeing the woman lean against the door frame of the armory. Blue eyes took her in, the blonde bun clean now. "Thanks. You look good yourself.."

Allison waved her off. "I was not in a presentable state when we first met."

"I suppose not," Kate said with a smile. "Out there for cosplay?"

"For a walk in the sun, always looking for spots. Getting the perfect lighting isn't easy," Allison said.

"Not something I've ever thought about, but I suppose you're right," Kate said, checking through her skills again.

"Never had to do a shooting yourself? For the firefighter magazine or something?" Allison said with a smile.

Kate smiled. "The guys are hot enough for that. I won't lie and say I haven't been asked before."

"They really are," Allison said. "Were they in..."

"Yeah, let's not..." Kate said, shaking her head slightly.

"I'm sure they're fine." Allison said with a slight smile.

Kate decided not to say anything to that. It wouldn't come out the way she intended.

"Whilst I have you here, I wanted to take your measurements," Allison said.

Kate raised a brow at that.

"What? Did you think I'd just sit around for you powerful lasses to protect me?" Allison asked. "Do you have any clue how complex some of the costumes I made were? Throwing together a well fitting piece of Wyvern armor is the easiest thing in the world. You do have to get me something to power the Strohringer though. And more materials."

"A generator, and fuel. Make a list and give it to Jon," Kate said.

“Oh valiant knight thou art,” she said when her eyes lit up. “Oh! There is this really cute sewing shop in Kahrsdorf. Nadelwald. Gods, I hope Nadia is alive. Hmm, she probably isn’t.” She shook her head and looked back to Kate. “Just get me everything that’s there. I doubt she will mind.”

“If we go there, sure,” Kate said, pushing the send button on her radio. “I’m up for testing.”

The others joined her outside less than a minute later, all of them regularly looking up to check for flying creatures. Smoke rose from near the gates, but Ethan was right, there were other plumes visible farther away, even from the yard.

Kate went to grab one of the old beds from the barracks. They were nowhere near comfortable enough to sleep on and they would need more space. For Allison to work, for storage, or other people. And they needed wood to burn in the furnace. *Quite a lot of birds with one single hammer.* She grabbed the large wooden frame and pulled, puffing slightly at the weight. *Solid wood. Could kill a man with that thing.*

She angled it upwards and pulled it out of the long room. There were ten in total. “Mind if I make some firewood?” she asked as she dragged the thing over the cobblestone, the sound of wood hitting stone dull and heavy.

The others just watched on, Grey with one hand on the handle of his blade. She looked at him for a moment. His gaze wasn’t as frantic as when they had met, instead focused. His hands didn’t shake, his posture relaxed and calm. The gray jacket looked good on him, gave him some mass. *Not quite the same guy that I met in the forest.* She grinned to herself and set down the bed.

“Melusine, can you check me before I use Blood Frenzy? Wait... Grey, get me some rope,” she said.

“Rope?” he asked.

“And ground coffee,” Jon said.

“You got it,” Kate said as Melusine approached and checked on her, a slight glow coming from her hands occasionally. She looked around and settled on the drain connected to the barracks. With the rope Grey provided, she bound her right leg onto the metal before handing all of her hunting knives to the man. Just in case.

“Ready?” she asked the others, hammer in hand.

Grey gave her a quick nod.

“We’re ready,” Melusine said, a smile on her face.

Alright, here we go, Kate thought and activated Blood Frenzy.

She could feel her chest heat up. It felt like her eyes sharpened. Her hammer felt good in her hands. She crouched slightly. They were out in the open, easily seen.

She heard birds fly, heard the breathing of her allies, she heard the smoldering of flames just outside the gates. Fast steps, a critter. No danger to her. She looked up, scanned the skies but found nothing. There were no enemies here. She was safe. As were the others. It was difficult to focus on them, to listen to what they said. Irrelevant. They were safe.

A task. There had been a task. An idea. She took a step forward, feeling the rope around her leg keeping her back. Did she have to pull? No. That had not been what she had wanted to do.

Firewood. The bed. In her focused state she had nearly forgotten. The task felt difficult to grasp at

first but now became freeing, as if the very blood in her veins boiled. A solid wood frame. It would not stand. Not against her.

She raised her hammer and sacrificed as much of her health as she could to increase the power of her strike. It felt intuitive. Easy. As if she was made for it. The rush was like nothing she had felt before. A first kiss. The heat of fire. The scream of a child. Her blood sang, her heart beating. She felt alive. Her hammer came down, striking one of the side beams of the bed, the wood splitting with a dull sound before the stone below shook from the power of her impact.

A part of her knew that the rush had come and gone but she remained focused on the task at hand. Kate tried to raise her leg but was once again reminded of the rope. She didn't let go of the hammer but grabbed the rope with one hand. Then she pulled. A creaking resounded from the drain pipe before something snapped. She didn't care what, but her leg was free. Pushing her boot against the wood, she pulled on the hammer, its head stuck inside the splintered beam. It came free after a few seconds.

She considered the broken frame and started to walk around it. Her next strike would break the other side. A voice resounded. A smell. Something was wrong. Her allies were concerned, she could tell. Were there enemies? She could not hear or see anything that would suggest such.

"Kate, stop the spell," the voice said.

The spell? Oh.

Yes. I see.

Her ears popped, her vision returning to something wider, less focused. She saw the concerned looks of the others, saw the mangled wooden beam and the splinters below. She turned to look at the snapped drain pipe. The rope had won out. "Need a better pipe," she said with a smile.

"How did it feel?" Melusine asked. Her eyes were entirely focused on Kate, the smile on her face wide.

"You look a little crazy there," Kate said.

"Well yes. What you just did was crazy," Melusine said. "Absolutely incredible," she added and walked over before touching Kate with a slightly glowing hand.

"I don't know if I should be flattered or scared. It felt..." she started but snapped her mouth shut. "Good," she said after a few more seconds. *Amazing.*

"We saw the look on your face, honey, you're not fooling anyone," Melusine said. "I can tell that you lost something from that, though it's difficult to discern. Any idea how much you used up yourself?"

Kate shook her head. She focused on the question and tried to feel it out. "I could tell... while the spell was active. I could tell that there was plenty left. And I used as much as I could. It felt right, as if I knew what was appropriate. Less than ten percent, I'd say. Maybe less than five. I can feel it kind of. A little drained, so to say."

Allison chuckled from the side.

"We could test more but it might become dangerous. Neither do we know how long it takes you to regenerate the lost... health. I should keep my magic ready to heal actual injuries as well," Melusine said.

“Speaking of which, how is Logan?” Kate asked.

“The actual burns are healed. A miracle on its own. He still needs to rest... healing magic isn’t easy on the body, and while I feel my magic contributes to a large part to the process, much of the work is done by the person I’m healing. Much like normal tissue regeneration for example, just amplified and guided. Only theories for now, but I can gauge a lot with my magic,” Melusine said.

“We should move on, the sun is setting soon,” Jon said.

“Right,” Kate said and used her Vengeful Charge in a random direction. She chose the full distance and rushed forward by seven meters. According to the skill, she didn’t have measuring tape with her after all. The speed at which she advanced hadn’t changed since she got the initial non-evolved skill, which meant for seven meters, the travel duration took more than a second. Probably less than two, but the strange thing was mainly that she was aware of the travel time. Like jumping from the one meter board at the pool versus the ten meter one.

The cost had lowered from twenty to ten percent of her stamina which was certainly noticeable, even after one use.

Testing Reaper Jump would be a little more difficult. She looked to the barracks, ran towards them, and activated the skill. She felt a pulse go through her, leg muscles tensing before she jumped up, all the way to the roof of the one story structure. A strange feeling had come and gone during the jump but it was difficult to tell what exactly. Just the fact that she could jump three meters high was a rush on its own, distorting what likely represented the added resistance. *Guess we could figure out a way to test this but knowing I have a physical resistance during the jump should really not change how I approach fights. Not without actual experience.*

“It’s a little cheaper now,” Kate said from atop the barracks.

“You don’t have to climb the stairs to the walls anymore,” Jon said.

“Yeah, but that also means monsters might have similar abilities,” Kate answered.

“We already have Wyverns around,” Jon said. “The walls are a measure of defense. We’ll have to add more, no matter what kind of creatures are out there.”

“What if it just adds a physical resistance to prevent injuries from falling,” Grey suggested.

Kate sat down on the edge of the roof, dangling her legs down. “That’s a good point. Should I try?”

“And sprain your ankles? No. In a few days maybe, if we have no injuries left,” Melusine said. “It takes about four hours for me to get back my mana.”

“Fine by me,” Kate said. She held onto the edge of the roof and lowered herself down with one hand, then she let herself drop. *Effortless*, she thought, a slight smile coming to her face. She had done similar exercises before and while she could lift her own body with reasonable strain, it had never been quite so easy. Let alone with one arm. “I feel like a monkey.”

Her eyes widened a little when she realized she had said that out loud.

Grey nodded as if he understood. Melusine smiled. “Monkeys are very strong,” she said as a matter of fact.

“I should invest into Strength as well,” Jon murmured to himself, too quiet for anyone but Kate to hear.

“Weirdo,” Allison said, quiet but the look on her face suggested she knew Kate could hear her.

“I don’t think testing Blood Rupture right now is a good idea. I know the range and won’t use it near anybody else,” Kate said, returning her attention to her skills. “Blood for the Living is self explanatory and Fury of the Unarmored... well, I suppose I’ll find out how that looks once I get injured.”

“If you knew how it worked, you could incorporate it into your fighting,” Grey suggested.

“Yes, but I’m not going to have you cut me here just to test it. If it happens against monsters, it happens. I’d rather be cautious, not that that’s much of an option with my berserking abilities,” she said. She couldn’t deny that a part of her wanted to find out what exactly her other skills did. Blood Rupture especially. But the time would come.

The last skill that had changed was Terrifying Presence, but if anything, Kate wanted a shower, not to cover herself in more blood. “I think I’ll go take a shower.” She noticed Grey’s eyes widening before he opened and closed his mouth. “What is it?”

“I... no... go take your shower,” he said and smiled.

Sad puppy eyes. She raised her brow. “What is it, Grey? If you want something, say it.”

“I... well,” he said and scratched the back of his neck.

Kate closed her eyes. She was tired from all the fighting and really not in the mood to help him out with his behaviors. She heard his heartbeat quicken, and she heard the steps of Allison coming closer. Leisurely, calm, laid back. Her confidence radiated even in the way she walked.

Kate opened her eyes to see Allison clutch Grey’s shoulder before she looked at him. Her face was very close to his, the man’s heartbeat increasing again. She hoped Melusine had some magic left to treat his incoming cardiac arrest.

“Boy. What she’s saying is that you should value your own wishes. Because if you don’t, you’re going to resent yourself more and more, until your self worth is so fucking pitiful, you might as well not exist. So say what you want, if only to yourself,” she said, touching his cheek before she turned his face towards hers. “Not so pale anymore, are we,” Allison said and giggled, letting him go.

Kate raised her brow. *Now that sounds like someone speaking from experience.*

“I g... g... got a new Class,” he said.

“Your support Class at level ten?” Jon asked.

The boy nodded. He looked down.

“That’s great. Congratulations. What did you choose, and what options did you get?” Jon asked.

“Wait, let’s do this inside, I want to write it all down.”

This time, Grey’s smile looked genuine. He followed an excited Jon back inside, Eloise and Celeste going after them.

Melusine, Kate, and Allison were left outside, their gazes following the group.

“I want him so bad right now,” Allison said.

“You wish,” Melusine said. “I sometimes thought it would be nice for him to have a son as well.”

“To pass on his hereditary titles?” Allison asked.

Melusine looked over and raised her brows. “Yes. I’m the Queen of England.”

“I just want a shower. I guess it’s a good thing you two can think about sex and children. Should’ve seen how Grey cut through those undead,” Kate said as she started towards the house.

“Don’t give me ideas. He’s way too young,” Allison said.

“You took the time to give him advice,” Kate said.

Allison smiled, sticking out her tongue. “Much easier to handle a few people compared to an entire community.”

“Right. I’ll clean up before I have to kill monsters again. Let me know how your romantic dreams go, Princess,” Kate said in a dry tone.

“Don’t act like you don’t love it, I saw the smile when you destroyed that bed. I’ll get me some of that magic too, can’t say I’m not at least a little envious,” Allison said.

“You can get a Class even without fighting,” Melusine said.

“Yeah, if it weren’t for the collapsing infrastructure and death of likely millions, this would be a great win for equality,” Allison said.

I just like my hammer.

Kate once more opened her eyes wide but sighed when she realized she hadn’t said that out loud. *Can’t give her even more ammunition against me*, she thought but found herself smiling. She never had siblings, the other firefighters pretty much her family. She sobered up a little, a part of her terrified that she started to feel the same about the people here, after such a short time.

She went up the stairs, the others too focused on Grey’s new Class to notice her walk past. She stepped into the shower, a fresh set of clothes waiting for her as she closed her eyes in the rather dark bathroom. At least the water still ran, even if it was cold.

Fuck it. I have magic now, and a bunch of people who can fight, heal, craft, cook, and plan. A smile tugged on her lips. Maybe it was alright to open up at least a little. And when the monsters came, she would be there to face them.