

Chapter 91 Cards

Veronica set them up with the radio station before she made to leave. “It’s good to be back. And it’s good to see you, Kate. I’m glad some of the team is still around.”

Kate respected the woman a lot but she had to admit that they hadn’t socialized much besides work. Maybe now at some point, they could get to know each other a little better. Not that she expected either of them to be any less busy than before the apocalypse.

“Me too,” Kate said.

They were in a side room on the first floor of the villa, equipped now with one of the longer range police radios that could reach both Keilberg and Grenndorf. The villa was chosen for its high altitude in the city after all.

Logan pressed the send button. “Jon? This is Logan. Are you around?”

“*Of course!*” Jon’s voice came through the speaker.

“*We’re all here!*” Celeste shouted. She sounded excited.

“*We heard about the dungeon. Veronica let us know you would be there to radio. What happened? Wait, maybe you want to tell us in person? Are you coming back?*” Jon said.

Logan smiled and glanced at Kate.

She smiled too.

Logan raised the microphone, then hesitated. “It’s good to hear you.”

Kate reached forward and grabbed the mic. “I’m here too,” she said.

“*It’s good to hear you too. Melusine says hi. Eloise too. And Allison wants to talk to you all,*” Jon said.

They heard a few crackles before another voice spoke. “*Oh my god, I’m so glad you’re not dead. How fucked is your armor, both of you?*” Allison said.

Kate nodded to herself, locking eyes with Logan. “You wouldn’t believe it. Absolutely wrecked.”

“Barely a scrap left,” Logan said.

A loud groan came from the other side, then laughter. “*You better have brought something else worthwhile out of that shithole!*”

“Have you been outside?” Logan asked.

“*The armory is locked,*” Jon said.

“You can see it from the roof as well,” Logan said.

“*Allison went to check,*” Jon said. “*What do you mean? Is there a signal flare or something? What? Wait. There’s light? What do you mean? The sun? Oh! The storm... the magical blizzard. So it came from the dungeon?*”

“Maybe,” Logan said. “It could just be a coincidence.”

“That would be a massive one. So dungeons can influence the weather? Or the creatures inside? We’ll have to discuss this! Yes yes, I won’t bother them about it now. Yes I know they’re tired. I’m tired too.” They heard Jon’s voice.

Eloise was next. *“Are you feeling okay? You’re not injured or anything?”*

“We’re alright,” Logan said.

“Did the potions help?”

“Probably saved my life,” Kate said. *“And many others, I’m sure. Same with the armor and enchantments. It was tough down there.”*

“You lost people too. I’m sorry,” Jon said.

Kate gulped. She nodded to herself.

“We are too. The monster on the deepest layer... it was bad,” Logan said.

“I’m sure it was,” Jon said. *“But tell us the details when you get back.”*

“Right. We’ll go catch some sleep, then make our way back to the castle, early tomorrow morning. I’m sure Veronica or whoever will be in touch has some more things to share. Valery is already planning the next moves. Don’t think it will be any less busy in the coming days.”

“But the dungeon is defeated? The undead are gone?” Jon asked.

“We don’t know for sure yet,” Logan said. *“The Union will keep an eye out but we definitely defeated something crucial. The red veins are gone, and the rest of the undead dispersed and hid once the sun was out.”*

“Those do sound like good signs. Yes here you are,” Logan said.

“It’s really good to hear you two,” Melusine said. *“I was worried. Thank you for fighting, and for working so hard. You should however go and get sleep now. I’m sure you’re both exhausted.”*

They were.

“We will,” Logan said.

“And we will too, and we’ll see you tomorrow morning,” Melusine said.

“You will. Good night, everyone,” Logan said and held the mic to Kate.

“Goodnight,” she said.

“Goodnight!” Celeste shouted, everyone else speaking over each other before Jon was back.

“Rest up, and get back safely.”

Kate and Logan sat there in silence after the radio call.

“I’m tired,” she said.

“To the bone,” he added.

“Let’s go to sleep.”

With all the fighting, and now the shower, call, and food, Kate was out in seconds after her head hit the pillow.

She woke up to loud snoring noises. She opened her eyes and saw the other combatants, the paintings on the walls and the shut door a few meters away. She looked for the source of light for a little too long before she realized that it was her new skill and not an external source at all that let her see in the supposedly dark room.

That'll take some getting used to, she thought and yawned, then stretched her arms. She felt sore. But not quite as much as she would've expected with everything that had happened. Sitting there in the dark, seeing everyone around her, she sighed, then shuddered. She thought of the dark corridors, the red and pulsing veins lining the stone walls, the undead, all the monsters they had fought. The Priest. And the presence she had felt.

She breathed out.

It was over.

They had gone down there, had fought, and they had won. Whatever that meant. *Defeated an unfurling source of death.*

And yet I'm still here.

We're still here.

The monsters are still in the valley.

She looked down at her hands, touched the calluses that she felt.

But fewer of them now.

Slowly, she stood up, to not wake anyone else, then made her way to the exit. She closed the door quietly behind her. Kate didn't wear her armor, staying in the clothes she'd gotten from the Union people. They felt comfortable, and she didn't feel ready to get back into her gear right away.

She did carry her mace. Just in case there were some undead nearby. It would take another few hours for the sun to rise. And they didn't know how the remaining monsters would behave, now that what they assumed had controlled them was gone.

Only a few people were awake, according to what she heard but she let them be, not in the mood to talk nor to disturb the quiet atmosphere in the villa. She did find a can of coffee and poured herself a cup, then made her way outside and into the open. It looked to her as if dawn was about to break. She could see that well, knew that there were no bright light sources nearby but she also knew that dawn was hours away. A very useful skill, she surmised and looked up at the stars.

When is the last time I saw the stars from anywhere near Falstadt?

It was a beautiful sight, and yet one that made her feel melancholic.

She looked down at her cup instead.

Casual clothes and a cup of coffee, she thought, then looked down at the massive bloody mace. *You don't fit the picture.* She smiled at herself, not about to start talking to her weapons as if they were sentient beings.

Only guys into guns do that.

She thought of Grey with his katana, a wry smile coming to her lips. *Did you talk to it? What kind of name would you have given it? Would you have shared that with me at some point? An embarrassing thought? Something the others might've teased you about? Ethan would've been relentless.* She smiled.

"I do miss those two," she whispered to herself, sipping from her coffee as she stood on the stairwell that led down to the garden. Snow still covered most of it.

Steam rose from her coffee and into the cold air. Cold air that didn't feel cold to her. And steam that she wasn't supposed to even see.

And yet she was here.

She had fought, had survived.

She sipped from her cup. It had felt like she'd been running since that goblin tried to shoot an arrow at her. Since she'd hid in that hut. There had always been something else that had come up. Orcs, an ogre, strange caves, military bombardment, a blizzard, undead.

And now. Now that she stood out in the open, looking up at the stars, it felt calm.

She didn't know what the next days would bring. Didn't know how things would develop, how the monsters would react, how the valley would change. But she found that right now, it didn't really matter.

She was just here.

Kate took in a deep breath of winter air, and sighed. Really, truly sighed. She wanted to have some time to process things, wanted to have a break. Of course she would fight, if it was necessary, and she knew for sure that she wouldn't want to sit still for too long. But a break sounded right.

She carefully sat down on the stone stairwell and leaned her back against the door frame of the villa, sipping from her cup of coffee, hearing the faint noises of the few people on guard duty, the sounds mostly drowned out by the whistling wind. It was a quiet night, even to her senses. And the stars shined bright.

When dawn finally broke, Kate and Logan were geared up and ready to leave. Dents and cuts aside, they'd still be somewhat protected by their armors, enchanted as all the gear was. They left the villa and made westward. Not towards and through the dungeon corridors but moving out in the open.

It was quiet, the air still crisp but a little warmer than in the previous weeks. Kate felt no tremors on their walk through the abandoned city streets.

They were in the outskirts of Falstadt when the sun rose to a clear sky, the bright rays breaking past the buildings of the quiet city. The snow shined white.

"A good day for skiing," Kate said, shielding her eyes as she looked up towards the sun. She'd have to take a pair of sunglasses with her if the weather stayed this good.

There was not a single Wyvern visible in the sky, nor any other birds for that matter. She wondered if they'd fled when the weather had turned cold, if they had been killed off by monsters, Wyverns or undead, or if maybe the magic had affected them too somehow.

The snow crunched below their boots. Their weapons clanked with every step. It felt good, Kate found, to walk out in the sun. Unafraid. Ready and geared up, but unafraid.

She knew that if any monsters showed up, she had plenty of tools to try and deal with them. And Logan had her back, equipped again with ammunition.

“Always surprising again how much the weather affects us,” Logan said, the two of them now moving back towards the castle.

The valley was just as quiet as the city, Kate found, and when they got into the forest, the only noises she could pick up were their own, the wind, and the flowing current of the Willow river.

They didn’t talk much on their way back. Kate had plenty to process from the past few days, and she knew the same was true for Logan. It felt good too, she found. Reminded her of the hikes she used to take to decompress from her work. It was the same really. But now she felt confident enough in her own new powers that the forest didn’t feel oppressive anymore. Sure, there were strange creatures there now but she’d faced an undead dungeon. She wouldn’t be surprised or injured quite as easily anymore.

She grinned to herself, realizing that she would even welcome a surprising encounter. Maybe not quite as much because she enjoyed fighting strange monsters but because it would allow her to go all out with her magic. And going all out felt amazing. Plus she’d be able to take out a danger that someone else might not be able to face. Several birds with a single stone. Was it a healthy mindset? Maybe not perfectly so. She would risk her life after all. But with monsters walking the forests and towns of humanity, she supposed that some people would have to take risks to fight them. Did it really hurt if she enjoyed that process as well?

She didn’t know, not for sure. But Kate found that it just didn’t matter too much to her. She felt comfortable. Comfortable with her magic, her powers, and she felt comfortable with the role that she’d fallen into. Though it had taken time, and a lot of work and stress. And injuries.

Healers, potions, and spells, she thought, smiling to herself. Now that the Maar valley might really be undead free sometime soon, and with some few hundred humans working together and getting used to their new magics and abilities, she wondered what was possible.

Kate and Logan reached the castle, looking at the stark walls. One difference she noted in regards to her hiking enjoyment was that she hardly felt exerted at all, despite their fast pace and heavy equipment. Well, heavy in the relative term. She more or less felt like she had a small backpack on. *Another reason to go for monsters. Or maybe I can start running some dangerous hiking routes. Not like sliding down a slope would be near as dangerous now than it was.*

She wondered what kind of fall she could take, with all her enhancements. There had to be a limit still. *And a reason to get to a higher level.* She smiled to herself, jumping over the trench and castle wall without issue, landing in a crouch that barely registered in her joints and back. She helped Logan up before they met up with the others.

They opened the armory door but Kate and Logan didn’t go in. She instead invited the others outside. Into the sunlight.

After the welcome, they set up a table out in the castle yard, sharing breakfast as Kate and Logan shared what they’d experienced in Falstadt, fighting alongside the Union. Jon and Allison had

plenty of theories about the Priest of Ceres, about the eye they'd seen, and various specifics about the dungeon, and now the weather as well.

"I'm just glad the sun is out again," Melusine said.

"And you're sure you can handle Wyverns?" Jon said. "If they've not all been turned into undead, maybe the weather made them hide away too, and now they'll come back out to hunt."

"We can," Logan said. "But we should still try to hide of course. In case we spot one."

"They'd be much weaker than an undead one," Kate said.

"They would feel pain, yes. But they would also be more intelligent. Maybe," Jon said.

"Intelligent enough to understand they shouldn't be fucking with us," Allison said and laughed.

"I'm more worried about you all if we're not around," Kate said.

"I'll have you know that we all leveled up plenty as well. You know we get stats too? Even if my skills are not generally combat focused," Allison said. "And we have equipment too." She tapped the Overakar scale armor that she wore. A slimmer and less jagged set than Kate's, far less brutal and more aesthetic, several pieces of fur and other fabric added to make it look almost ceremonial. The others had various pieces of different metal and monster part gear on as well, enchanted of course. Kate knew they had prioritized the work for the Union and for the two of them but they had to think of themselves as well, and with their highest leveled combatants unable to defend them, they had to take everything they could get.

"The third tier skill thing is a shame, really," Jon said.

"We don't know if clearing a dungeon is the only way to get them yet," Logan said. "It's possible there are other sources."

"I fucking hope so," Allison said. "Or you two will have to help us clear one. And with what you've told us, I don't plan to get anywhere near a dungeon boss or whatever that creature was."

"It's also possible that the undead dungeon was more dangerous than others," Logan said. "We just don't know enough quite yet."

"There were no orcs, Wyverns, Eratur, or any of those large black scaled creatures you saw down in that cavern near Keilberg. They were all taken out by the undead," Jon said. "So it's a reasonable assumption to make that the undead were the most dangerous creatures in the region."

"But if they're gone now," Logan said. "That means other creatures can expand again. Other dungeons. If there are any."

"We saw blue veins in the Keilberg caves. So that is one," Kate said. "Probably."

"We'll see how things develop," Jon said. "One thing we know is that we're far more prepared now. And the Union won't be sitting still either. They're well organized, and after that victory, even with the losses, I'm sure more of them will want to join the ranks of the fighters."

"Yeah," Allison said. "I mean fighting monsters sucks but the undead were fucking crazy. Props to you fighting so many of them, for so long. Even the Bograths were super scary but taking on an amped up orc zombie is really not on my list of shit to do."

"Let's hope you won't have to anytime soon," Kate said and smiled. She too was hoping they were done with the undead for the time being. Just the fact that they could take over any other dead

creature made them incredibly dangerous. And not just take over, but whip onward with almost no regard for their personal safety. The goblins had at least fled when their formation was broken.

She leaned back on the old wooden chair she sat on and closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sunlight, and the company of the others.

They had a bit more food and then played some card games, the conversation more relaxed now.

“I do want to see that red metal. I hope those tunnels are safe by now,” Allison said.

“Oh and all the roses. Will they wilt, now that the red glowing veins are gone?” Eloise asked.

“Only one way to find out,” Allison said.

“You really think it’s a good idea?” Melusine asked.

“It is the world we live in now,” Jon said.

“We’ll be there to protect you,” Logan said. “And you do want to see those artifacts.”

“I do,” Jon said and smiled. “But we’ll wait until we know how the situation looks like.”

“Can I come as well?” Celeste asked. She looked deep in thought, then smiled. “It would be too dangerous to stay here! If so many go.”

Kate smiled at the girl. She did have a point there.

“Of course,” Melusine said, to Kate’s surprise. “If we go to Falstadt, we’d all go together.”

Jon nodded. They must’ve discussed the possibility before.

“You don’t mind leaving your keep?” Logan asked.

Jon shrugged. “I’ll be honest, I’m getting real tired of seeing the same walls. Some variety will be good. At least for a time.”

“But let’s not rush things,” Kate said. “I want to have a few baths before we leave again.”

“Of course,” Jon said. “And I’ll keep in touch with the Union. And I think it’s good if we take today off.”

“I will want to try and save your armors at least,” Allison said. She hadn’t complained overly much, knowing how tough the enchanted materials were. If anything the armor had done exactly what it had been intended for. “Might have to remake some of the parts entirely.”

Kate smiled, looking at the cards in her hands. “The mace did a great job by the way.”

“Scrappie you mean,” Allison said.

Kate sighed and shook her head slightly.

Allison grinned. “I knew she would.”

“So what’s your level by now anyway?” Allison asked when they’d finished another round of cards.

“Me?” Kate asked.

“Both of you, I guess,” Allison said.

“I’m at forty-seven,” Kate said.

“Forty for me,” Logan added.

Allison’s mouth fell open. “What?” She leaned back in her chair and puffed. “I’ve been working my ass off and I’m at a lousy fucking eighteen?”

“We know there are a lot of factors going into leveling up,” Jon said. He chuckled to himself. “I’m only at sixteen. So is Eloise.” He said the second half with pride, giving the young woman a nod. “Grey used to talk about experience, as in experience points. He assumed using skills and doing actions related to our Classes would help us level up but he also assumed that killing monsters granted experience as well. There could be a factor as well in regards to the difficulty of the tasks at hand, the danger of the beasts, one’s own level of health et cetera. He made it very clear that it’s a massive boon that we can even level without killing anything at all. Which essentially means that we can prepare and get stronger without even facing a single beast.”

“Instead of danger alone, maybe it’s more to do with the quality of the experience,” Melusine suggested. “The first Overakar armor got you a level, Allison. And Kate said she didn’t progress nearly as much from fighting normal undead after a while.”

“A matter of challenge?” Logan suggested. “That makes sense. Yeah. Otherwise Kate would’ve already sailed far past me but the gap is similar.”

“The Union will have interesting data to share on this as well once they’ve taken stock. With the machine gunners and artillery team taking out hundreds of undead near city hall, they would’ve shot past everyone else but I would assume that wasn’t the case,” Jon said.

“Either way, we’re growing,” Logan said. “And that is what matters.”

“So what new things can you two do? We haven’t had time to show off our magics in a while,” Allison said. She grinned, before her lips changed into a thin line.

Last time we did, the others were still alive, Kate thought and stood up. *They would’ve enjoyed this though.* She glanced at her weapons leaned against the armory wall and raised her arms.

The weapons flew over and into her hands. “Jon, you can repair damage to the castle walls?”

“Just don’t break them down fully,” he said.

Kate snorted. She charged her axe with sound and threw it into the distant wall with a casual throw.

The blade cut into the stone with a loud thrumming sound, a broad section of the wall shaking for a moment before it stilled.

“An area effect,” Jon murmured.

Kate recalled her axe, showing how it was still thrumming slightly. “And another charge. Not super flashy I guess but it’s pretty big. It’ll save me a lot of mana.”

Allison whistled. “I wouldn’t want to fight you, that’s for fucking sure.” She grinned and stood up, grabbing a hammer from somewhere on her belt. She twirled it in her hand before the hammer head erupted in flame. “This *is* flashy.” She smiled and walked a few steps to the side, raised her hammer and knelt down to strike at the ground.

The hammer struck with a heavy sound, with far more impact than what Kate would’ve expected from the tool. A small section of the ground was on fire too.

“Probably the flashiest I’ve gotten. The rest is mostly defensive stuff or crafting related,” Allison said. “I would love to activate it all and have you hit me but I don’t think I want a level forty-seven Barbarian to hit me.”

“Berserker,” Kate said.

“Whatever. Wild-woman,” Allison said.

Kate smiled. “I missed you too.”

Allison winked at her.

“I… I have something flashy too,” Eloise said. She remained sitting and glanced at the others, avoiding eye contact when she realized they were now all waiting for her to show what she meant.

She stood up gingerly and took a few steps to the side, took in a deep breath and steadied herself. She raised her hand and snapped with her fingers, a bright crescent of fire flared outwards in a short range from where she stood. She smiled and glanced back at the group.

Celeste clapped.

“It’s definitely flashy,” Allison said. “You haven’t shown me that one.”

“No fire spells indoors,” Jon said. “Only for crafting, cooking, and alchemy.”

“It is technically an alchemy spell,” Eloise said with a smile.

“You know what I mean,” Jon said.

“You got some new stuff too?” Logan asked, looking at Jon.

“Not much, to be honest. Upgrades to the existing skills and some improvements, yes.” He held out his hand and a spear appeared in it, a dim blue glimmer following the movement of the metal tip.

“Almost as cool as Kate recalling her weapons,” Allison said.

“It’s faster,” Celeste said. “So it’s better.”

“It would be better,” Allison agreed. “If he could wield a weapon anywhere near as heavy or brutal as Kate’s.”

Celeste crossed her arms and nodded. “That’s a fair point.”

Kate smiled to herself, seeing the young girl doing her best to argue like an adult. She was doing a good job. *I do wonder when she gets a Class. Nothing so far I assume, or she would’ve shown it off all the time. Maybe there’s some limitation from an age level? Puberty seems like the most obvious option. What would you get, little girl?*

Celeste glanced at her and struck out her tongue.

I see, Kate thought. Mind reader it is.

Celeste giggled and Kate narrowed her eyes.

Little demon.

“How high can you jump now?” Celeste asked.

Kate smiled. “Want to see?”

“Yes!”

Kate checked the skill. *Second level ten, so thirty total levels which equals to a whopping nine point five meters. Five times my height.* The thought was pretty ridiculous. She mostly used the skill when her berserking abilities were up, which meant it was just a means to an end, or a jump to the next monster or group of them. She stepped away pretty far, crouched down, and jumped straight up.

She saw the ground move away, flying above the castle walls and even the armory, seeing the snow covered forests beyond as she flailed her arms in the air, then came down and landed with a heavy impact and a crouch.

“That fall would literally kill me,” Allison said.

“She’s tough,” Logan said.

“And I get more physical resistance stuff when I use the jump. Can also now create a wave of blood on impact but I won’t do that here, for obvious reasons,” Kate said.

Celeste’s eyes were downright sparkling. “So cool. I want to be able to jump like that too!”

“If you eat your spinach,” Allison said.

Celeste glared at her as if the statement was a grave insult. She huffed and crossed her arms in front of her.

“What about your gardening work, Melusine?” Logan asked. “Any progress?”

Melusine waved him off with a smile. “The skills are advancing, yes. Oh and I did get this as well,” she said, pointing her hand towards the non cobbled section of the yard.

A large wooden root shot out of the earthen ground and bent in their direction, moving as if an extension of Melusine’s hand.

“I haven’t tried it out yet,” Melusine said.

“Wood magic?” Logan asked. “That’s a new one. Impressive.”

Melusine waved him off, the root doing a similar movement.

“Want to see how effective it is?” Kate asked, grinning when she got a smile from Melusine. She walked over to the wooden root that reached about her own height. She watched as the thing snapped out at her, grabbing around her arm before it tried to pull at her.

She fought it with her own strength and won out. “It’s not bad.”

“Kate is far too strong for a test like that,” Jon said.

“It does use quite a bit of mana too,” Melusine said.

“You could easily hold back a monster, maybe even a few of them,” Kate said, having freed herself of the root.

She joined the others again and smiled to herself. Grey had been right. With how the Classes worked, people would grow in power and ability, and they wouldn’t have to face the monsters directly. It meant that in time, they wouldn’t have to rely on combat Classes or modern weaponry to defend them.

“Do you think we could go and look for other magical ingredients in Falstadt?” Eloise asked.

“We might be there for a while. Sure,” Kate said. “We haven’t found anything obvious though.”

“I should be better at that,” Eloise said, then raised her brows. “I didn’t mean it that way! I have a skill for that. And I want to make different tinctures too, they should have more effects for me as well, same as more advanced food.”

“You mean the food and tinctures give you bonuses that we wouldn’t get from it?” Kate asked.

“Yes, exactly. It’s like with Allison’s equipment. Things she makes are better for her. Or with dad’s Keep bonuses when he’s close to the castle,” Eloise said.

“Conditional bonuses, yes,” Jon said. “I suppose that’s the benefit of more specialized and Crafting Classes.”

“I wonder what a level forty-seven cook equipped with really special food could do,” Allison said. “Or a level forty-seven smith,” she added and grinned.

“You’ll get there. In time,” Logan said.

“Hmm. The things I could craft,” Allison said and leaned back in her chair. “I can already heat up metal to shape it, even without a forge.”

Kate smiled as she listened to their theories. Was it the undead? They had focused so much on that threat. Now that they had pushed them back, had killed the monster at the end of the dungeon, she supposed it only made sense. She wasn’t the only one who felt like she could breathe again. It felt like a lot of doors had opened up once more, a lot of paths for them to choose and take. Yes, they would have to deal with the monsters in their world but they’d found magic at the same time, and they were at the start of it all, figuring out the foundations.

But for now, Kate really wanted a bath.