

Hug a (Land) Shark

Von Alaiya

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Wyll was a good cook, which was a blessing, given that Shadowheart herself had not learned to cook well and Karlach's understanding of cooking was to just kill something and hang its meat over the fire. It was not as if Shadowheart was entirely averse against a well-seared steak or something like that, but it was most certainly not something she wanted to consume every day.

As it was, Wyll was making a soup from roots they had foraged in the forest and some vegetables they had bought in the last village they had come through. Additionally, however, Karlach had gotten her wish as there were two poor little bunnies – skinned and gutted – by the side of the fire, slowly coming up to temperature.

It was a nice autumn day, with the trees around them glowing in the most wonderful colors, as they were sitting there.

"And I am telling you," Wyll continued the story, "the man did literally not understand sarcasm or irony. He took everything – and I mean everything – literal."

"Well, what about the chimera?" Karlach asked. She was setting next to the fire, her feet naked as she was holding them up to the flames as if she needed to warm up.

"What happened to it?"

It turned out that dear Wyll was rather good at telling stories and seemed to enjoy those very much. "So, there we were in that old ruin with the chimera having us cornered. I did, what I do best, trying to distract the beast with some eldritch blasts. But of course I could feel the poison circling in my system and I knew I was running out of time."

Shadowheart rolled her eyes. "You clearly survived that encounter, though, didn't you?"

"Boo." Karlach elbowed her. "Let him tell the story." Like a little girl she was looking to her boyfriend, as he was stirring the soup, tasting it, before adding some more salt. "I learned one thing about Xenk Yendar that day," Wyll said. "He is one crazy man. When the chimera came sprinting towards me, he got this old shovel with the broken hilt, and he just bashed at the dragon head. Of course that drew the beast's attention and it turned to him. And maybe that guy is just lucky. Given the stories I have heard, it might well be true, but he bashed at the beast again, managing to burry that shovel in the chimera's neck. And there was blood sputtering forward, though the beast was obviously not that easily slain. It came at him, pushing him to the ground and there was spit dripping from the lion mouth as he was there." He paused for dramatic effect. "I of course could not just let him die, could I? So, I blasted the beast again and for once I was lucky, too, because I managed to blast the beast's goat head right off. Xenk did the rest. He managed to decapitate the lion head and in the end the monster

bled out.”

“Darn,” Karlach muttered. “I really gotta meet that man some time. I bet he has the best stories to tell.” But then she turned her head, clearly having heard something.

“What is it?” Shadowheart asked, but she did not even have to wait for an answer to hear it as well. A rustling in the underbrush. Looking for it, she found the source of it. A creature in the underbrush. It was hard to make out more. Just pale grey scales and glistening eyes.

It was Karlach, who got up, her hand at her axe. Her tail was whipping from side to side in anticipation, as the creature retreated just a bit further into the forest. Shadowheart, however, had not expected the squeal that followed.

“Oh my gods, you are adorable!” Karlach exclaimed, clearly having gotten a good look at the beast. “What are you, little one?”

The creature did not really seem all-too keen on that loud sound either, rolling into a ball.

Again Karlach’s tail whipped, but this time it was in curiosity. (Yes, by now Shadowheart had become quite adept reading that woman’s mood just by the movement of her tail.)

“Don’t be afraid, little one,” Karlach said, crouching down by the fire. She got one of the rabbits from the fire, holding it out towards the fire.

“What are you doing?” Shadowheart and Wyll asked almost in synch.

“The poor thing is probably hungry.” Karlach was waving the roasted hare back and forth. “It’s alright, little cutie. Auntie Karlach ain’t gonna hurt you.”

The creature probably did not understand her. But it smelled the food, slowly, but surely coming out of the underbrush.

“You call that cute?” Shadowheart muttered, upon seeing the creature.

“That’s a bulette.” Wyll sighed as he watched the creature come forward a bit further.

“A very young one, by the looks of it.”

“A bulette?” Karlach asked. “A fucking landshark?”

Then, finally, the hunger of the creature won out, as it jumped forward grabbing the rabbit, before retreating into the shadow of the forest with it.

“We have fought one of those before, remember?” Shadowheart noted.

“I remember,” Karlach said. “And that thing was giant.” She smiled at the creature.

“Which means you really are a widdle baby, aren’t you?”

Wyll just raised an eyebrow. “You are aware that these things are dangerous, right?”

“But not a little one like this,” Karlach protested. She got the second rabbit from the stick, holding it out for the bulette. “Are you, sweetie?”

The creature was clearly not quite certain what to make of it. But it was very young – and clearly very hungry. So in the end it came forward once more, carefully taking the second rabbit as well, gulping it down with the stick included.

“There, isn’t that better?” Karlach carefully reached out to pat the creature’s head and much to Shadowheart’s surprise the creature made a strange noise that sounded like a bucket of rocks being thrown around. It seemed to be a kind sound, though, given that the bulette allowed Karlach to pet it, coming even closer.

“You are so freaking cute,” Karlach announced.

“And you just gave away half of our dinner,” Wyll noted.

Karlach shrugged. “Oh, come on now. The poor thing clearly was hungrier than we are.”

There it was. That rumbling sound again, just before the creature snapped with a good put of Karlach’s arm vanishing into the large maw. It was, however, either not

meaning to or not strong enough to sever the arm. So while blood was running over the red skin, the arm was still attached – and Karlach was laughing.

“Careful there,” she said, freeing her arm. “You might accidentally eat my arm.”

Shadowheart groaned, hiding her face behind her palms. “I am not quite certain whether it will be accidental...”

Karlach looked at her, almost ignoring the pain from the bleeding wound. “It is just a baby. It doesn’t know any better.”

“But that does not mean it isn’t dangerous,” Wyll tried it with reason.

“Ah, you are just worrying too much. Little Bitey just got a bit overenthusiastic, that’s all.”

“You have to be kidding me,” Shadowheart murmured, as she got up the next morning, crawling out of their tent.

Wyll was already up, watching the same thing unfold. “I guarantee you, she is not kidding.”

Of course Karlach wasn’t kidding. She was lying by the fire, arms around the young bulette, with the monster peacefully sleeping in her arms. Maybe it was really missing its mother or something. Frankly, Shadowheart was not sure. Did those creatures stay with their mother or father till a certain age or were they just left to fend for themselves?

“Karlach?” Wyll asked, poking their girlfriend’s shoulder.

It was the tail that moved first. Flicking from one side to the other. She grumbled something, squinting. “What is it?” she finally managed.

“You... are aware that we cannot keep it, right?”

Karlach turned her head. “But why? Little Bitey is all sweet, don’t you see?”

“Because little Bitey is going to grow into a twelve feet giant monster,” Wyll answered. “And they... they are known to be aggressive.”

“Speaking of which.” Shadowheart crouched down next to Karlach and the still sleeping Bulette. “This one is rather tame.”

Karlach sighed, caressing the creature as if it was dog. “Maybe Bitey has lost his mother?”

Wyll winced at those words. “I... I don’t know how to tell you that, Karlach. But bulettes are known to kill their mother upon hatching and eat her flesh.”

“Bitey would never!”

“I am afraid he did,” Wyll said. “Or she. Do we even know...”

“I honestly do not think it should make a difference,” Shadowheart noted.

Karlach finally sat up, with that waking little Bitey up. “Well, I cannot fucking abandon him, can I now? Poor thing was all hungry last night. He will probably starve!”

Shadowheart looked at her, then at the creature, that was now rubbing its head on Karlach’s back almost as if vying for her attention. Admittedly, something was off. “A creature that usually kills its mother would not... well, act like this, would it?”

For just a moment Wyll was silent, considering that. “I admit that this behavior is rather unusual for a bulette. For that matter, I have not heard of them ever having been tamed, though I know at least some gnomes have tried.”

It was at those words, that something clicked inside of Shadowheart’s mind. “Wait just a moment,” she said, fetching her staff. By Selûne, spellcasting first thing in the morning was not the easiest thing to do. Especially not as it was a fairly chilling

autumn morning and she would have loved to stay in the tent for a bit longer. But the thought just needed a quick exploration. "Lady Selûne," she whispered. "Let me dispel any magic bound to this creature." She did cast the spell, directing it onto the small bulette.

And indeed, something happened, as with a strange sound and an even stranger smell, the bulette transformed into a rather small dog. Not a puppy, just a rather small breed. And for a moment the dog seemed to be about as shocked over this development as Karlach. Then it turned around, as if to take in its own body, seeing its own tail and starting chasing it.

"Bitey?" Karlach asked, gaining the dog's attention. The animal barked, jumping onto Karlach's lap to lick her face, seemingly happy about this development.

Wyll stared at the dog. Clearly this was not what he had expected. "Who in the nine hells transforms a dog into a bulette out of all things?"

"Who indeed," Shadowheart muttered. In her mind she was going over the options. Sadly neither of them was able to speak with the animal, but frankly... She could not quite shake a certain suspicion. "Well, let's see if little Bitey can show us the way to his home."

By the time their way led them out of the forest, Shadowheart's stomach was grumbling, given their lack of a proper breakfast.

At least little Bitey seemed to be in a good mood, the small white and brown dog running ahead and being at times clearly saddened, that they were not following fast enough. At times Shadowheart wondered, whether the dog would just run off. But whether it feared something or just had taken a liking to their hellish friend, or was just looking to them for protection, the dog waited again and again.

At times the snout was going down the ground as if to sniff something out. But then, finally, just some clouds came up to cover the ground around noon, there were some buildings in the distance.

Bitey seemed to get excited about this, starting to bark and running as fast as those tiny legs would carry him.

Karlach sighed. "I guess Bitey has found his home, hasn't he?"

"It appears so," Wyll said. "I still want to know who in the hells transformed a dog into a bulette."

"Yep," Karlach agreed. "That is one fucking good question."

By the time they reached the buildings – given it was only five of them, it was hard to call this a village – there was a whole host of kids around little Bitey. One especially was crying tears of happiness, which the dog was promptly licking off her face.

Karlach being Karlach, she went over to those kids – and the dog. "Is that your owner, Bitey?"

The dog turned around, barking as if to agree.

The little girl – she was indeed little, given she was halfling – sniffled. "Where did you find him?"

"In the forest," Karlach said. "Was all hungry the poor thing."

Shadowheart sighed, going over to them as well. "And one of you now is going to tell us, who thought it was a good idea to turn a dog into a monster!"

While none of the kids did answer, it was easy to make out the culprit. The human boy in question looked suspiciously into another direction as if he had not heard the

question – or had even noticed Shadowheart.

Shadowheart, though, did not get around to confront the kid as a moment later someone else was talking to them.

“By Chauntea’s bountiful harvest, what is going on here?” The woman coming out of one of the houses was a plump halfling woman with a stern gaze, but a face that clearly laughed at lot. “Is Pascal back?” She looked from the dog to Karlach, Shadowheart and Wyll. “And who in the name of Amaunator are you?”

“We are the one who found the dog,” Wyll explained. “As a bulette. In the forest.”

Shadowheart looked at the clearly guilty boy. “You can only be glad that our tiefling friend has such a big heart. Had it just been him and me, we would have probably killed the bulette, you know that?”

The boy, who could not be older than twelve, was uneasily moving from one leg to the other. “I... I don’t... I... I didn’t mean it, you know?”

“You almost got Pascal killed!” the halfling kid announced, getting up. While the dog was small, it looked rather big in her arms. “You are a fucking asshole, Freddy!”

The halfling woman groaned. “So it was you, Freddy? I should’ve known.”

“I didn’t do it!” the boy protested. “I... I mean... I... I did. But I... It was supposed to be a prank, alright! I didn’t mean for him to run off! Or get harmed.”

“Well, you are clearly lucky he wasn’t, you useless boy,” the halfling woman grumbled. She went over to the boy, grabbing him by the ear. “I am gonna have a talk with your father, you know? Messing around with magic, when you do not even have a proper teacher.”

This somehow seemed to hit a sore spot. “Well, that is not my fault, is it!” He strained against the woman. “I swear. I didn’t mean it. I just thought...”

“You just thought you would use magic all improperly. Magic is not to be messed with.” The woman dragged him over to one of the other houses, clearly not having any of this. “And now you will take responsibility!”

Shadowheart turned around to Wyll. Frankly, she was not even certain what they had gotten themselves into here.

But at least the halfling girl – still holding the dog in her arms – looked at them. Again she sniffled. “Thank you so much for bringing Pascal back. I was so worried he would be gone forever!”

“It’s alright, little one,” Karlach said with a grin, wiping away the girl’s tears. “He was a good fellow for the little while we knew him.”

Again the girl sniffled. “Thank you. I... Once momma is back, she’s probably gonna thank you too... But...”

“That’s alright.”

It was one of the other kids who looked at them. At Karlach specifically. “So, you met a bulette and were not afraid?”

“Nah, I am not afraid of some monster,” Karlach said. “We fought bigger, didn’t we?”

“Yes.” Wyll finally came over to them as well. “We did fight quite some other sorts of monsters.”

“Monsters and gods,” Shadowheart muttered, more to herself than to answer the children – but the children heard her never the less.

It was a rather pale human kid, who looked at her. “Gods?”

“Oh, that is a long story.” Shadowheart smiled. “A really long story.”

But the kid’s interest was clearly peaked. “Then stay for dinner! I wanna hear about that.”

“We should ask our parents first,” the halfling kid replied.

"Oh, they are going to agree," the pale girl insisted. "After all those heroes brought back Pascal, right?"

"You just wanna hear the story," a young halfling boy said.

"So what?"

The boy rolled his eyes. "You always just wanna hear stories."

Before an argument between the kids could break out however, the halfling mother returned. She had her arms akimbo and was sighing now. "You kids are really something, you know that?"

"Auntie Felice!" The pale girl was running towards her. "Auntie Felice!"

"What is it now, Ana?"

"Those fearless adventurers have brought Pascal back, right?"

The woman – Felice – raised an eyebrow, before looking over to their little group. "I assume they did."

"Wouldn't it be appropriate to then invite them for dinner?"

Felice gave a long sigh. Her eyes darted over the three of them, clearly trying to place them, to get an impression. "If they do not have anything better to do."

Once more Shadowheart's stomach was grumbling. She really needed some breakfast – or rather dinner. "I think we can stay for at least one meal."

"Alright," Felice replied. "But I am gonna need your names first."

"I am Wyll Ravengard," Wyll introduced himself. "These are Karlach Cliffgate and Shadowheart."

This got the woman to harrumph. "Very well. Then I kindly invite you. For dinner, that is."

"Dinner it is," Karlach said.