

Chapter 68 Home

Allison went to work whilst Logan and Kate shared what they'd learned about the dungeon, the inner city, the horde, Logan's support Class evolution and Kate's new support Class, Jon documented everything meticulously, the group sharing their thoughts and theories on the dungeon and the nature of the undead.

"I do wonder about the implications of a mana infused blizzard," Jon said after a while.

Kate had finished a few bowls of soup, the warmth first in her stomach now permeating throughout her. The sofa and blanket felt nice but she did need a shower still. She heard the tacking of the Strohringer or whatever it was called from upstairs, faint cursing sometimes mixed in when Allison couldn't quite get something right.

"It's definitely too early for snow, let alone this much," Logan said. "A mana infusion could mean anything however. Just the existence of mana could now affect the weather, same as it allows us to use magic. Or it could be that a creature or something else caused it in a more direct manner."

Kate sighed. "Feels like there are more and more things just piling up against us."

"True," Jon said. "But today you two fought and killed a monster that would've wiped out our entire group just a few weeks ago. And you got another support Class. We're here and I for one, want to keep going. I understand if it's too much, if you want or need a break, and I'd encourage it. We know now at least that we're not the only ones in the v-"

"I will fight," Kate said. "I just feel exhausted, Jon but I know why we're here, why we're doing all this. And I want to be in the very thick of it."

Logan gave her a look, raising his brows with a self satisfied smile.

Kate crossed her arms. "Yeah. I enjoy the fighting too but that's beside the point." She sighed. "It's part of the point, I guess."

"We all have our drivers," Jon said. "Whatever gets us to survive all this, and to build a new life for ourselves, and for everyone else out there."

"I'm more concerned about killing that giant monster," Kate said.

"You should discuss that at your meeting with the Union tomorrow. With more people ready to enter the city through the dungeon, you'll be able to explore more places and gather more resources. If the police stations haven't been hit directly or burnt out by the fires, there should be quite a lot of tools at least, and who knows what kind of magic and resources the Union has amassed already."

"We'll see," Logan said. "We shouldn't rush things either. The undead are a dangerous threat, so we should prepare accordingly."

"We will. You will," Jon said.

"All of this takes energy as well. Be aware of your mental state and make sure to get enough rest," Melusine said when she rejoined them from the cellar. She sat down on a chair next to Jon with her pot of earth on her lap and a glowing ball of light hovering above it.

Kate saw a tiny green sprout and raised her brows. "It's growing..."

Jon smiled. “You’re not the only ones pushing forward, though admittedly our efforts here aren’t quite as dangerous.”

“Mana infused weather, mana based healing, repairs, enchantments, plant growing,” Logan murmured.

“Yes. Even electricity doesn’t come close to the potential of this new power. If we can harness it, and push back against the monsters that would kill us,” Jon said.

Celeste made a slurping noise with her straw, finishing the glass of orange juice. She looked down at the empty vessel and glanced over to her mother.

“When we watch the movie, you can have another half, but not more,” Melusine said.

“But there is more,” Celeste said, the tone of her voice bargaining. “It’s a special day, isn’t it?”

“It is but this is about sugar. You won’t be able to fall asleep if you drink too much of it in the evening. And you can be excited for tomorrow. If you drink too much of it, you won’t enjoy it as much anymore,” Melusine explained.

Celeste seemed to think about it all, the frown on her face suggesting that she didn’t quite see the reason in it all.

“Maybe she should drink more and learn herself?” Jon suggested.

Celeste nodded at that.

Melusine sighed. “Tomorrow, because I want you to be able to sleep. Is that agreeable, Celeste?”

“Why not now?” the girl asked.

“Because I know you won’t sleep and I don’t want to deal with that. You can try tomorrow and see for yourself. It seems like a good deal. All you need is a bit of patience,” Melusine said.

Celeste glanced over at Kate, Logan, and Eloise.

“Patience is a good skill to have,” Logan said and gave her a thumbs up.

“You’ll like the juice more tomorrow,” Kate said. “And anticipating something nice is a very nice feeling as well, you can try to enjoy that in itself.”

Celeste slurped the last few drops out of her empty glass, listening to everyone and no longer asking any questions. It seemed she was satisfied with what she heard, or she was tired of arguing, though considering her young age, Kate assumed it was the former, she was a smart kid after all.

“Anything else you’d like us to share tomorrow? Plans you’ve made?” Logan asked.

“I prepared a list, yes, but most of it should just be formalities. I think it’s best to focus on getting to know each other, checking if we can trust that group, understanding what their goal is. If what Maximilian and Valery Lang have shared on the radio are true, then we should be able to cooperate without issues but you never really know how people really are until you at least meet them, and even then there can be surprises.”

Logan nodded. “I would’ve done that anyway.”

“Discuss what you think is important, I’ll leave the list with you as well with potential things to discuss,” Jon said.

“Don’t they have a lot of people?” Eloise said. “I mean, Kate and Logan are strong...”

“Not just them, darling,” Melusine said and smiled. “We’ve all been working hard.”

“I agree,” Logan said. “We’ve met one of their groups and while superior numbers will give them a lot of advantages, having to make due with less can lead to better results.”

“And sacrifices,” Kate said.

“And that,” Logan said.

They were all quiet for a long moment, even Celeste stopping her slurping when she noticed the sudden weight permeating the room.

“Fuck yeah!” Allison exclaimed, her dulled voice audible even to the others, breaking through the atmosphere like a hot knife through butter.

It made Kate smile.

“Sorry, I didn’t-” Eloise said and trailed off.

“It’s okay,” Logan said. “It’s important to feel. This as well. Everything.”

Kate stood up. “I’ll go get a shower.”

“Need a guardian?” Logan asked.

“Just my axe,” Kate said and walked up the stairs, knocking on the door before she entered.

“Allison?”

She found the woman focused on a piece of scale. “Not like this,” Allison murmured and turned the piece around. “Kate. I hope you don’t expect me to make you a set of armor by tomorrow? Because I don’t think I’ll be able to manage that.”

“Of course not,” Kate said.

“Your repaired things are over there,” Allison added.

“That’s why I’m here. Hey.”

Allison looked at her.

“Wanna see something cool?” Kate asked.

Allison sighed. “I can’t exactly stop you, can I?”

Kate smiled. “Come on.”

Allison rolled her eyes and sighed. “Sorry. I get pissy when I’m in my work tunnel vision.”

“Me too,” Kate said and raised her hand towards the axe leaning against the wall. She watched with a smile as the weapon flung itself towards her, catching it in her hand without trouble.

“Alright, I mean that *is* pretty cool,” Allison said. “Can I get back to work now?”

Kate nodded with a smile. “Sure. Sorry for bothering you.” She walked up to the woman and touched her shoulder. “And thanks for the repairs. Melusine said something about taking breaks and all that. Make sure to listen to her as well.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, Berserker,” Allison murmured, already lost in the scales again.

Kate whistled an innocent tune as she departed, closing the door behind herself before she descended the stairs.

Eloise had gotten a fresh set of clothes for her, Kate taking it and thanking her, leaving the armory while listening for threats before she went over to Bert's home.

Kate leaned her axe against the wall and locked the door to the small bathroom. It was dark by now but there weren't a lot of things that could've gotten in the way. She found that she would've liked to light up a few candles, to bathe instead of shower, and in hot water instead of cold. But this was what she'd get right now. *Another reason to deal with the undead, or any threat that would come here and attack us.*

She undressed and stepped into the shower, grateful that up until this mess, she'd had hot baths and showers, whenever she had wanted. And maybe, in time, they could allow and provide themselves luxuries like that once more.

Eloise can already heat water, she thought, wondering about what Jon had said. With healing, enchanting, all the strange crafting that Allison could do. The world had ended, the world that she had known, that they all had known. But it all made her feel like they were at the beginning of something new.

Dressed in clean clothes and warmed up once more, Kate joined the others in the cellar. She'd done a last check of the perimeter, listening to the snow covered forests. It was quiet.

Eloise had poured the wine into a carafe already, proper wine glasses at the ready as well.

The contrast of their day and what she saw here was a little confusing to Kate but if anything, it amused her. She was happy to see that Allison had stopped her work to join them as well, though she imagined it would take a bit of time for her to turn off. The alcohol would help, if she wanted any that was.

Kate raised her brows. She realized that while she felt closer to these people than she might've even felt to her coworkers, in many ways, she really didn't know them at all. Did they even like wine? She supposed she could ask but she decided to observe them instead.

She sat down onto the bedroll, leaning against a set of boxes covered by blankets. It felt like a sleepover from her childhood, Melusine to her right and Logan to her left.

"That's a cute smile," Logan said to her in a dry tone.

She laughed and got close to his ear. "You're a piece of shit."

He grunted with a nod.

"You two dating now?" Allison asked as she waited for Eloise to pour her a glass of wine.

"No," Logan said. "She's dating her axe."

"Oh am I?" Kate asked.

"They're f- dating," Allison murmured.

"We're not though, just to make sure," Kate said.

“Mhm.” Allison looked at them with some suspicion.

“Maybe you should explain to her later that we’re not dating,” Kate whispered to Logan.

“I don’t need you to set me up with anyone,” Logan whispered in return.

“What are you whispering about?” Celeste asked.

“Combat related topics,” Jon said and gestured for the girl to join him.

“What movie did we decide on?” Allison asked.

“Bert’s collection was somewhat questionable,” Jon said. “I’m glad we got some movies from Herbert’s Corner. It’s not Netflix but there are quite a few choices. Has everyone seen the Matrix already?”

Kate smiled. “Ages ago.”

“Yeah. That one stuck with me though. Sure it’s fine for Celeste?” Logan said.

“The effects don’t look real. It’s old,” the girl said.

“I was hoping we could watch something less action oriented,” Eloise said.

“It’s really more of an existential commentary on life,” Melusine said. “But I don’t exactly disagree.”

“Something Ghibli maybe?” Jon suggested as he looked through a box filled with dvd cases.

“They’re nice but a little too melancholic, for right now,” Melusine said.

Jon held up a case.

“That works.” Melusine said.

Kate smiled when she saw the Finding Nemo case. “Yeah. That works.”

Eloise walked over with two glasses of wine, one each for Kate and Logan.

Kate glanced at him and sighed, then looked at Eloise. “Not today,” she said. It had seemed like a nice idea back in the mall but now that she saw everyone here, she deemed it too much of a risk. Even a single glass would affect her reaction time, and it seemed Logan felt the same.

“We’ll make sure to join in when we’ve gotten to a safer place,” he said.

Kate wondered what that place looked like. The bunkers in the Hein Pass? Or just these same walls but with fewer and better understood dangers out there. They’d gotten Celeste her juice, and now they could share crackers and olives with the others, and they could have some wine too, but she supposed it was something to work towards.

To sip a glass of wine on a summer evening, overlooking a desolate square of Falstadt, with burnt out cars and someone nearby playing music from high quality speakers. The idea sounded nice to her, despite everything that came with it. *The beginning of something new, hmm?*

The others quieted down when Melusine started the movie, the quality of the sound and image not the best on the old laptop but then she supposed it wasn’t really about that at all.

The evening passed, and so did the night, no monster attacks waking up Kate or any of the others. Logan's new Vigor stat didn't have much of an impact yet but they knew that would change in time.

The next morning, Kate sat on the couch on the ground floor and listened with her eyes closed. She didn't further enhance her senses, just in case she had to react quickly. Her guard shift had already lasted a few hours. She found she wasn't tired anymore. Sleep had come easy and she hadn't woken up, feeling rested and sipping from a canteen of warm coffee she had made with a french press and one of their gas cookers.

The room was cool, warm light coming from the fairy lights. She breathed in and remembered how the room had looked like when she'd first found it, how it had looked like when the undead had broken in. She felt all that came with that, and smiled. They were still here, had retaken it once again, despite the intrusion, the violence. They were here, and this had become their home, her home. She glanced over to the old oven, wondering when they could reasonably use it again. Maybe they would simply never have a need for it again, their Vitality stats steadily growing. Maybe once they had equipment that didn't break every time they went out for a fight, Allison could make them magical blankets or something too.

She glanced at the wall to her right and looked at the sheathed sword that was fastened to it. A double barrel shotgun hung below, with a box of matches set onto it.

Kate pushed out some air from her nose. *Box of matches. He'd hate that, next to the sword and shotgun.* It'd been their home too. *Maybe we'll find a flamethrower at some point,* she thought but found the box of matches quite fitting. Sparks of fire. She thought of the time they'd stood on top of the battlements together, and looked upon the burnt down fields and forest of the Maar valley. He had loved it. "A new beginning," Kate murmured to herself and drank from her coffee. It felt meaningful and then the moment passed, and all she looked at was the thick wooden door to their armory, the room they'd come to call their home, out of necessity.

She heard some of the others stir and wake up. Looking at the watch whose ticking she'd tuned out first thing after waking up, she found it was eight in the morning. Ten hours until they were set to meet with the Falstadt Union. Venturing into the city before that didn't make much sense, with potential unknown dangers that could lurk there.

Kate didn't know what to expect from the meeting exactly. *Three hundred people. And a radio station.* She knew what kind of potential it represented, especially with magic and equipment they could get from the city, or equipment the Union already had. Managing all that, all those people, in any coherent manner, that was a difficult task, one she was glad someone else had.

She preferred smaller teams. It usually meant she could move faster, the scope of whatever they were doing more manageable.

"Morning," Allison said when she exited from the cellar, followed by Jon and Melusine.

"Morning," Kate said.

"Allison, you repaired her axe already?" Jon asked.

"I did."

"Wonderful," Jon said, smiling when he looked at Kate. There was a glint in his eyes.

Kate held her axe as she watched him approach. "What's that about?"

He spread his arms. "An enchantment. The first of its kind."

“You say that like it’s special and not just the fact that you have no clue what you’re doing,” Kate said.

“Come on! I tested it with one of the combat knives yesterday,” Jon said and fumbled to get the knife, then handed it to her. Nodding for her to take it.

Kate looked at it with some suspicion, then grabbed it. It felt the same as any combat knife she’d recently used. At least at first. Moving it around, there was something about it. Was it weight? She set down her axe and grabbed one of her own knives, holding one in each hand. *Not weight. Not exactly.* Both felt like really good knives. She felt annoyed that she couldn’t really see the difference, so she touched the two blades together and pushed.

Kate had gotten stronger. A lot stronger. And still, she didn’t really expect anything to happen. Especially with the two knives being of the same make. But when she applied a bit more pressure, she raised her brows, seeing that her own blade gave way, as if she was cutting through a thick aluminium foil. And she felt it now, as if some strange current, and it resonated, with her blood. Not a pulse but some kind of sense that what she touched was different. Magical. Because it was, of course. “Enchantments, you say?” she said, hearing the cut through blade clatter to the floor, only the handle and a bit of flat steel left of the original blade.

Jon clasped his hands together and grinned. Even with his gray hair and short beard, he looked about thirty years younger. “Enchantments.”