

Chapter 69 Roses

Kate stood in the former exhibition room of the first floor of the armory and watched Jon set up, drawing strange circles onto the floor before he spread out bits and pieces of metal and splintered wood.

“Is that some kind of witchcraft ritual?” Kate asked when he stood up, wiping away at the sweat on his brow.

He laughed. “Yeah. I mean it looks that way, right? I have no clue. There’s a vague idea of the runes I draw in my head and it takes mana to actually draw them. It’s a baseline, I think. Either given to me by this system or some kind of intuition that was unlocked. And I think there are rules to it, I just don’t understand them yet. But the more we learn, the more this whole thing will fit together, and the freer we should be able to apply this new knowledge.” He looked at her. “At least in theory.” He held up his hand. “Your axe.”

Kate looked at the thing and held it out to him. “How long do you think that will take?”

“The knife took a while, around an hour probably,” he said.

She nodded, watching him carefully set down the battle axe with its wooden handle and metal blade, both unblemished thanks to Allison.

Jon didn’t say another word, fine lines of blue light appearing between his fingertips, like string. He looked focused, moving down to touch one of the runes he’d drawn, pulling blue string from it towards the axe before it connected. He moved on to another rune and repeated, connecting the axe at a different point. Sometimes a string would snap and disconnect, Jon grunting in response, murmuring to himself as he continued his work.

Kate watched on for a few minutes before she turned away. Both to not disturb him and because she had no clue what was going on. At least with Allison’s work, she could somewhat grasp at what she was trying to accomplish. Cutting and sanding down scales, using the very knife Jon had already enchanted.

“Got enough juice for a pair of scissors and a few needles after the axe?” Allison asked, glancing up towards Jon when Kate walked past. “This is so much easier.”

Jon didn’t reply, too engrossed in his work.

“I’ll ask him later,” Allison said, glancing at Kate before she resumed her cutting and honing, occasionally blowing at the scale in her hand.

Kate found the others downstairs, Celeste and Logan watching Eloise stir the contents of a pot, heated by her magic it seemed as there was steam rising from it. Melusine sat with one hand holding a book and the other raised above her flower pot and the growing green within. It looked a little bigger than yesterday, Kate thought.

She herself sat down on the couch. “That smell isn’t particularly appetizing.” It was both earthy and herbal.

“I don’t think the taste is the point,” Eloise said, taking a spoon before she sipped a bit of the liquid. She coughed. “Better,” she murmured and turned to the cutting board set onto the ground next to

her. A few of the red roses they'd found in the dungeon were laid out on top of it and Eloise began slicing away the heads.

"Is that safe?" Kate asked.

"I should be able to heal her if she poisons herself," Melusine said and looked at her daughter with a smile. "But I'm sure she'll do well without it."

"Getting poisoned is probably just part of the process," Eloise murmured. She breathed in with a slight shudder, as if to steel her resolve. "No achievement without some amount of risk, and poison. At least that's what I'm trying to tell myself," she said, the second part murmured more to herself.

She held up one of the rose heads and closed her eyes, her hand glowing for a short moment, singeing the flower. Then Eloise opened her eyes and squashed the flower before she chucked it into the pot.

Kate watched as the thick brown liquid took on a reddish color near instantly.

Celeste clapped her hands and made a squealing sound.

Eloise added two more heads in the same manner before she went back to stirring, humming to herself.

Logan glanced at Kate and smiled. "I don't exactly feel needed here anymore."

She smiled back, grabbing her coffee and sitting down on the couch.

"Jon said he'd try to enchant my greatsword as well if the axe project works out," he said.

"If it works out? I didn't know there were any risks involved," Kate said.

"Oh he didn't say? If he fails to concentrate even for a few seconds, the thing he enchants combusts into mere dust," Logan said.

Kate opened her mouth to respond when she narrowed her eyes. She grunted instead.

"Sure," she said and sipped from her canteen.

He sat down next to her and sighed. "A joke."

"I figured," she said.

They were quiet for some time, watching Eloise simmer whatever the fuck she was cooking, Celeste asking questions here and there, most of them related to witches and superpowers.

Kate drank from her coffee, hearing the simmering liquid, the low humming of Melusine's light magic spell, the dulled sounds of cutting from above, and another hum, likely from Jon's magic. The whole place felt vibrant to her, busy. She could feel their purpose, smelling the coffee to distract herself from the smell of Eloise's creation, the herbal and earthy scents having been joined by the smell of iron. Seeing and hearing all of it, it made her feel confident for the time being. More so however, she felt an aching sense in her chest. She wondered what kind of magic Grey and Ethan would've unlocked at level thirty, what kind of powers they would've gotten, and how excited they would've been to see all this, to see how far they'd come.

She drank and closed her eyes.

Today, they would meet with the Union, they would share plans and resources. Herself and Logan, they would soon delve deeper into that dungeon, and they would think of a way to wipe out that

horde, and any other horde of undead still out there. But Kate knew in that moment that that wouldn't be the end of it. Not for her. Maybe they would be safe here after the monsters in the valley were wiped out, who really knew? But Grey, Ethan, and Bert, they were three people she had known, had come to care about. There were people out there who had met the same fate, hundreds of thousands, millions, numbers she couldn't comprehend. And there were hundreds, thousands, hopefully more out there still, each and every one of them going through this nightmare. Alone, afraid, grieving, fighting, and surviving.

She couldn't save everyone, couldn't fight and kill every single monster. The world had changed, that much was sure. But she knew that as long as she had blood in her veins, and air in her lungs, as long as she was here, she would take another step, and fight against the next monster that threatened her and those who remained.

She felt a pulse go through her veins and breathed, focusing back on the coffee and the smell of herbs and blood now lingering in their home base.

"I'm bored," Celeste said.

"We can play a game," Logan said. "Up for something, Kate?"

"Sure," she replied.

He glanced at her and stood up. "Let's see what we have."

Kate felt a strange resonance when she gripped her axe once more. It wasn't heavier, not exactly, but she knew that something had changed. It felt more substantial, on a strange, instinctual level. She felt as if charging it with magic was just a thought away. She felt a little embarrassed when she realized that she couldn't wait to use it again. To throw it, now that she could call it back once more.

She tapped the metal blade with her knuckles, the sound it made different than what it had been before. More vibrant, though again, it was hard to say what it meant exactly.

Logan inspected his sword with focused eyes, moving his hand along the flat side of the weapon. "It's like my sacred magic is already flowing into it."

"Magic resonates with magic," Jon said. "I would love to add more to that but that's really as far as I understand it so far, and that understanding is more instinctual than anything else. We have a long way to go to establish and understand magic theory."

"But you've started on that path," Logan said. "Can you enchant guns? Or bullets?"

"I will try, and will have something ready when you're back, though with the complex mechanisms involved, it's hard to say how the chemistry will react with magic. The gun itself would be sturdier, that's for sure but if the bullet itself is more effective, who knows? The crossbows you've recovered were capable of holding higher tensions for the size, and the bolts were magical as well, so there's certainly possibilities to employ similar techniques to modern weaponry but it's not as intuitive to me, nor something I know about. Yet."

"The payload could be increased if the guns are sturdier. But I agree, it would likely require manufacturing," Logan said.

“Or high level crafters and smiths,” Jon said. “With increased strength and other stats as well, the possibilities for weaponry has increased... many fold, I’d imagine.”

“At least when it comes to anything that a person could carry,” Logan said. “We’ll see what the Union has figured out about all this. More people with Classes that don’t primarily focus on fighting will have a lot of potential to set up an efficient production line.”

He looked lost in thought for a moment, Kate prepping the last of her gear for their journey to the outskirts of the city.

She checked her pistol and knives, taking the enchanted one as well, with Jon here to supply Allison directly. Eloise had prepared food to go, and was finishing up her meal for them to eat now, for the longer stamina buff.

The young woman came upstairs a moment later, her cheeks flushed and a smile on her face. “Food will be ready in a few minutes. Until then, here. I finished them, I think.” She held out two soda bottles with their labels removed, each filled half way with a dark reddish liquid that looked suspiciously like blood.

Kate raised a brow, taking one of the bottles and sloshing the liquid slightly. It was thinner than blood but pretty smooth, the color a deep and dark red. “What exactly did you brew?” she said and made to open the top. “Is it safe to open?”

“You can open it, yes,” Eloise said. “They’re tinctures of life.” She said the words and looked away, then shook her head. “It sounds ridiculous. It’s... I can tell. I could feel what the flowers would do if I added them to a base of liquids and herbs. It’s like baking in a way, or making drinks, I suppose. There is a balance to it, and I’m not good at it yet but I know that if you drink those, they should help with... almost anything. You have to drink them though, not spill them on an injury or something.”

“A lot of intuition there, you don’t know how they actually work?” Kate asked and opened the bottle. She smelled the contents and nearly gagged, closing the bottle again.

Eloise shook her head.

“We’ll use them if we sustain injuries and are in a safe environment,” Logan said. “And we’ll report back what we find.”

“Or if we’re in an emergency,” Kate said.

Eloise’s face lit up slightly and she smiled. “Yes. I’m sorry that I don’t know more, and that I couldn’t make more of it. It’s the same as with the cooking, I need mana to put in and with the low levels of the skills, it takes more out of me than meals.”

“Every tool will be helpful,” Logan said. “And who knows, maybe soon you’ll be able to supply healing tinctures that will make life out there a whole lot easier.”

“I will try more things... and do bring anything that could be magical or interesting back! Maybe it can be used to make other tinctures,” Eloise said.

Melusine stood up and walked over, then hugged her daughter. “Cook and apothecary. I’m so proud of you, Eloise.”

“Apo-” Celeste said, stumbling over the word before she looked up at Kate. “Witch.”

Kate didn't dare comment on the evaluation. She personally agreed with Celeste and liked the designation of witch more but historically speaking she very much understood the benefits of a more general and safe title like apothecary. People trusted apothecaries and many of them didn't exactly like witches.

They stored one bottle each in their packs and prepared to leave, Logan readying his various guns and Kate doing a last check of her own gear before they left the armory, out into the castle yard, a light film of snow covering both the cobbled and earthen sections.

"Good luck out there," Melusine said before she closed the door, Kate hearing the orc swords set back into place.

"Message check. Next planned one in one hour. Stay safe." Kate heard Jon's voice in her head, breathing in the cool air and looking up. No snow was falling currently but the sky remained overcast. She heard the wind and Logan reaching for his radio.

"We hear you, Jon. Moving out. Over," Logan said, his voice coming out through Kate's radio as well.

"Back out here again," Kate said.

"Feeling ready?" Logan asked.

"As ready as I'll get," she said and started towards the wall. "Let's see what the Union can bring to the table."

"Yeah," Logan said, following behind. "And don't let your guard down. We've met some of them before, and we've heard the radio messages but with everything going on, we can't be too careful around other people."

Kate nodded. She didn't like the thought, she found. Not at all. Everyone who had survived was in this together, weren't they? It just made sense to her. And at the same time, she could see the reason in his words. There were all kinds of people out there and with the magic they could now wield, all of that potential. They could do whatever they wanted with that, and there were no longer any laws in the way, or anyone to enforce them.

She walked up to the battlements and reminded herself that she could only control her own thoughts and actions.

Get information, evaluate risks, prepare, and take action.

She hoped the Union people were as reasonable as she hoped.

They left the castle and went eastward through the forest. No monsters stood in their way nor did they see any hordes or beasts in the distance.

When they reached the fence of the chemical compound, Kate raised a fist and listened. *There was something just now.* Slight vibrations in the ground. Very slight. She turned around and looked at the field of snow they had just covered.

Logan readied his sword.

Kate walked a few steps past him and squinted her eyes, then clicked her tongue. Her echo awareness revealed a crouched humanoid being less than twenty meters away from them. “I know you’re there,” she said. The sound she produced let her know that the being didn’t move.

“Lost another marble?” Logan asked when nothing happened for ten or so seconds.

His voice let Kate know that the being still hadn’t moved. “I know there’s someone there. Just can’t see them with my eyes,” she said and reached for her pistol, then decided on her axe. She signaled for him to get ready for a fight and started walking towards the being. “You look like a human, so just reveal yourself and we’ll talk. We don’t want to fight other people.”

She kept talking while she approached slowly, her own voice used as a guide for her echo awareness. Kate smiled when she started hearing a heartbeat, and breathing, both very quiet even with her enhanced sense. It sounded very similar to what any of her teammates sounded like, so she was pretty sure this wasn’t some ghost. Maybe a creature that liked to hide but didn’t want to attack directly? It didn’t move away either though, and now she knew where it stood even without her echo awareness.

Kate walked close enough to reach the being with her axe, looking right at it. She put her foot into the snow and kicked a bit of it towards the creature, the snow hitting something in the air, a strange shimmer visible before Kate heard a woman giggling. She saw a person appear, as if a veil was lifted.

A small woman, thin and holding a pistol in her hands, the weapon equipped with a silencer and aimed towards the ground. The woman straightened slightly from her crouched stance but some tension remained in her body. She looked at Kate with curious green eyes looking out from between a cloth covering most of her face and a hood above, both of them a very light gray, contrasting her dark skin.

“You found me,” the woman said, tilting her head ever so slightly to the side. She raised her left hand and waved, first towards Kate and then to Logan. “How did you do that?”

“Who are you, and why are you following us?” Kate asked instead. She glanced at the pistol.

The woman gestured to Kate’s weapon. “You came closer with that massive thing, thought I should be ready, in case. You two are Kate and Logan, aren’t you? I was to make sure no undead sneak up on us, and then I saw you two.” She smiled through the cloth covering most of her face. “The rumors seem to be true, though I’d expected you to turn into some kind of rage monster if you found me.” She laughed at that.

“What if I had?” Kate asked, shouldering her axe and taking up a more relaxed stance.

The woman looked up and nodded to herself. “Right. I didn’t think that through. My name is Aathi,” she said and curtsied with a fluid motion, twirling her gun before she holstered it. She put her hands together and bowed. “The others are waiting at the meeting place. I won’t delay you any further, though I still would like to know how you found me.”

“You were invisible,” Logan said as he joined Kate’s side. “Those are illegal,” he added and pointed at the silencer.

Aathi made a shocked expression. “I didn’t know, sir!” Aathi relaxed her pose and giggled to herself, raising a hand to her mouth. “No wonder Bastian spoke so highly of you two.” She pointed. “That rifle doesn’t look legal either, Mister. Maybe I should report you to the local authorities.”

“I’m more interested in where you got it,” Logan said. “We could use equipment like that.”

“The gun sounds attract more undead. I don’t really see the problem,” Kate said.

Aathi grinned through her mask. “I think I’m looking forward to working with you two now.”

Kate didn’t know if she agreed. The girl seemed entirely too blasé with everything going on but then Kate could see how someone like that would excel in a world with monsters and magic. She just didn’t particularly like the idea of someone like that having her back. “We’ll see,” she said.

“Good to meet you, Aathi,” Logan said. “I hope to hear when there’s an undead horde or anything else coming towards us.”

Aathi saluted in a fluid manner, ridiculing the sharp and orderly manner with which the gesture was normally performed. “You will know if anything interesting happens,” she said and grabbed a radio from a pouch on her belt. “Two unidentified humans just reached the compound, a red haired woman equipped with a large axe and a man wearing medieval knight armor, equipped with a shotgun, a sniper rifle, and a large sword. Over.” Her voice sounded professional, though she didn’t entirely hide the fun she was having.

Her radio crackled. “*Hmm. You know that I can see you, right? You were found, that’s really quite impressive, isn’t it?*” The voice was somewhat deep, not mocking, simply observing.

Aathi squinted, then rolled her eyes and sighed.

“*Is the radio working?*” The voice asked. “*Am I using this thing right?*”

“You’re supposed to say over at the end of the message, over,” Aathi said into it.

“*Did I annoy you? I’m sorry,*” the voice said. The radio crackled again a moment later. “*Over.*”

Kate looked around to see if she could find the man. He could supposedly see them but she couldn’t hear anything. *Binoculars? Or a sniper rifle.*

She was glad the Union was supposed to be on their side. But she still thought about what Logan had said when they’d left the castle. People who could turn invisible to the eye, equipped with sniper rifles. And she knew that that was just the beginning.

She put the thought aside for now and walked into the compound with Logan by her side, ready to meet up with the Union.