

Chapter 227 - Preparations

Kai realigned the block of ivory stone and cast a layer of dark moss to make the patch indistinguishable from the rest. Heading down the muddy tunnels towards the meeting point, he repeated the process again for the first exit used to escape the storage chamber.

Once his break out was discovered, someone would put together that cutting through stone was the only way to leave the camp unnoticed. The camouflage wouldn't stand up to scrutiny if an Earth shaper examined the walls, though Seryne might not want to involve them.

It'll be even more awkward to explain if no one knew I had been arrested.

Her intention to leave the Heart in the morning, together with the seeds of chaos he planted should delay any organized response. If everything went according to plan, he would be long gone by the time an organized party came searching for him.

Hmm... When did anything ever go as planned? His lips curved in a rueful smile. It should be good enough. I've other problems to worry about right now.

A large shadow stood by the passage into Valela's room.

"You're here." Lou took out a crystal light at the sound of his steps. His low voice carried the barest hint of surprise. He wore tight-fitting clothes with numerous pockets, a longsword in one hand and a round shield reinforced with steel plates in the other. Nothing extraordinary, but with his muscular frame, Lou looked like an adventurer ready to face a ferocious beast.

I just need to make sure he doesn't get eaten. If Kai had his way, Lou wouldn't come close to the basilisk.

The teen looked down at himself with a shrug. "If the basilisk is blind, enchantments are more likely to attract its attention than to help. I didn't have any armor that could block its claws and fangs, so I aimed for stealth like you said."

"That's a good idea, though your weapon and shield are enchanted." Kai pointed out with a casual wave at his equipment.

They must have cost a pretty mesar.

He would have missed them if he wasn't already on alert from infiltrating the camp. The suffused glow of the runes got lost in the dense ambient essence until Mana Observer focused on them. Standard sharpness and sturdiness bundle, with a pinch of elemental flare for Darkness. The effects hidden underneath the cloak were less impressive but still well made.

How many enchantments must he have come across without realizing? The only cloaking he recognized were those that were poorly made, giving him a biased view of what was out there.

Now I really want to test Mana Observer in Higharbor.

Lou grimaced at his blade. “They told me no human below yellow would realize. I thought they’d be good enough to hide from the King, but I can go fetch some unenchanted equipment.”

“Don’t. They’re good.” Kai patted his shoulder. *Suspiciously well-made.* While most beasts could intuitively perceive mana, their instinct wasn’t comparable to a specialized ability unless they had a talent for it. And basilisks lacked that specific gift among their deadly repertoires. “My skill is just really good at piercing veils.”

“That’s quite a niche specialization to take.” Lou furrowed his brows in thought before his eyes widened a fraction. “Have you already evolved your skill?”

Damn boy, I can’t say a word without you pulling three more.

“No comment.”

Kai looked down at his sea serpent sword he had gone through so much trouble to recover. He could obscure it with Shadow, or use a more practical solution. In a blink, the white opaque blade disappeared into his ring.

It wasn’t the time to hold back secrets. He had already used it in front of Lou when a wyrmling attacked them during their first spatial anomaly.

The big boy scrubbed a hand through his hair. He cautiously waved his hand around him and poked him with a finger. “It’s not an illusion... You really have a spatial artifact.”

A scream of dramatic shock would have been appreciated.

Kai slapped away his hand and flashed the silver band in front of his studious face. “Stop looking at me like I’m some kind of exotic creature. One of my teachers gave it to me as a goodbye gift when they left the archipelago.”

“Sorry. I suspected something, but I never thought I’d see one for real.” Lou stopped pacing around him, though kept peering at him with interest. “You’re like a walking bundle of mysteries. Most people can only dream of possessing such an artifact or striking a bargain with a divinity.”

“Well, after tonight I’ll be an open book,” Kai said with some sourness. “You can be the mysterious one. I’ve got no more secrets to give.”

Almost none.

Lou lost his amused glint. “You know I’ve told you anything I can about *that*.” His jaw clenched, forcing the words out. “And it’s nothing quite as exciting.”

Just a shady deal to take advantage of the archipelago's lack of resources.

“Yeah, I know. I don’t need you to faint right now. We must get going.” Kai took out a casket of polished cherry wood from his spatial closet and knelt on a carpet of moss to open it.

“I’ll have to get used to that,” Lou grumbled at the sudden appearance. The rows of gleaming potions inside quickly caught his interest. “Seems like you’re not out of surprises just yet.”

Two vials for each of the seven strongest recipes Dora created. Kai had been saving them. He had only taken a sip of Kai’s Nullifier to eliminate the drug when the rebels had kidnapped him, and a few drops of Kai’s Second Wind to recover. Once he finished them, they’d be gone for good.

If this isn't an emergency, I don't know what is.

Lou crouched beside him. “I’m not an expert, but I’ve never seen this many high-tier potions. Are they all yellow grade? And why is this labeled Kai’s Prowess? Did you use code names in case someone stole them?” he said with a smirk.

“That’s exactly why. Good guess.” Kai snatched the golden potion from his hands. “They’re a goodbye gift from my alchemy teacher, all *peak* yellow.”

He selected another vial containing a silver solution and poured a single drop of each in two empty vials, diluting them with water. There was another reason why he had saved them till now. “These are enhancing potions. The silver is for mental attributes and the gold for physical ones, but they’re not made to be used at our grade.”

The recipe book said early Yellow in both race and profession. Hmm... a few side-effects are better than being dead. It's just a drop.

Thinking again, he took out four more vials and added a few drops of Kai’s Second Wind and Kai’s Restoring Light. It was incredibly wasteful to use them this way, but he couldn’t gamble with their lives. “This one is for slow recovery. And this for fast healing.”

Should I add one for the basilisk's venom as well? If I'm hit, I won't be able to move and that's already a death sentence.

Lou carefully stored the vial in his pocket. “What do we need to do exactly? You didn’t say what your bargain involved. The plan is to avoid the basilisk, *right*?”

“Huh... Well...” He gathered his courage to push out the words. “I need an artifact that’s on the basilisk.”

Lou advanced on him with a threatening posture. “You’re kidding me. Please, tell me that’s a joke.”

If it helps, I wish it was.

“I didn’t know when the god offered me the bargain,” Kai raised his hands to pacify the growling teen. “From what I was told, I needed to find a piece of inert rock in some ruin. The King must have perceived it was special. You don’t have to come with me.”

“Yes, I should just let you get eaten. Why didn’t I think of that?” Lou nailed him with a furious gaze, making a clear effort to keep his hand at his sides. His fists clenched till his knuckles whitened. “Are you *absolutely* sure the basilisk is carrying what you need, and that there is no other way around this?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Lou cursed under his breath. “Fine. We’re going to do this. But if we survive, you’ll tell me the whole story, and why you thought getting pulled into the affairs of a divinity was a good idea.”

“I promise,” Kai bobbed his head. “I have no plan to repeat this.”

“Good.” Lou gave a humorless chuckle. “To think I considered keeping the twins out of trouble difficult. You’re on a whole other level.”

Thanks...?

“I was serious when I said I can deal with this mess on my own. I’ve got a plan.” Kai was warmed by his willingness to help, but it’d be easier if he was the only one in danger.

“I’m not backing down just because it’s dangerous. I’ve already made my decision.” Lou loomed over him again, looking offended at the notion. If Hallowed Intuition hadn’t stayed silent, Kai would think he was about to get hit.

“Spirits help me,” Lou sighed. “I don’t know whether to curse or bless the day you fell back into our lives. Can you promise me you won’t get yourself killed?”

“Only if you do the same.”

“Deal.” Lou pulled him in a bone-crushing hug and lifted him off the ground. “I also swear I’ll stab you myself if you do something so foolish again.”

Duly noted.

“Okay, put me down. We need to move,” Kai managed to squeezed out.

The burly teen released him with a chuckle. “Yes, little shrimp.”

“I can stab you from down here just fine.” Kai elbowed him in the stomach to reinforce the point. “We need to find and then mug the basilisk. I’ve got a plan to minimize the risks involved with recovering the artifact.”

Lou slumped in relief. “You know, I was scared your idea was to sneak up to the King and hope it wouldn’t notice you pickpocket it.”

The nerve on this one.

He couldn’t tell if the impertinent teen was teasing him. “Don’t forget who taught you to write.”

“You mean your dad?”

“And who helped you out when you couldn’t understand a lesson? Exactly. I’ll admit this situation has worsened beyond my expectations and I take full responsibility. But if you want to help me, you need to do as I say.” Kai held his gaze till Lou offered him a half-nod.

“How can I assist? Two minds are better than one.” He clearly wasn’t sold but seemed willing to listen.

That’s good enough.

Kai explained the idea that had been brewing in his mind ever since Makyn had told him the basilisk was blinded. Not having to do everything alone required some adjustments. When all the pieces fell into place, he was quite proud of the result given the nature of threat and his limited resources.

Lou crossed his arms. “So, you want me to act as a distraction and wait aside while you do all the dangerous parts.”

Yep.

“That’s the most sensible distribution of tasks given our talents. Look, neither of us can face the King head-on even if it’s injured, but you don’t have a danger or mana-sensing skill at Yellow. If the stealth fails, I’ll be able to tell immediately and escape.”

“I don’t like it. We could ask Valela for help, there are many high grades in our camp.”

Kai shook his head. "The King will run away if we bring too many people. Not to mention, the military would suspect something. Apart from us, everyone's primary issue will be the hidden realm. The only person I trust is Valela, and she's not equipped for this."

That was without considering all the secrets he'd have to reveal. There was no way to contact the princess without at least Ferla learning of what was going on. He honestly doubted Valela would even accept. She always put the archipelago first in her list of priorities. And whether it was true or not, the hidden realm was far too disruptive to leave everything behind just to help him.

"I trained my skills too. I can move faster than you if I need to dash." For how much Lou disliked the idea, he couldn't argue with the facts.

They discussed the plan, ironing out the details till neither of them could improve upon it.

I might even survive.

Kai covered the entrance to Valela's chamber with a layer of moss and mud, though it would still be suspicious if the military discovered the entrance. To avoid any future trouble, he circled the outer edge of the camp and cut a dozen more holes.

Now she's beyond any accusation. May chaos fester!

"Let's move. You'll need to be back before dawn to avoid attracting suspicion."

"One last thing." Lou rummaged through one of his pockets and took out a black jar with the distinct glow of an orange concoction. "It's odorless powder. Not as fancy as your potions, but it'll be good enough to hide our scents. Even a yellow beast shouldn't be able to smell us if we keep away from its snout."

Why didn't you tell me sooner you had that?

"So we don't have to cover ourselves in mud and weeds?" Kai couldn't hide his relief. If they wanted to have any hope of not being perceived by the basilisk, physical camouflage was as important as the mana one.

"Hmm, it's better to use both. A little sprinkle on your clothes should last for half a day." Lou took out a pinch of a fine gray powder to show him.

Great.

When the transformation was complete, Kai felt like a failed ninja. He was covered in mud and random leaves. He had a cloth over his mouth and nose to conceal his breath. It was probably overkill, but he wouldn't refuse anything even if it only had a one-in-a-million chance of helping.

All bow to the hobo of the woods! If the evil lizard could see me, it might die laughing.

Lou was in a similar attire, though he must have had experience camouflaging because it didn't look nearly as bad on him. He consulted a map he had borrowed from Valela before heading out.

They advanced into the underground maze cloaked in their respective skills. While Kai continuously replenished his elemental reserves, Lou's skill-supported shroud was far more efficient. They had already decided on every major detail, so they wouldn't have to speak and make noise.

Looking for the King was the biggest uncertainty in the plan. They were counting on the beast being too prideful to leave the site. The ruins were its home and hunting ground, possessing the mana density it would need to recover.

I'm so screwed if it left.

Lou patted his shoulder with a frown.

Kai gave a thumb-up to proceed. Careful to heed any whisper of danger.

They would set up the battleground near the center of the ruins, just clear of the summoning chamber. Kai'd rather not mess with the stone anywhere near. If the enchantments had been woven into the walls, it'd be disastrous.

He had considered intentionally causing another calamity before dismissing the idea. If beasts and spatial tears started flooding the ruins, the King would be much faster at fleeing to safety. It might also annihilate the camp and have consequences in every other Vastaire site for a chance to get himself killed.

The basilisk's speed was the main threat they needed to neutralize. They reached the central area without a hitch. Kai was about to start the preparation when a rattling hiss made him freeze.