

## Chapter 232 - Epilogue

Seryne forced her palms to lay still on her legs. She had been sitting in the empty hallway for the better part of an hour. Being the one waiting to be summoned was a strange sensation, and not one she enjoyed.

*Crimson Moon lend me your strength.*

A clerk with a thin goatee opened the door. “Captain Seryne?” He read from his clipboard with a disdainful smile—as if he didn’t remember her name. “The general will receive you now.”

*How dare he treat me this way.*

Keeping a calm expression, she stood up as Sergeant Makyn walked out the office. The soldier disappeared down the corridor with a terse nod. After everything she had done for him, he didn’t even greet her properly.

*I should have left him to rot pushing papers. He let that damn kid escape and made everything go downhill.*

The sneering clerk went to sift through a pile of documents without giving her another glance. It was all a ruse. The lowlife must be reveling in her humiliation.

Captain Seryne wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing her squirm. She kept a dignified poise as she approached the oak door. To think she had been ordered to wait outside the secretary’s office, her mother must have been very displeased.

*Mother will understand I’m not the one to blame.*

She dried her sweaty palms on the pants of her uniform and took a slow breath to calm her racing heart. Everything was fine, the general would see reason. It wasn’t her fault that she was surrounded by incompetent morons.

With an appropriately repentant expression, Seryne stepped inside.

The office was starker than she remembered. The garish trophies the local commander displayed had been replaced with six standards—one more than she remembered. The bright heraldry stained with blood, each belonged to an army her mother had defeated.

*Thump!*

Her attention snapped to the stately woman behind the desk, deciding the fate of thousands with the stamp of her seal. The decorated blue uniform couldn’t hide the square shoulders and muscled arms. Though she was more than twice her age, not a wrinkle showed on her handsome face.

The general had never forgiven her for taking an administrative profession. Seryne never understood the appeal of risking her life on the frontline like the daughter of some farmers. Her talents were better suited to a command position, where her mind could shine.

“Mother, I—”

“Sit.” She didn’t raise her voice, halt her work or look up, but the word fell with the power of an avalanche. Aryanne hurried to do as instructed, mother never liked to repeat herself.

“How many times do I have to tell you, it’s General Seryne when I’m in uniform?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Just stop disappointing me.” She finished signing the documents with a sigh and turned her dark blue eyes on her. “The stunt you pulled will make me the punchline of the northern front.”

“M— ma’am, no one will laugh when we find the hidden realm.”

“I’ve brought two Space warpers in the fourth circle. Do you have any idea how much they cost? Neither could find conclusive evidence of a lesser dimension behind the spatial distortion.” The general poured herself a cup of amber liquor smelling of fiery spices. The drink burned with enough Fire mana to char the insides of anyone below Yellow, though her mother downed it like water. “Not a *single* beast appeared since our arrival. Even your so-called ‘summoning chambers’ brought no result.”

Aryanne scratched at the cuticles of her fingers. “That’s impossible, I know what I saw. The extinct species, the ancient enchantments and the portal to another place. A realm is the only logical explanation.”

“Stop dreaming. There is no lesser dimension hidden on the Baquaire Archipelago.” Mother nailed her with a hard gaze. She took out an anti-spy construct from her ruby amulet. A dozen layers of protection sprung around them against eavesdropping, scrying and divination. That device alone could buy a small ship, not to mention the spatial artifact, awarded by the consul in person for her service. “That will be the only story you’ll speak of outside this room.”

“What do you mean, mother?”

“Blessed Moons, use your brain and stop embarrassing yourself. What are the possibilities if the mages didn’t find anything?”

Aryanne bit her lip, speaking slowly not to stutter. “Either there is nothing or... someone has hidden it from us. But that would require a colossal effort. There is no way—”

The general gave her a look full of scorn. “The evidence indeed points to a lesser dimension, enough to warrant preparations. The neighboring kingdoms can’t mobilize the necessary resources to seal a dimension without alerting our informants. A force from the heartlands might, but they could just demand we hand over the archipelago. Given the timing, we can also exclude a natural phenomenon. That means we are dealing with either some ancient safeguard or a powerful sentient entity.”

“How—” Aryanne stopped herself to digest the information. “The enchantments we found were already crumbling. To seal a dimension would require a powerful spirit or demon. The Moons would never allow an outer divinity to intrude, and none of the local divinities have any affinity for Space.”

“You’re thinking too limited. This entity might belong to the lesser realm or the Void, but the details don’t concern you.” The general scowled. “Do you know the only thing worse than mobilizing the army for nothing?”

Aryanne lowered her gaze, knowing her mother expected no answer from her.

“It’s having the prize stolen right under your nose. The Merian Republic would become the laughingstock of the continent. And be certain that if you make us look weak to our neighbors, it will be your head on the chopping block. And I don’t mean metaphorically.”

This couldn’t be happening to her. She didn’t deserve this. She had done nothing wrong. “Mother, how could I predict—”

A pressure choked the words in her throat. Aryanne was too scared to even breathe. For a second, she thought she was about to get slapped like a child, then the general retracted her aura.

“I won’t tolerate any more excuses. Now, tell me how you allowed this whole situation to degenerate.”

“I— It was—”

“Speak clearly, you aren’t a child anymore.”

Aryanne gulped, her mind racing for someone else to take the blame. “It was Kai Tylenn who sabotaged the expedition. He has probably been working for a foreign power from the start.”

“You’re blaming a kid? One with only a red profession and no connection outside his masters. I’ve ordered a scryer to look into him, his fate led nowhere. At most, he was the pawn in someone else’s game and he’s now dead in some ditch.”

*He had a profession?*

“I— Sergeant Makyn. There is no way the kid would have escaped if he had done his job properly.” It was just a passing suspicion, but the man deserved to be punished anyway.

“The soldier has already been interrogated by a truth teller. While he admitted some sympathy for the boy, he followed your orders to the letter and checked the manacles to ensure the kid couldn’t escape.”

The general poured another cup of amber liquor, then pulled out a classified folder from a drawer. “Do you know what this is?”

Hoping the general wouldn’t notice her hands shaking, Aryanne quickly skimmed through the familiar pages. “It’s a report on the spatial readings inside the Veeryd’s site, the last one I compiled.”

“Then tell me why it was left in the ruins. Specifically, in the room belonging to Sergeant Vert. My team found evident signs of an Earth shaper and what must be the basilisk’s carcass.” Her presence hung heavier with each word. “It’s clear you had no idea what was going on under your watch. If you weren’t my blood, I’d have you executed for this level of incompetence.”

*No, no, no.*

Why couldn’t she see it wasn’t her fault? “Mother—”

The general slammed her fist on the table. “Another word and you’ll be sifting reports for the next fifty years. The commander of the local garrison will be executed for this embarrassment since he put you in charge. You’ll receive a note of demerit and be demoted to a petty officer.”

After destroying any prospects of a future career, the general dismissed her with a wave and went back to stamping orders. “Go tell my secretary you’ll be working under him. I need to find out who sabotaged us. For your sake, I hope they’re equally stumped by the dimension sealing.”

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Dark clouds crowded the horizon, the subtle smell of a storm brewing was carried by the winds. Lou walked the paved roads of Higharbor to the outer city.

For all the vexing restrictions binding him, the oath also brought advantages. The knowledge and resources to obtain his rare profession were the most obvious, but there were more subtle gains too.

*I vow to serve the office of the governor, the high council of Higharbor, and the Baquaire Archipelago as a territory of the Merian Republic...*

The deal had been born from a compromise not sanctioned by official channels. There were five pages just to establish the hierarchy of command and exceptions he had to follow. Lou hadn't entirely understood the implications when he signed it at twelve. It engraved loyalty onto his soul beyond question, the wording was unbreakable *when* he was following a direct order.

*When* multiple factions of the Republic bickered and he was left to his own devices, the waters got muddier. His involvement had been easily dismissed. He was free to go with the order not to mention the Vastaire's investigation again.

While the exchange wasn't equal, the governor had also bound himself with more than the words of the contract. Neither party would gain anything from exposing their deal. The only way the governor would allow the military to interrogate him was as a corpse.

Lou was under no illusion; he would be made to disappear if he became a liability. Lady Cressida wasn't someone to be weighed down by past investments if they lost their usefulness.

*Cursed spirits! Why didn't I stay?*

Guilt grappled him, a small part of him had hoped he would be discovered and punished. He should have never let Kai out of his sight. When he found no message at their agreed meeting point, he thought it was a temporary delay, an unforeseen holdup.

With each passing day, the logical solution festered in his mind. For all his reckless behavior, Kai wouldn't disappear without a sign. Was he simply stuck somewhere, unable or too scared to send a message?

His feeble hopes crumbled when Valela brought him the news: the military had used some arcane way to establish that Kai was dead.

*Why couldn't you stay out of trouble...*

Had Kai known death was likely when he smiled and sent him away? Or had he merely bitten off more than he could chew? If he had truly gotten involved with the Spirits, a myriad of things could have gone wrong. Though it couldn't be a coincidence that the beast attacks had stopped on the same day.

*I'm sorry...*

He had sworn to himself he would protect him, and still failed.

Lou stopped in front of a wooden house reminiscent of a time before the Republic. An old building for the standards of High Harbor, still kept in good condition. Privacy enchantments adorned the facade. Not something that people in this neighborhood could commonly afford.

It had taken a while to track Flynn down, the teen had disappeared after Kai had been recruited. He had visited half the pubs in the city before he found someone who recognized the name and was willing to sell him the address for a price.

Lou had never known what to make of Flynn. The boy was easygoing and had also frequented the scholarship program where he fared quite decently. It was unusual he hadn't looked for employment in the Republic, though it was hardly a unique case.

Still, there was just *something* about him that told Lou to stay vigilant.

Whatever his personal impressions were, Flynn was the only friend Kai had outside their old group. Valela had insisted on personally meeting Kai's family to deliver the news. He was ashamed of his relief at not having to face them. The least he could do was inform Flynn.

Steeling his resolve, Lou knocked. The door opened almost immediately as if Flynn had been waiting on the other side.

"Lou?" Flynn gave him a once over, pulling back his messy hair. A bright smile flashed on his face. "I should have known it was you when they told me a big menacing guy was looking for me."

"I didn't know how else to contact you." Lou stared at his feet, not missing the glint of the knife that disappeared up his sleeve. "I needed to talk to you."

"What's up?" Flynn leaned with an arm on the doorway. "Sorry if I don't invite you inside. I've just moved in, and this place is still a mess. I should have known. They looked too eager when I asked to rent it."

*He deserves to know.*

Lou forced himself to meet the mischievous green eyes. "Kai's dead." It was the first time he said it out loud. His eyes stung, forcing him to blink and avert his gaze.

"What?" The smile froze on Flynn's lips.

"Kai's dead," Lou repeated, the meaning sinking in with the weight of a boulder. He couldn't deny the facts any longer. "I'm sorry, I wish I could explain more—"

"Were you there when he died?" Flynn stared at him unblinking.

"No."

"Have you seen the body?"

"No, but—"

Flynn held up a hand to stop him. "Trust me. I don't know how, but he'll come back." He regained his grin.

Lou slammed his hand on the door before it could shut. The contract was compelling him to silence, but he squeezed between the cracks. "You don't know what happened. There is no way he could have survived."

"And you don't know Kai like I do." Flynn snorted up with a furious glare. "He wouldn't die without letting the world know. It was nice seeing you again. I need to go. Bye."

The door closed under Lou's slack-jawed stare.

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A little part of her died when Valela saw the light dim in Alana's eyes.

"How?" The woman grabbed her hand over the kitchen table with a Strength that defied her grade.

"There was an accident during the expedition. Kai was ambushed by a beast. I'm sorry, he died before the soldiers could get to him. Though I didn't know him for long, he was an incredible person. I'm sure he will be welcomed among the ranks of the ancestors." Valela delivered the official story, fighting to keep her voice steady.

That was the only way she had been allowed to communicate the news. The truth was much worse. She had no idea what happened, too busy dealing with the ramifications of the lesser realm *he* had revealed.

*Why are the Spirits so unfair?*

The worst part was that even if she could go back, she would have made the same decision. The hidden realm radically altered the future of the archipelago, from a forgotten rock to a strategic location. No matter how much she loathed herself, the fate of her people overshadowed her or any other individual.

They'd need to tread carefully if they ever wanted to see the rule of the islands in the hands of a native. There remained a smidgen of hope because no one had found a way to access the lesser dimension, and the beast attacks had ceased.

"Are you—" A beautiful young woman with pearl earrings tried to hold back her tears, dabbing her cheeks with a handkerchief. Her face puffy as she tried to find her voice, "Are you certain he's dead?"

“I saw the body. He was beyond the skill of any mortal healer.” That was a break from the official story, but she couldn’t let them hang on to false hopes. Hopefully, this would help them find closure. “If it’s of any comfort, it looked like he had died on the spot. He didn’t suffer.”

“You’re lying!” A girl around her age screamed. She had a pixie cut and a fiery look that said she would have leaped at her if a burly man didn’t hold her back. “Let me go. Now!”

“It’s not her fault, Kea.”

“She’s a liar!” She elbowed her way free and stormed out of the room, slamming the door. A baby started crying in the background, prompting the older sister to get up with a lost look.

The man moved to console Alana, who was sobbing in the chair. Moui, if Valela remembered correctly. She had rushed here so quickly that she hadn’t had time to check their names.

“What grade was it?” He regarded her with a somber look.

Her brows furrowed. “Sorry?”

“What grade was the beast that ambushed Kai.”

Valela shouldn’t have been aware of the details, but she had already gone off script and told them she had been present. Breaking the rules one more time wouldn’t matter. “It was a peak Orange drake near the Heart.”

“I see.” Moui nodded, whispering soothing words to Alana. “Thank you for informing us personally. I know you didn’t have to.”

“It’s nothing.” Understanding she was being dismissed, Valela took out an envelope. Gold couldn’t bring their son back, but it could relieve the problems of the living. For now, that was all she could do. “Please, contact me if you need anything.”

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*About two years later.*

Inside the chamber of a forgotten ruin, an iridescent portal bubbled into existence. A ragged young man leaped out, landing in a crouch. His gray eyes studied the room, a white crystal sword in his grip.

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End of Book 3

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