

## Chapter 226 - Herald of Chaos

“Of course, it shouldn't be a problem. I already planned to go test her intentions after the order of retreat.” Valela drummed her fingers on the table. “What do you need to steal? Maybe I can get it for you.”

He'd have rather not gone into details and needless worries, though he couldn't resent her for looking out for him. Her help would make the attempt considerably less dangerous. Escaping an unguarded cell was different from sneaking past yellow professionals.

“You should hide here till morning.” Lou failed to hide his simmering irritation. A rare breach in his usual composure. “Planning to cross the Heart alone is already a bad idea. Your danger sense won't save you from the basilisk.”

“I have it on good authority that the lizard has been blinded and crippled. If it's half as smart as it has shown, it won't show its ugly snout for a while.” Kai projected all the confidence he could muster. “And to be precise, I'm not stealing anything. I'm just getting back my belongings.”

“What is it you need? Can't you just stay safe for once?” Lou rumbled with a silent plea.

*I really wish I could do that.*

“It's...” Kai watched into the deep eyes of his friend, Lou would probably try to stop him. Valela was harder to predict, her mind still busy with the ramifications of the hidden realm. It would be complicated to slip away in the confines of the room if Ferla came back. Not to mention, he would be giving up their help to retrieve his belongings.

*Damn Zervathi and damn my greed.*

The bargain had already been struck, and he couldn't take back his choice. Improvisation offered him a castle of lies to get what he wanted. After the shocking news he brought, anything else would be easily believed, enough to last the night.

*They deserve better.*

He had yearned to reconnect with his childhood friends and worked to bridge the years apart. Now that Lou had accepted him back, Kai couldn't repay care with lies. “I need to get my sword back.”

“Do you need it right now?” Valela looked perplexed. “It'll be easier to recover when the expedition disbands, and I can lend you one if it's urgent.”

"It needs to be my sword. It has been engraved with enchantments specifically suited for me." Kai bit his cheek. If anything happened to him, it was better someone knew what. "Do you mind using your stealth cube thingy?"

"Sure," Valela brought out her enchanted cube again, isolating them inside a bubble of magic and runes. "What is it?"

Lou read behind his intentions before he could answer. "What do you need your sword for?"

*He's definitely going to strangle me.*

Kai forced as much of the truth out before his conviction wavered. "I've struck a bargain with a divinity. It's a quest I need to complete in these ruins. After that, I'll meet you back in Higharbor."

Lou massaged his temples. "Tell me you're not being serious."

Valela quickly recovered from her mute disbelief. Her emerald eyes fully focused on him. "Which of the Great Spirits contacted you? And what are the requirements to complete the quest?"

Kai didn't feel the need to specify it wasn't either Kahali or Yatei he dealt with. He was frankly surprised they knew what a divine bargain was and didn't question him. "I can't explain. I know I should have been more cautious. The request didn't seem difficult before some unexpected obstacles arose. I'd feel safer if I had my sword with me. Can I count on your help?"

"The underground tunnels are still dangerous even if the basilisk is injured." Valela tried to be diplomatic. "We can find a safer way to solve this when things settle down."

*If only...*

He shook his head. "It's something that needs to be done specifically at this Vastaire site. And the military won't let anyone come close after the news of the hidden dimension. This is my only chance."

"I'll come with you to watch your back." Lou suddenly stood up. "Two is better than one."

"No, you're not." The idea horrified him. He was only taking this risk because his back was against a wall. He wouldn't be dragging anyone else on this gamble against all odds.

"Did the spirits ask you to do it alone?"

"No, but..." Kai wracked his brains, Lou wouldn't buckle with a random excuse. He needed a concrete reason, so he summoned a veil of Shadow around himself, the last affinity he had

kept hidden. It wasn't as impressive in a well-lit room, but it made his presence slippery if they didn't focus on him. "You can't do this. I plan to avoid a fight if possible."

"I see." Lou examined him with a critical gaze, a half-smile and not in the least surprised. A shroud of Darkness swallowed his hulking form as if the light itself dimmed around him. "I think I can manage to be stealthy too." Even his voice came out muffled.

*Dammit.*

Kai wanted to argue it wasn't good enough. Darkness didn't have the same elusive qualities of Shadow, though his presence was little more of a void to his senses. He had to focus Mana Observer to pierce the cloak. It was probably a dedicated skill, much more effective than freeform magic.

*Why did he even learn this?*

Lou looked at Valela, suddenly tense and formal. "Permission to leave, ma'am."

"If there is no other way..." she looked between them with resignation. "Permission granted."

"You can't come," Kai blurted out, wishing he sounded more convincing to his own ears.

Lou regarded him with painfully honest eyes. "Would you not help me if I was in trouble?"

"I—" He hesitated, losing any chance Lou would believe his lie. "This isn't your mistake to fix."

*Stupid truth policy.*

"What do you think will happen if you get yourself killed?" Lou glowered at him. "Do you think your family and friends will just mourn a day and move on? What happens to you also affects the people you care about."

The burly teen slumped. "I won't stand by and watch you march into a suicide mission. Even if it's your own foolish head that landed you in it."

"I've no intention of repeating this mess," Kai said, and he meant it. There were good reasons why he had accepted the bargain, though it had been stupid to lock himself in an uncertain deal with no way out.

"I still need to retrieve my sword. I can meet you here when I'm done."

"I'm going to scream your name if I don't see you." Lou threatened with a smile.

*Damn, stubborn boy.*

It could have all been avoided if he had lied to their faces, though Kai couldn't bring himself to regret it. And his plans didn't include letting Lou anywhere near the basilisk, crippled or not. "I'll count on you for the distraction."

Slipping back into the dark tunnels, the damp cold helped him focus on his current task. If he got blinded by the risk ahead, he'd trip right into the one before him. Makyn had said he would keep his sword safe, which hopefully meant his lodgings. He wasn't going to have time to check too many places.

While no one would be expecting him to infiltrate the camp, the officer chambers housed the strongest professionals in the expedition. Shadow magic wouldn't protect him if he walked in their direct sight, or maybe even their peripheral. That's why he needed Valela's distraction.

Kai jogged through a mossy corridor and checked his mental map to get into position. Having learned his lesson from jumping into Valela's room, he cut a hole thinner than his pinky and sent his senses through to observe the situation. The chamber he picked was the one dedicated to the 'bathroom', and it shared a wall with his goal.

Squares of beige cloth had been hung between the improvised stalls to provide privacy. There were three people, less than he expected. This chamber was sure to always have someone present, but it was also the least guarded. A wooden pane covered the exit to stop the lack of ventilation from spreading the stench of human waste through the camp.

No one would go to investigate if they heard a suspicious sound. Adjusting his angle of entry behind a latrine, Kai cut a round hole and slipped inside. His cloak of Shadow surrounded him in case anyone decided to stretch their Mana Sense.

He froze at the sound of a satisfied sigh and a wet plop on his right—clearly the person wasn't focused on him. He crept closer to the inner wall, hiding behind a large square cube of stone boxes where the Earth Shapers had sealed a filled latrine.

*C'mon, it should be about time.*

A handful of seconds later, a ruckus of voices rose in the distance, prompting the three occupants to finish their business. Alone in the chamber, Kai didn't abandon his cover and steadied his fingers to cut a thinner hole.

*Make my Favor be worth something.*

The room wasn't one he recognized, clothes lay abandoned on an unmade bed and floor, as if the occupant had just left. Not knowing how much time he had, Kai hurried to open a way inside and slid the ivory block back into place. The stone was so perfectly smooth, no one would notice unless they pushed against it.

The voices were louder and angrier now. Seryne responded with sneering outrage to Valela's demand for answers. He could just make out the words when steps shuffled outside the room.

Kai threw himself underneath the bed, wrapping the veil of Shadow tighter around him. Few people were important enough to have a real frame and mattress. He prayed he hadn't left any obvious sign.

A man strode inside, the mottled leather boot stopped a palm from his nose. He grabbed something from the bed. "A stupid whore who doesn't know her place," he grumbled under his breath.

His heart stilled, recognizing Bert's voice. Kai prayed his heart to slow its incessant beating, too afraid to breathe. Another voice called from outside.

"I'm coming." The scout had marched out, slamming the door.

*I need to hurry.*

Extending Mana Observer as lightly as he could, Kai exited upon a short corridor between two rows of rooms. He didn't waste a breath to Empower his legs and jump, just enough to grab the edge of the roof and silently pull himself up.

The overworked Earth shapers hadn't bothered to cast anything more than stone boxes, giving him a convenient plain surface to move onto.

Kai had considered walking around as if he belonged to the expedition. He was confident that whether Seryne had kept his arrest secret or not, she wouldn't have bothered to make an announcement. But being the only kid in the camp, his figure was too recognizable. Even if no one stopped him, people might remember seeing him.

He overlapped the layout in his mind with what he was seeing. He crawled forth with his fingers and toes, his cheek and shirt grated against the rough stone. Judging by the loud arguing, Seryne and Valela weren't close to concluding their dispute.

There were three soldiers still in the chamber who might decide to wander around at any moment. Grim luck made his endeavor much easier. The camp would be far more crowded and guarded if they hadn't lost so many people, with dozens of wounded resting in the healing tower.

*A third of the beds are probably empty. Why did I have to pick Bert's?*

Kai crept twenty meters to Makyn's lodgings, one of the few places he had bothered to remember. The room was empty, he didn't have to search hard to spot the sea serpent sword inside.

*Wait for me, daddy's here.*

He considered cutting a hole in the ceiling, but the cast stone was more brittle than the ivory one. It would create dust and be difficult to realign. If he had to bet on someone to notice minor details, it would be Makyn.

*Fine.*

Two soldiers stood just outside his line of sight. Kai kept his attention on the corner they would need to cross to spot him. He didn't want to focus on them in case they were perceptive to mana skills.

He lowered himself in front of the door and bent his knees to quietly absorb the impact. Locks were a luxury the military hadn't thought necessary except for Seryne's office. With a simple push, Kai was inside.

There wasn't a speck of dust or other clue that a human lived here. The place looked like the room of a spartan inn, the only sign of habitation was the folded uniform on the tight sheets of the bed. The few personal effects were stored in a plain wooden chest by the wall—his goal.

*Almost there.*

In his rush, Kai almost missed the cloaked enchantment on the aperture. *Almost.*

*You sneaky boy. I know some tricks too.*

The runes unraveled under the focus of Mana Observer. It was an alarm made to send a signal of some kind. Without any restrictions on his skill, interrupting the flow of mana was laughably easy.

His sea serpent sword had been laid on top in all its shiny glory. Kai stored it into his ring. He wouldn't have bothered to go through Makyn's possessions if the alarm hadn't piqued his curiosity. While he understood the soldier's point of view, the man had still screwed him over.

*Let's see. Time for retribution.*

The contents were terribly mundane. Perfectly folded clothes, a pair of black boots, a set of serrated knives, material for the upkeep of various equipment, generic potions and a small bag of money. Kai hadn't fallen so low to steal cold cash. Since it would be obvious someone opened the chest, he carefully dug deeper.

*Hmm... This is better.*

Beneath the shirts there was a bag of sweets, *his* bag of sweets.

*It'll be too obvious it was me if I take it.*

He turned his attention to the remaining items. A very photorealistic picture of a group of late teens in military uniforms. From the festive mood and the man with graying hair standing in the middle, it must be some kind of graduation class. Kai squinted to recognize a younger Makyn, weirder yet, he was *smiling*. Not his thin smirk or faint smile, but a full-blown grin.

*Creepy. This is too sentimental.*

Kai discarded the photo of a little boy and a pretty woman with dark indigo hair for the same reason. His revenge didn't quite reach that point. He knocked on the bottom of the chest to be thorough and his eyes widened when the sound wasn't quite right.

*Bingo.*

Another enchantment hid a fake bottom, even better concealed than the alarm. There were only two objects inside. A broken arrowhead, probably some kind of personal memento, and a black notebook.

Kai put the book in his spatial closet without a second thought. It might add another layer to the mystery of his escape. He could always discard it if the content was too personal.

Satisfied with his loot, he hurried to reorder the chest. It had taken less than a minute altogether. Makyn would suspect him of the sword's disappearance, but without proof, Kai'd have plausible deniability.

*How could a kid could accomplish all this alone? He must have a partner!*

Captain Seryne was paranoid enough to make up a wacky conspiracy, and hopefully bring her search away from him.

The two soldiers hadn't moved from their position. Kai climbed over the rooms again. He made a quick stop by his lodging, helped by the fact it had no roof, and filled his ring with supplies. With that, he had accomplished his main goals while the argument in the next chamber wasn't close to waning.

*Valela must be giving her all. Hmm... Why not go wild?*

Since he was already here, he might add one final layer to his deceptions. Seryne's office was only a dozen meters away, and definitely empty. It would throw off the military further and deliver justice in one fell swoop.

Since the door was locked and in full view of a guard, Kai was forced to open a hole in the ceiling and lift the slab with Earth magic. He jumped inside. There wasn't time to read through the pile of documents on the desk.

Letting his Favor guide him, he picked a random folder with *classified* on the cover and climbed back outside, using what remained of his mana to seal the breach. He retraced his

steps to Bert's room. The coast was clear, he slipped inside, cutting a secret compartment in the stone wall to hide the folder.

It would ensure that the scout wouldn't find it first, and make the espionage more believable if they came looking. It was clear that whatever devious mind was responsible for his breakout and the stolen documents had access to Stone Magic.

*I think I've sown enough chaos for today.*

With his work completed, Kai hurried towards the tunnels. It was time for some fun and possibly deadly work.