

## Chapter 224 - Unforeseen Complications

“What do you mean?” Kai stopped himself from making any nervous motion, though stillness could be suspicious too. He rose in his seat, letting some irritation seep into his voice. “If I knew how to stop the beast attacks, I would have done so a long time ago and spared the archipelago.”

The smile plastered on Seryne’s face didn’t waver in front of his outburst. She was about to open her mouth when Improvisation urged him to keep the initiative.

“*Blessing* might not even be a proper translation. It could be how they referred to their monarch or kingdom. Without the cultural and historical context of the Vastaire, we’re doing a lot of guesswork.” As if he had suddenly realized he was almost shouting to the leader of the expedition, Kai lowered his gaze. “I’m doing my best to help, ma’am. After presenting the scholars with my father’s research, I let them take the lead since they have more experience.”

Seryne showed the smallest crease of confusion between her sharp eyebrows. A breach into her certainties. She glanced behind him, a silent consultation with Makyn to confirm his words.

What he said was misleading, but it wasn’t a lie. Seryne must suspect he knew about the Hidden Realm.

*She can’t imagine I’ve spoken to a god. Will she try to shut me up over her speculations?*

While many had seen the blurry shapes inside the spatial gate, few would understand what they meant—especially in the aftermath of the tragedy. Even if they realized the beasts arrived through gates and not teleports, it was a huge mental leap to imagine there was a hidden dimension connected to the ruins.

The ones with the necessary knowledge to arrive at such a wild conclusion were the mana professionals and the scholars.

*Is that why she went talking to the mages after the explosion?*

And he was the only scholar present. Now her accusations of incompetence made more sense. Someone would stop trying to solve a mystery if they had already found the answer and wanted to keep it to themselves.

“You haven’t answered my question.” Seryne focused back on him. Her affable pretense had turned into a vexed gaze. “Do you know what this Blessing is?”

Kai shrugged with all the nonchalance he could muster. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I need you to tell me, yes or no?” The captain pressed him with a disquieting wide grin.

*She must be using a skill.*

Improvisation failed to offer any viable solution. Silence or more deflections would be like admitting directly he was lying. From what Flynn told him, these kinds of skills still latched on to his reactions to establish the truth. He might just have a chance.

Kai kept his mana flow steady, praying his sweaty palms wouldn't give him away. It was normal to be nervous when being interrogated. And despite all the evidence, he had never been to the Hidden Sanctuary. He couldn't be sure it was real.

*It's not clear-cut.*

"No, I don't."

Seryne intently peered at him, jaw clenched in concentration. After several tense seconds, she brushed her hair back to hide a blush of embarrassment and looked at Makyn again.

Kai couldn't resist turning. Those icy eyes lingered on him, his usual composed demeanor muddled by complicated emotions. Then the soldier focused on his superior officer and spoke. "He's lying."

*Fuck you too.*

The man wouldn't disobey a direct order. It wasn't surprising, just disappointing. Kai stiffly sat in his chair, there was nothing else he could do. He might have had a chance to take Bert by surprise, but Makyn wasn't so foolish.

What would they do to shut him up? While the truth couldn't be kept forever, the first party to move had a considerable advantage. Seryne had already proven she didn't care about any casualty standing between her and her goals.

"I knew you were a smart kid. Did you hide your knowledge of the glyphs?" She smiled triumphantly. "You must have put it together when I said the situation changed beyond your understanding. Didn't your mother teach you that eavesdropping would get you in trouble?"

*You literally blurted that out to my face... And don't flatter yourself, I found out much earlier.*

Kai crossed his arms, trying to maintain a neutral expression. "Not sharing a wild hypothesis no one would believe isn't a crime. I wasn't sure before today."

"You've broken your contract by withholding information relevant to the mission, the reason doesn't matter."

"I'll pay the penalty."

"I'm afraid it's not that easy," Seryne said with mock regret. She picked one of the documents woven with mana. The crest of the Republic took the first page, only the hawk carried a sword in its beak. Below it was a flowing signature.

"The Fourth General of the northern front has declared this affair a state secret and granted me complete authority till the reinforcements arrive. Every citizen, even if not officially part of the military and underage, will be subject to martial law for the safety of the Merian Republic. You'll be detained till the extent of your crime can be ascertained in a trial."

*Better than getting killed, I guess.*

To his own surprise, his rage quickly evaporated. The Republic's bullshit left him a single path forward. Whether dangerous or doomed to failure, he now knew what he had to do.

Seryne continued her speech to stroke her ego. "Given your age, they might commute your sentence into active military service. I shouldn't need to remind you that sharing *any* information about our current situation will be a much more serious crime. Do you have any questions?"

*And here's the cherry on top. You didn't want to miss anything.*

"Just one. Why does this say Averlenne Varlette Seryne? That's the name of the general, right? Does she have any relation with you? Is that why you called her?" Kai observed with fascination as the captain's triumphant visage reddened to a ripe tomato.

*Did I strike a nerve? Let me guess, mommy issues?*

Her finger pointed to the door, shaking slightly. "Get him out of here! He won't talk or leave his cell till we depart."

If that woman didn't have the power of life and death over him, Kai would have laughed in her face. Instead, he waited till he was out the door before chuckling out loud.

"Take this more seriously," Makyn growled, guiding him to another chamber.

"Of course," Kai was hit by another burst of hilarity. Uncaring about the looks he received, he dried a tear from his eye. He was fucked and he couldn't bring himself to care.

*Spirits, I'm losing it, but this is so funny.*

"Thank you very much for selling me out, by the way."

"We agreed that you wouldn't hold back any important information for the investigation. And I've kept my end of the deal."

*Hmm, he does have a point...*

“You’re right. Though it’s not like anyone would have believed me or it would have stopped the beast attacks.”

Makyn sighed heavily. “You don’t understand what’s at stake.” They stopped in the storage area in front of a stone cube with no windows. The door was just a wooden panel leaning against the aperture. “You’ll stay here till we’re ready to depart. I’ll send someone to bring you stew later.”

“Uh... I didn’t know we had a *cell*.” The inside revealed an equally plain interior half-filled with empty crates, a dim crystal and a bucket. The only notable features were the sound-dampening enchantments hidden in the walls. “It’s bigger than my room.”

“It’s temporary.” Makyn produced a pair of thick manacles. More worrying were the enchantments that covered the steel. Kai had never seen anything similar, but he could imagine their purpose.

“Your hands.”

Humor quickly drained off him as he took a step back. This wasn’t an obstacle he had anticipated. “Are you serious? Where would I even run?”

“It’s protocol to shackle a suspect awaiting trial when there isn’t a proper holding cell.” He spoke with a tone that left no room for compromise.

His back hit the wall of the storage unit. “I broke a clause of a contract by omission, which has not even been proven. I didn’t murder anybody. Half the camp could wipe the floor with me.”

*If they get the first strike.*

“Which is why you’re only getting your hands cuffed. Don’t make this more difficult than it has to be. Every person in the expedition is subject to martial law, the captain was very explicit.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. Seryne’s afraid the opposing factions will learn of what’s going on.”

“The reason’s not relevant, breaking the law has consequences.” Makyn advanced till he loomed over him. “It’s either this or I’ll seize your ring and you still get handcuffed.”

*Fine.*

Kai reluctantly surrendered his arms, the cold steel locked on his wrists with a metallic clank. The enchantment quickly proved his worst fears. He lost his connection to Mana Observer, and his flowing essence became sluggish and unresponsive.”

"It's only till we leave Veeryd. Don't try to use active skills or mana, you'll only hurt yourself."

"*Thank you.*" His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Makyn didn't answer, he just unfastened his scabbard. "I'll keep it for you. Do you have any other weapons besides your wand?"

"Not on me." Somehow it hadn't occurred to him that a prisoner wouldn't be allowed to carry a sword. Another setback to his plans. He might have underestimated the difficulty of escaping a tad bit. "Anything else? Do you want me to sign a soul contract to not breathe too hard?"

"Just don't try anything stupid. You'll get caught, and the consequences will be more than a slap on the wrist." Makyn hesitated in the doorway. "Do you know how many lesser realms have been found in the entire Republic?"

*What's this about?*

Kai considered ignoring him out of spite. His curiosity won. "I don't know, about a dozen?" While hidden dimensions were rare, their domain on the mainland was more than a hundred times that of the archipelago.

"Two."

*Oh...*

"So they're *really* rare."

"There are probably more that have not been publicly disclosed, but the number is incredibly small. If news of this one got out before the Republic secured this island," the man paused as if he lacked the words to describe it. "It wouldn't be surprising if another kingdom invaded this territory or destroyed it to prevent us from getting our hands on it. By not disclosing your suspicion, you could have caused a calamity."

*Okay, I didn't know that. But it's not like I planned to tell anyone else either.*

"What's so special about them anyway? Isn't it just a hidden corner of the world?" He couldn't imagine how that worked, probably some mind-bending spatial nonsense.

"That's classified information."

*Of course, it is.* Kai gave him a flat glare. Leading him on like this had been just cruel.

He now understood why they made such a big fuss. Hidden realms must have some kind of strategic or material value beyond their rarity.

Once more Makyn lingered and spoke again. “After the Republic secures the area, you must agree to sign a binding contract to keep silent on this matter. Given your age, you’ll get away with two or three years of military service if you’re cooperative.”

*How generous.*

“I’ll be my most agreeable self.”

The soldier gave him a frozen look. “Do you need anything before I go?”

“I’m good.” Kai jiggled the manacles. “I’ll just sit and admire my new pair of fashionable bracelets. Do they also come in a different color? Plain metal clashes with my eyes.”

The wooden panel that passed as a door closed. Something heavy got dragged over it and more things were piled on top. If moved, they just needed to cause enough noise to attract a soldier. Given the size of the camp, there was no way he wouldn’t be heard.

*At least there is no guard. Seryne must be paranoid that I might give information away.*

Hearing steps grow faint, Kai searched the room for anything useful. The place had been erected the day before. From the smell, the empty crates must have contained food rations. He could break the wood to recover a nail. With the silencing enchantments in the wall, no one would notice till they came to check. The issue was he had no idea how to pick a lock. The handcuffs’ tiny keyhole looked too well-crafted for an amateur.

*I’ll ask Flynn to teach me all his shady tricks once this is over.*

A wave of melancholy swept over him. Things wouldn’t get back to normal for a while—if ever. He was going to miss his new sibling’s birth, his friends and his family.

*Sorry, Mom, your son is a bit of an idiot sometimes.*

The deal with Zervathi should have been a breeze, then everything that could go wrong did. The basilisk, the broken Altar and the Republic. He could blame it on bad luck, but he had chosen to take the risk. When betting with his life, unforeseeable issues were bound to arise.

*Enough moping around. I need to escape and hunt down a blind basilisk.*

If he failed to uphold his end of the bargain before the gate to the Hidden Sanctuary fully opened, Zervathi would own his body—whatever that meant, it couldn’t be good. It would be hard to recover the Altar, possibly deadly, and get him in trouble with the Republic even if he succeeded. Yet, it was the only solution. The expedition was preparing to leave, and he wouldn’t get another chance to visit the ruins once reinforcements arrived.

Kai examined the manacles on his wrists. Makyn had not tightened them excessively, but there would be no way to free himself without dislocating his thumb. Those things were

never as easy as in movies. The runes had also been engraved inside two bands of metal fused together. There was no way to scratch them off.

*I'm a freaking mage, how hard can it be to break an enchantment made to prevent exactly that?*

The answer was somewhere between a lot and extremely. Most of his skills refused to activate—even the ones from his profession. His mana was like a dense syrup that dissipated as soon as it left his body.

*If Makyn let me keep the wand and the ring I must have no way to use them. And I didn't pack a hacksaw anyway.*

His only minor success was with Mana Observer—likely because of its higher grade. An inch was like stretching a rubber band to its maximum length. He wrapped his arm around the metal to study the runes.

The enchantment had been cloaked to prevent tampering. It was decently made, though it must not have been a priority since whoever was cuffed shouldn't be able to look. Compared to Edgar's standards it was subpar. With much patience and a growing headache, Kai managed to pierce the veil.

He recognized half runes that had been used in ways he hadn't seen before. There was no obvious flaw, if the military used them to restrain criminals that was to be expected. Though if they could mass-produce them for all their units, they must cut some corners too.

By the time Makyn brought him a bland dinner and warned him they'd be leaving in the morning, Kai began to doubt it was even possible. The handcuffs siphoned his essence to sustain themselves, so there was no way to overwhelm the enchantments with sheer mana. He could spot the fault lines he needed to break, but he had no way to touch them without his mana. If only he had access to his skills for ten, no, five seconds.

*Wait, I'm an idiot.*

If his hands hadn't been tied, Kai would have slapped himself. How could he forget he had another skill at Yellow, one he never got a chance to use? One that was made specifically to mess with runes.