

Chapter 215 - The Expedition

Kai removed the chair and the glass shards of broken vials from the door and windowsill. No one had come from him that night. Already jittery for the expedition, he had slept little and woken up with just darkness outside. Hallowed Intuition had stayed quiet since he had left that office, but the encounter with Annyl hung in his mind.

He wouldn't blindly trust a skill. The Fate Fulcrum and the spatial anomalies had both muffled the whispers. While those were unintended side effects, there must be abilities that could obscure a Favor-based skill.

Once they were inside the jungle, he'd be too far to reach.

Let's hope these are the ruins. Zervathi promised a safe passage to the Hidden Sanctuary if I got to the Altar of Covenant.

There weren't that many sites remaining. While the passage might stay hidden without godly guidance, the Republic had scoured every other ruin. The only other possibility might be Velu, where the spirits dwelled.

To respect their will, the island remained uninhabited except for the occasional pilgrimage. It housed the largest Vastaire site that had been discovered, and Kai had seen reports of yellow beasts appearing. With divinities being real, the Republic was hesitant to profane their land. They left a small team to quarantine the ruins after failing to find any clue.

Kai didn't want to consider the final possibility: that the Altar had been destroyed seven years ago by the governor and his whole quest was doomed. If that were true, he'd need to take more drastic and risky actions.

All the enchantments seemed anchored to the Hidden Sanctuary. A god should know, right?

Kai put on his waterproof pants and boots. Hawkfield had a nice selection of shops to trek into the wild, no more days spent drenched wading through mud. He left most of his dad's journals behind and filled his backpack with rations that would last him weeks. The military was supposed to provide the meals, but there were too many unknown variables.

Dawn was warming the barren outpost, a small crowd had already gathered in ranks in the central square. Half the soldiers and mana professionals were new faces, many reaching half-step yellow or higher.

Valela and Lou were there too with a small contingent of guards. Ferla stood by her side, even by her standards she looked less than pleased. They had also stepped up their average grade, though their numbers were a third of the military.

Given the death toll of the last operation, he'd be surprised if everything went smoothly.

Hmm... should I ask her about what's the deal with Annyl? She's the most likely to know, and least likely to be involved.

Valela was busy talking with another grizzly guard. He was about to nonchalantly wander to their group when Makyn stood in his path. "I sent a man to escort you."

"Uh... I must have missed him. I woke up early since the expedition is on a strict schedule."

Could I ask him? He doesn't usually lie outright, that I know of...

Given their agreed collaboration, Makyn shouldn't be involved with that strange woman either. The soldier was pretty good at reading between his bullshit. He would have asked him directly if he wanted something.

Unless I misjudged him and they're all playing me. Damn, this is annoying. There are too many ears to ask anyway.

The soldier gave him a curt nod. "We're almost ready to depart. Go get briefed and do as you're told. The Veeryd jungle is a mana zone, you can't be careless."

Boy, I hunted among those trees since I was a child while you were... probably still bigger than me. But you had no idea the place existed.

"I'll be careful," Kai marched to the group of non-combatants. Barely concealed mutters for his age quickly spread, with more amused glances at the scabbard he was carrying.

"What's a kid doing here?"

"Look at the sword he's carrying. Is the little soldier here to protect us?"

"I mean, he's not bad for his age, but he doesn't have a profession."

"I didn't know we'd be getting a mascot."

This is going to be great.

"You're here too!" A hand grabbed his shoulder.

Kai found himself a palm from Sonya's beaming smile, teal irises watching him from behind her glasses. She squeezed him into a hug before he could respond. "It's so nice to see you. Things got pretty crazy that night, didn't they? They told me you were safe, but I wanted to confirm with my eyes."

"I'm glad to see you too." Kai slowly patted her back. He was relieved to have one friendly face and not have to awkwardly stand by himself. "Hmm... Is it only you?"

"Of our group, yes. There are two scholars who studied the ruins of Velu. Hey, Mehvin and Ivonn, this is Kai. The one I was telling you about." Sonya energetically waved to a man with

white-streaked hair and his bald companion. Both immediately turned away, acting as if they didn't know her.

"What a funny couple." Sonya leaned closer, lowering her voice. "They're a bit stuffy but Mehvin is very knowledgeable about ancient languages and cultures. Darlo was also offered to join the expedition, but you know him..."

"Not a fan of long walks in beast-infested areas?"

"Something like that. He was upset we had to walk in the rain before getting picked up that night. He said he'd look for a milder adventure away from this beautiful and mysterious archipelago."

Kai raised an eyebrow. "Those were his exact words?"

"Of course, that's what he meant in his heart. He was a big softie—"

"Okay, listen up!" A soldier spoke uncomfortably loudly to get their attention. "I'm Sergeant Savel, I'll go through your instructions for this expedition in case someone hasn't been to a mana zone before. We can only protect you if you don't endanger yourself, so you need to..."

Kai quickly tuned out the speech. The briefing boiled down to staying in the center of the group and doing nothing unless specifically requested. Don't touch anything, don't pick up anything, don't wander off without a soldier even if you're about to soil yourself.

Hmm... I imagine protecting a group is much harder than protecting yourself. It still sounds overkill outside the heart of Veeryd.

His eardrums were severely tested before they were allowed to head out the southern gate. Wildepoint had been built on the edge of the jungle, clearing a circle of trees for half a mile around the outpost. A wide dirt path led into the green sea. It received frequent use, judging from the lack of any wild weeds reclaiming their territory.

The twins did say they were brought here for the scholarship program.

The expedition counted about a hundred people, less than half the camp on Kawei, though their offensive potential and expertise were far superior. Kai was relegated to the center of the convoy, walking behind half a dozen men carrying large, expanded backpacks.

The novelty of having a kid in their midst had quickly worn off as the trees loomed over them. Leafy canopies shield them from morning light, though they'd do little to shield them from the heat when the sun rose above them.

I missed this.

It had been half a year since he had last visited Veeryd. The smell of wet vegetation, lush vibrant plants and parrots chirping in the distance, it all brought back many fond memories.

His first fight with a red boa, countless crossing to and from the estate, getting abandoned in the inner regions by the butler.

While he had never entered from this side, the air carried a hint of familiarity. Now if only he wasn't surrounded by dozens of sweaty men and forced to march in ranks, it would be perfect.

"How pretty," Sonya cleaned the glasses on her sleeve. "Mhmm... there is something different from the jungle in Kawei."

Kai nodded, admiring lilac flowers on a vine. "This place always felt more... *alive*." That was the only way to describe it, and Nature motes thrummed around him in agreement. There was an undeniable difference from any other green patch in the archipelago.

Perhaps it has to do with Yatei. I'm not sure what's the connection with the colossal tree near Greenside, but I did get my blessing there...

"It's probably due to the mana." Sonya picked up an emerald leaf from a nearby bush.

"The density is about the same near the outskirts."

"Huh... sometimes I forget you've never seen the world outside the archipelago. Mana can stunt as much as it helps a tree grow, it all depends on the elemental composition."

"You mean like Nature mana?"

"And also Earth, Light, Water, Plant, Life and many others. Every environment needs the right balance for it to flourish. The vegetation will adapt to their circumstances, but it takes time. A sudden elemental shift can destroy a forest even when the density remains the same."

"You know a lot," Kai mused. Four years at the estate hadn't been enough to receive a complete education when he had to grind his skills, and Dora's lessons had focused on singular plants rather than ecosystems.

"Just bits and pieces," Sonya waved away the compliment. "Ancient civilizations aren't my only interest. Some things look obvious after you visit many places. Hmm... You should see the luminescent meadows of Imish when you get the chance, the flora there are a perfect example of an elemental shift—"

The mana slowly climbed as they crossed the outer ring of Veeryd, the plants grew lusher, leafier and taller, throughout it all Sonya never stopped her downpour of stories. When half the non-combatants heaved for breath, she didn't show a drop of sweat, always lively chatting like they were on a casual excursion.

Kai was happy to leave the burden of the conversation to her, only occasionally chipping in to ask questions about life on the mainland. Her stories of cities made of glass, haunted valleys and sunken kingdoms reignited his desire to sail to the continent.

Once the pact is fulfilled, I might leave the archipelago early and get away from the snoopers of the Republic. I'd bet a hand that Annyl will bring more trouble.

There were so many places to visit and explore that one lifetime wouldn't be enough. Thankfully, he would get access to several if he advanced his race, a couple centuries at Yellow if he reached it early in life.

While attributes were the attributes, a higher grade only lengthened the time you had remaining. It was the disadvantage of being born at Red, the clock ticked against you the longer you took to climb. Kai hadn't noticed since the slowed aging only kicked in after puberty. He was on course to gain the full benefits from Yellow.

Chatting with Sonya helped stove off the boredom. Kai hadn't considered how long it would take to move such a large group, their pace only slowed as the beaten path grew thinner and the jungle denser. He didn't want to imagine their speed when the trail ended and they had to trek through a wall of ferns, shrubs and vines.

Yatei have mercy, It'll take days to get to the heart.

Despite all the recommendations, no beasts came within sight of the convoy. The march proceeded with no hold-up, except a few insect bites and a furry spider dropping on the robe of a mage.

They set up camp by the edge of the inner area. The stew was surprisingly more tasty than what he had eaten at the mess hall of Wildepont. He got no chance to speak with Velala, or anyone else for that matter. Her group kept to themselves, and with the military's paranoia, he never was farther than two steps from another human. Worse yet, he had to share a tent with five other people, one of whom snored.

Spirits grant me patience. If there is no space why does Seryne get her own private one?

The next day began much the same, more recommendations for they were *actually* entering a dangerous area, and a hard cracker that tasted of sawdust for breakfast. Kai was tempted to reach inside his own food, but worried the group would fall on him like a pack of rabid seagulls. Worse case scenario he might be forced to surrender his supplies or raise questions on why he brought them in the first place.

Heading into the inner reaches, the mana density was distinctly higher. Around mid-morning, a feral screech and the soldiers halted the expedition. The beast was killed before he could glimpse the fight.

From then on, the attacks kept repeating every hour or so. It was always over in seconds. The non-combatants stuck close to the middle, and the soldiers had to cut a way through the dense greenery, careful of where the trees grew too thick. There were myriad places where a threat could hide, though Mana Sense made most of them trivial.

“Why do they keep attacking?” Awakened beasts were naturally aggressive since hunting was their faster way to grow stronger, but they weren’t suicidal. They should be wary of a larger group.

“Maybe we crossed their territory,” Sonya shrugged. “Crossing a mana zone in a large group always attracts attention, especially where such expeditions are rare. If they’re hungry enough, an unknown enemy might be a better bet than another beast they know they can’t defeat.”

Hmm... guess the precautions weren't for nothing.

The jungle was saturated with mana made for a much more interesting environment. He had found three high-red herbs and an orange one, though none of the soldiers was willing to make a detour to pick it, which wasn’t helping his mood.

They were forced to slow down further and Sonya’s barter could only help so much. That night the camp was even more cramped, set on a small hill around a towering rubber tree.

If this goes well, I can ditch them on the way back.

People weren’t smelling too nice after two days marching. A world without deodorant had accustomed him to a different standard, but there was still a limit if he had to share the tent with them. When he kindly offered to wash them with Water Magic, they got them mad at him.

It's not my fault if you stink. That's an objective fact.

Worse yet, there was an extra snorer in his tent, and the beast attacks picked up under the cover of the dark. He woke up cranky from a stilted sleep. He took out a bag of whiteberry cookies he had brought in Hawkfield—consequences be damned.

They were a bit stale, but they still beat the tasteless cracker by miles. Munching on his food, he dared any of the fools in his tent to come closer.

Revenge never tasted so crunchy or sweet.

“What are those?” Sonya peeked over his shoulder. “Can I have one?”

“You can have the bag, just don’t let any of those five get a crumb on them.” Kai pointed at the faces one by one and marched off. He had caught sight of another, familiar person.

“We’re going on a walk,” Kai informed Makyn.

How does he look as good as the day we departed?

The soldier gave him a once-over. “We’re about to set out, I don’t have time.”

“We can easily follow them.”

“I need to guard the convoy.”

“How many yellow professionals do you need to bully any red monkey? C’mon, we can walk ahead and act as scouts if you want. Anything you want, just get me away from here.”

“While I sympathize with your plight, I can’t entertain you.”

“Fine, I’ll share my candies.” Kai grabbed a paper bag from his backpack jiggling in front of him. He couldn’t endure another day of this without having tried everything. “I bought this one from the upper city in Higharbor. You won’t find better anywhere in the archipelago.”

Makyn examined the bag of hard candies. “Still no.”

“Fine. You can have the whole bag.”

You greedy boy.

“I—”

Kai gritted his teeth and pulled out a second bag—whatever it took. “Two bags! Last offer.”

“I’ll inform the vanguard I’ll be joining the scout for today.” Makyn grabbed both bags with one hand. “Wait here.”